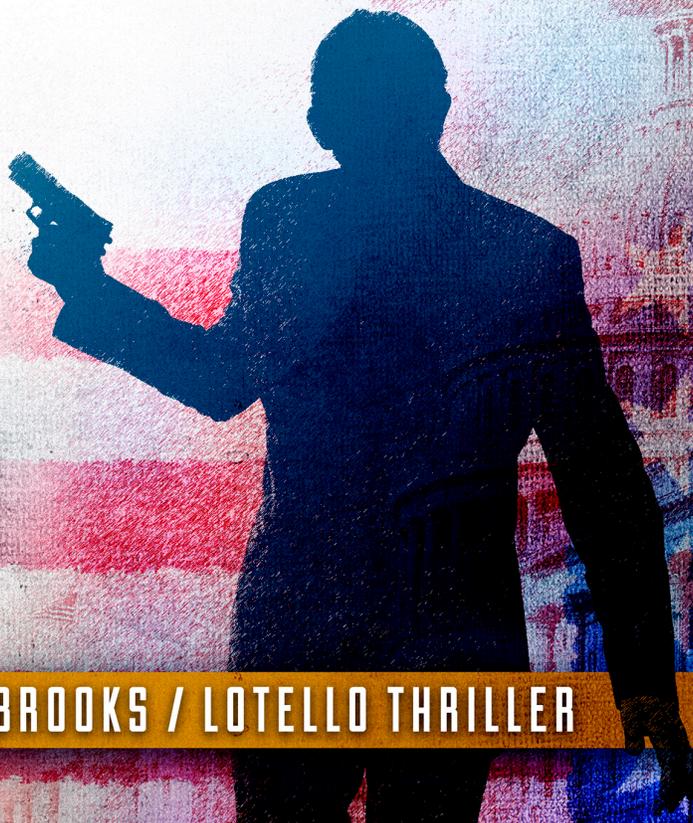


RONALD S. BARAK

**A SEASON FOR
REDEMPTION**



A BROOKS / LOTELLO THRILLER

A Season for Redemption

RONALD S. BARAK

Copyright © 2015 by Ronald S. Barak

All rights reserved. No part of the corresponding full publication or this advance, uncorrected, pre-released sample may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. This pre-released sample of the manuscript is being made available to the recipient solely for display and review purposes and may not be transferred to any third party. Any duplication, sale or distribution to the public or to any third party of this sample or the corresponding full publication is a violation of applicable copyright law. Do not quote for publication until verified by the finished book, which may differ from this sample in the discretion of the author. Acceptance of this sample by the recipient constitutes agreement with these terms. For permission requests, email the author at ron@ronaldsbarak.com

Pacific Palisades, California 90272-3106

<http://ronaldsbarak.com>

The man who pardons easily,
courts injury

- Corneille

PROLOGUE

THE JUDGE

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

-Cowper

PROLOGUE

Undated

There are 117 sitting trial court judges in Washington, DC. Judge Cyrus Brooks always thought of himself as among the best of them. Lately, however, he was beginning to wonder.

It used to be if you were unhappy about something, you'd write to your congressman. If he ignored you, then you wouldn't vote for him the next time around. You'd vote for the other guy. Maybe, you'd even campaign for the other guy.

But what if the problem you're unhappy about *is* your congressman? What if you think he isn't doing his job? What if you think he's on the take, corrupt? And what if the other guy is just as bad? Then what?

Brooks knew you couldn't just go out and shoot someone because you're unhappy. Let alone shoot a *bunch* of other people. People you don't even know.

Or could you?

More and more, there are those today who seem quite willing to do precisely that, to kill complete strangers just . . . because.

That was the crux of what had been troubling Brooks of late. What if one of those killers was arrested, and ended up in his

courtroom? Could he assure both the people of Washington, DC and the accused alike a fair and proper trial? Could he remain impartial, and objective?

Brooks wondered if all his recent doubts meant it was time for him to step down, to retire. Pass the baton to someone else.

But he waited too long.

BOOK ONE

The Criminals

February 5–8, 2009

Society prepares the crime,
the criminal commits it.

-Alfieri

Chapter 1

Thursday, February 5, 7:20 p.m.

US Senator Jane Wells had also been wondering. Wondering whether tonight might be the night.

Her last two companions had been disappointing, downright boring, in *every* respect. Almost as boring as her political constituents, and having to pretend she actually cared about them.

Being single again definitely had its benefits, more or less. No longer back home in dull, sedate Kansas, but things were still pretty boring. Maybe she just found it more exciting sampling the other merchandise when she was still married. She hoped tonight would prove more fulfilling.

Wells glanced in the mirror opposite her desk, making sure everything was in order. *Not too bad for a fifty-year-old strawberry blonde in a bottle. Well, admittedly with a little help from Dr. Nip N' Tuck.* Looks had never been her problem. Or . . . maybe that *was* her problem. Tall and curvaceous, she still managed to fill out her power suit in all the right places. Wells closed her briefcase and walked from her lavish private office

out into the spacious and well-appointed reception area. She carried herself in a way that was not easy for anyone to miss.

“Night, Jimmy,” Wells said to her new legislative aide, boyishly good-looking James Ayres. She considered his sandy brown locks and piercing hazel eyes—kind of a younger, chiseled version of Robert Redford—imagining for more than just a second what a frolic in the hay with Ayres might be like. *He’s probably a lot more virile than my somewhat more successful, but older, recent partners. It’s hard not to visualize that hard body of his gliding back and forth across mine. Certainly one way to get better acquainted with the staff!* She tucked that picture away in the not-so-hidden recesses of her mind for further consideration.

Wells’ mind shifted unintentionally from Ayres to her parents, how disappointed they would be if they knew her *real* interest—like that of most of the other members of the WSOC—was not to manage Wall Street, but to be rewarded by Wall Street for *not* really managing it at all. She also couldn’t help but wonder how her parents would feel if they knew about her . . . lifestyle. Actually, she didn’t really wonder at all. She knew precisely how they’d feel. She didn’t feel much better about herself.

“Good night, Senator,” Ayres replied, bringing Wells back into the moment. He summoned the elevator for her. “Robert’s

here to drive you home. He'll pick you up again in the morning at 9:30 and get you to the WSOC hearings on schedule." Wells nodded and stepped into the elevator.

~

Ayres stood there, staring at the closing elevator doors. He had followed Wells to Washington from Kansas after her election. *I just can't fathom how the voters could ever have chosen someone like Wells over me.* He shook his head in dismay, turned, and walked back into his office.

~

As always, good old dependable Robert Grant was right there, waiting for Wells as the elevator deposited her into the underground parking garage. "Evening, Senator. How are you tonight?"

"Okay, Robert, bit of a long day. You?"

"Fine, Senator. Thanks for asking. Let's get you home, then."

That was pretty much how it was with Grant every night, just a warm and fuzzy ride home, someone harmless with whom to make small talk. Wells had occasionally confided in Grant about her dates, but he just listened, and didn't judge.

Riding home, Wells thought about tomorrow's hearings, to consider whether possible Wall Street malfeasance had contributed to the country's economic collapse. She knew the

hearings were not going to be any fun. With increasing pressure and hostility from both the media and the various public interest groups, it was becoming more and more difficult to keep up appearances without actually *doing* much of anything. Lately, she felt as if it was she—rather than Wall Street—who was being placed under the microscope and scrutinized.

The job was taking a greater toll on Wells every day. *What do people expect of me? Why are they so damn naïve? Life was clearly a lot easier when I was just a Midwestern farmer's daughter looking to find myself a rich husband and settle down. Maybe that simple life was not so bad after all.*

Wells' mind returned to the present. She had a premonition that someone was watching her. A lump gathered in her throat. She glanced back over her shoulder and spotted a car that looked like it was watching and following her. The driver's eyes seemed to dart nervously away. Had she put him on his guard?

Wells tried to convince herself that she was just being silly, imagining that someone was actually following her. But she couldn't help herself. Her heart was beating, and her breathing was becoming labored.

After another minute, she found herself looking back over her shoulder again. "Robert, do you see any car back there that seems to be following us?" She tried to be nonchalant, but her voice gave her away. *Robert must think I'm nuts.*

Grant looked in his rearview mirror. “Don’t see anything unusual, Senator.” They drove on in silence. A few minutes later, Grant pulled his car into the rotunda outside the townhouse project where Wells lived. “Here we are, Senator. Let me walk you to your door.”

Somewhat calmer now, Wells resisted giving into her anxiety any further. She knew Grant must be concerned about her, but she was far more worried about the awkwardness that would result if Grant saw her guest for the evening possibly already waiting at her front door. “Not necessary, Robert,” she said as she slid out of the limo. “I’m fine, thanks. See you in the morning.”

~

Grant watched Wells walk off through the outside lobby entrance to the townhouse project. He shrugged, and peeked at his watch. *Still time to make it home before the Lakers–Wizards game comes on.*

~

He watched Wells punch in her identification code, pass through the interior lobby security door and head off down the densely landscaped path toward her individual townhouse unit. Seeing no one else in the lobby, he quickly wedged his foot in the security door just before it fully closed behind her. He

slipped quietly through the door, carefully allowing Wells to put a little distance between the two of them.

He saw Wells turn. *Shit, did she spot me?* She didn't show any outward sign of seeing him, but she did reach into her briefcase, take out her keys, and increase her pace. Moments later, Wells looked back again. He could tell that this time she definitely saw him, saw his face, looked directly into his eyes, clearly recognized him, and probably saw the gloves on his hands. She seemed more surprised than alarmed. She started to speak. "What are you . . ."

He had intended to kill Wells inside her townhouse, but now she left him with no choice. He couldn't count on her not to scream, or run off. He had to act right away.

Before Wells could finish her sentence, he fired two shots, muffled by the silencer attached to his gun. Wells looked confused. She started to reach for her chest, where the blood was already spreading, but it was too late. She was already dead.

He quickly pocketed his weapon and seized Wells before she collapsed to the ground. He managed to grab the keys still in her hand, open the front door of her townhouse, and get both of them inside.

He set her down in the entryway and checked her pulse. There wasn't any. He went back outside, turning on a small flashlight he had extracted from his pocket. He carefully

surveyed the surroundings, mentally noting every visible splatter of blood. Using a special blood remover he had found on Google, he cleaned up all of the blood he could see. The bottled cleaner seemed to do the job nicely.

He picked up Wells' briefcase and went back inside the townhouse, setting the briefcase down on the entry table and locking the front door. He then lifted the body, carried it into the bedroom, and placed it on the bed.

He removed and scattered all of Wells' clothing around the room, donned not one but two condoms, and then proceeded to violate her defenseless corpse. His intention was to make it appear that the killer was completely deranged, that he had somehow gained entrance to Wells' townhouse, killed her, and only *then . . .* raped her already-dead body. *Certainly no one would suspect anyone of sound mind doing anything like that!*

Twenty minutes later, after one more thorough inspection, he was satisfied with the way things looked, and how smoothly things had gone—in spite of the last-minute need to improvise. He allowed himself a moment to gloat over how well he had executed this first step in his plans. *But this is just the first step. More will follow, and soon.*

The first notch on his belt, he was now more confident than ever. The racking pain in his head was receding. He quietly left

the townhouse and made his way out of the complex, again reflecting on how well things had gone.

~

And he would have been right, if not for the couple of minuscule drops of blood he had overlooked at the edge of Wells' front porch. And the one pair of eyes that peered out at him from the nearby shadows as he headed for the exit.

Chapter 2

Friday, February 6, 5:30 a.m.

Frank Lotello was already awake when the alarm went off. He had not been sleeping well since that day, almost six months ago, when he lost his wife, Beth, to the carelessness of a drunk driver. Beth was his love, his best friend. She was the person Lotello had always discussed his cases with, *every* one of them, large or small, simple or complicated.

The department shrink they made him see said to be patient. Give it some time, he said. The ache would lessen, he said. *Hey, I know I need to get past this. I do. But the thing is, I don't think I want to. Without you, Beth, I don't know who I am. What I am. I can't touch you—hold you, hug you—any more. I can't feel you—hear you—any more. It's even becoming harder for me to remember what you look like. I'm so afraid the ache is all I have left of you. If I let go of the ache, I'm afraid you'll . . . disappear. Then what?*

Lotello's administrative leave was now technically over, but he had not yet been given any meaningful work. He wondered how much longer they would continue coddling him. But he also

wondered if he was ready, if he could handle a real case. Almost as if on cue, the telephone rang. “Hello?”

“Hey, Frank, it’s me, Jeremy.”

Jeremy Barnet was Lotello’s younger homicide partner. “No shit, J. Who else would call at 5:30? While the kids are still asleep.”

The kids were eleven-year-old Charlie and nine-year-old Maddie. People were always telling Lotello that his kids looked just like they had been lifted out of Mark Twain’s novels, Charlie, the spitting image of brown-eyed, red-haired Tom Sawyer, and Maddie, the perfect clone of blue-eyed, blond, freckle-faced Becky Thatcher. But whenever Lotello looked at them, all *he* saw was Beth.

It was just the three of them now. It was up to him. Lotello was painfully aware his priorities needed to change. *I have to get past this all-consuming funk, feeling sorry for myself. I need to concentrate on Charlie and Maddie, not on myself. I have to.*

“So, what’s up, J?”

“You know Jane Wells? *Senator* Jane Wells?”

“Sure, make it a point to have lunch with *Jane* every week. How many senators do *you* know?”

“Funny. Don’t really need your sarcasm right now. Just as early for me. Do you know *who* Wells is?”

“I see her on the news now and then. *So?*”

“Dead, raped and murdered in her townhouse. Case is ours. I’m on the way to her townhouse now. Just texted you the address. How soon can you get there?”

Not supposed to text and drive, J. “Got to get the kids up and out. I’ll call when I’m on the way.”

“Drive’ll take you about 30 minutes at this hour. See ya there.”

Lotello’s question about how much longer they were going to shelter him had been answered. “Wait up, J. When did all this supposedly happen?”

“Not sure. Got the call a few minutes ago. Was anxious to reach you and get going.”

“What’s the rush? Where’d you think I’d be at this hour? Find out who called this in, and when. I’ll meet you at Wells’ place as soon as I can.”

Barnet hung up. Lotello knew Barnet was not happy. Nothing Lotello could do about that. *I’m not the only one who has to deal with Beth being gone.*

Lotello dragged himself out of bed, pulled the covers up over the pillows, threw on some sweats, and bent down to stroke Beau, the youngest member of their family, a German shepherd rescue pup, one of Beth’s many thoughtful acts. Lotello went out front, grabbed the newspaper, glanced at the headlines while waiting for Beau to piddle, and then went back inside and into

the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and took a few sips from the carton of orange juice as he skimmed further through the newspaper. He didn't see anything about Wells, but noticed that the Lakers had pummeled the Wizards the night before.

Lotello put some food and water down for Beau, who needed little coaxing. He also put out some dry cereal, milk, and fruit for the kids, and confirmed their lunch pails were in the refrigerator all ready to go from last night.

Lotello next went into his combination home office and exercise room. He jogged on the treadmill for all of five minutes, trying to get the kinks out, and then hit the shower, one of his favorite thinking spots. He thought it odd that someone reported the Wells body around 4 or 5 in the morning. *What do you think, Beth? If Wells had already been missing for any period of time, wouldn't that have made the morning newspapers? You know I read the papers every morning. There were no such reports. If the murder happened last night or early this morning, who—other than the killer—would have known about the body, and called it in so early this morning? This means the killer probably made the call. Why would he do that, and why at that hour?*

Beth didn't answer.

No more stalling, they had to get going. “Dad,” said Maddie, as he gently woke her, “what are you doing? It’s still *way* too early.”

“Morning, pussycat,” Lotello said, kissing both of her sleepy eyes. “It’s not *still* way too early. Breakfast’s out and your lunches are in the ’fridge. I’ve already fed Beau. You and Charlie need to get up, brush your teeth, get dressed, eat breakfast, and take Beau next door to stay with Mrs. Schwartz ‘til Elena gets here. Meet you and Charlie in the car. C’mon, get a move on it!”

Beth had been right about Beau; it was good for Charlie and Maddie to have some responsibility, and a friend who would watch out for them. Maddie seemed to be adjusting to Beth’s death okay, at least as near as Lotello could tell, but Lotello wasn’t so sure about Charlie, who was a lot quieter than he used to be, and a lot more moody. He knew he needed to keep a closer watch on both of them, especially Charlie.

School was only a couple of miles away. They were there in a few minutes. “Okay guys, be cool. Elena’ll pick you up after school. See you tonight. Love you.”

“Love you too, Dad,” Maddie echoed back.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Charlie, barely.

As Lotello drove off in the “family-safe” Volvo, he inconsistently snuck an unsafe peek at his text messages to see

exactly where Wells lived—where she used to live. *Not supposed to text and drive, but, hey, I'm just reading.*

Chapter 3

Friday, February 6, 7:35 a.m.

He sat there in the dark, all alone. Things weren't like they used to be. He had lost *so* much, but he was going to get even. They would be sorry.

So far, so good, it had all gone much easier than he had imagined. The first call was a little dicey, but he was off the phone in a flash, well before the cops could have thought to trace it. If he had called 911 instead, the call would have been recorded, if not traced, before he could have hung up.

The timing of the second call, to the reporter, also went pretty easy. The story would soon make the media outlets and begin drawing attention. He wondered what she would say to explain how she got her information.

He knew the next murder would also be easy, but they would then start becoming more difficult to pull off. He didn't care. *I have to shake things up, bring about some real change.*

He liked the dark. It was quiet, peaceful. No one bothered him. Not anymore. It allowed him to think, and to plan.

Chapter 4

Friday, February 6, 8:47 a.m.

Wells' townhouse looked more like Grand Central Station than someone's home, with people coming and going everywhere. Lotello silently caught Barnet's eye, but his arrival didn't seem to offer Barnet any comfort. "Damn, Frank, what took you so frigging long? Place's a madhouse. This case is gonna be nothin' but trouble."

"Lighten up, J. What's all the rush? Wells isn't going anywhere. What do you have so far?"

"Already *two* people here from Wells' office. First one's her limo driver, a Robert Grant. Here to drive Wells to some senate committee hearing. Minute he saw the cops, was on his cell phone. Now, the second guy is here." Barnet consulted his notes. "James Ayres, Wells' legislative aide. Grant's quiet. Not much of a problem. Ayres is a piece of work, a real *prima donna*. Acts like *he's* in charge."

Lotello checked out the body and looked around Wells' townhouse. *Nice digs. Nothing surprising about that. Nothing out of the ordinary about the body, except for the chest wounds.*

Barnet followed after Lotello. He started in again. “Remember I told you Wells was raped and murdered? According to the lab guys, I had it backwards. The penetration didn’t occur until *after* Wells was dead.”

Lotello understood Barnet’s apprehension. This was going to be a high profile case, lots of attention, lots of pressure. He didn’t want to add to Jeremy’s anxiety. “J . . .” Lotello paused for effect. “Calm down. I’ll take Ayres and Grant. You stay with the lab guys and photographers. Don’t let anyone *else* in. Let’s not compromise the crime scene any more than it already has been.”

~

Before Lotello could figure out who was who, a man in an obviously expensive dark pinstripe business suit came bustling up to him. “You in charge here?”

Opening his wallet, Lotello responded, “Detective Frank Lotello, Metropolitan DC Police. Can I help you, Mr. . . . ?”

“Ayres, James Ayres, Senator Wells’ legislative aide. What happened here?”

“Sorry for your loss, Mr. Ayres, but you’ve been here longer than I have. Not much information yet. Are you usually at the senator’s townhouse at this time of day?”

Ayres seemed taken aback, exactly as Lotello intended. “No, of course not.” Pausing, he added, “The senator’s driver arrived

to pick her up earlier this morning. He called me when he saw the police. I came right away. Isn't there something you can tell me?"

"Aside from the fact that Senator Wells is dead, no. Why don't *you* tell *me* where the senator was supposed to be this morning? And where she was supposed to be last night?"

"Left her office a little after seven last night. Driver brought her home. Then went home himself. No idea what plans she had for the evening. Supposed to be at the WSOC hearings this morning, the Senate Wall Street Oversight Committee."

"Her driver? Is that Robert Grant?"

"Right."

"How long did Grant work for the senator? How well do you know him?"

"About three months. Met him when he started working for her. Seems like a nice enough guy. He cleared the government security check okay."

"How is it you know Grant went home last night after he dropped the senator off?"

Ayres thought about that for a moment. "Guess I don't. Just assumed it."

"Assumptions aren't very helpful, Mr. Ayres, especially ones you keep to yourself. Do you know anyone who might have wanted Senator Wells out of the way?"

“No, but she’s on the Senate WSOC. They deal with lots of contentious and inflammatory issues concerning the economy. No shortage of kooks out there, but I don’t recall any out-of-the-ordinary threats against her.”

“Okay, Mr. Ayres. Thanks. You can be on your way. I’ll speak to Mr. Grant. We’ll release a statement later this morning. I’ll be in touch.”

Lotello watched Ayres turn around and leave. Ayres didn’t seem to like being told what to do.

~

Looking around, Lotello saw another unfamiliar face. “Robert Grant?”

“Yes.”

“Detective Frank Lotello, Metropolitan DC Police. What brought you out here so bright and early?”

“I’m Senator Wells’ driver. I was here to pick her up this morning, like I always do when she’s in town.”

“What time did you arrive?”

“Around eight, maybe a few minutes before.”

“How long have you been driving the senator?”

“About four months.”

“And before that?”

“I drove for a local limo service.”

“For how long?”

“About eight years or so.”

“How did you become the senator’s driver?”

“I got a call one day from our dispatcher to pick her up. I gave her a ride. She asked me if I could drive her again the next day. I did. After that, she said she’d lost her prior driver and asked if I would be interested in driving for her on a regular basis. It sounded good to me, I said sure, and that was that.”

“What will you do now?”

“I’m not sure, I’ll probably go home. I don’t mind telling you that I’m a little rattled.”

“No, no, not today. I mean now that you won’t be driving the senator any longer.”

“Oh, sorry. Don’t really know. Probably go back to driving for a limo service.”

“What was the name of the limo service you worked for before?”

“Tri-Star Limousine Service.”

“Can you go back there?”

“Don’t know why not.”

“By the way, did you drive the senator home last night?”

“Yes, around 7:45.”

“Do you know what plans she had for the evening?”

“Nope. Didn’t mention any to me.”

Lotello sensed some discomfort on Grant's part. His denial seemed a little too quick. "Would you have driven her last night if she was going out for the evening?"

"Sometimes, but didn't last night."

Again, Lotello thought Grant was holding back, but it could just be the shock of Wells' unexpected and grisly death.

"Okay, Mr. Grant. I may have some follow-up questions for you, but that's it for now. Do you have a number where I can reach you?"

Grant gave Lotello his cell phone number. "Can I go now?"

Lotello made a mental note not to forget Grant's visible agitation when Lotello asked about Wells' plans last night. If Wells had any strange goings on, there was a good chance that Grant would know about some of them. "Sure. See you."

Lotello walked back over to Barnet. "You finish up. See you back at the station."

~

Lotello walked outside the townhouse, stretched, looked around the exterior of the townhouse, and headed back through grounds to his car. He was surprised to see one of the local reporters, Rachel Santana, already at the scene. Santana wasn't a bad looker, Lotello thought, if you liked the flamboyant, ostentatious, over the top look, heels too high, skirt too short,

top too tight, too much make up. “Hey, Rachel, what brings you out here so early?”

“Missing your pretty face, Frank. You know, when the boys and I have nothing better to do, we just start following you around. Figure sooner or later something interesting will pop.”

“Yeah, *right*. Suppose it wouldn’t do me any good to ask you for a more serious answer?”

“Probably not. Any chance you might have something for me?”

“Probably not.”

“C’mon, Frank, give me *something*. I will tell you I got an anonymous voicemail message earlier this morning saying Wells was caught without her panties one too many times, that it would be worth my while to stop by her place. Couldn’t pass that up. So what gives, Frank?”

“Nothing yet. Hey, Rachel?”

“Yeah?”

“You still have that voicemail message?”

“Not sure, Frank. Guess I could check.”

“I can get a court order for it. Anonymous calls aren’t protected.”

“No point, Frank. You know how I am with technology. All thumbs. Voicemail’s probably long gone.”

“Never learn, do you, Rachel? See you around.”

“Right, Frank.”

Frank drove off, mired in thought. *Okay, that’s two mysterious telephone calls this morning, one to the station and one to Santana. Who’s making all these damn calls? And why?*

Chapter 5

Friday, February 6, 10:00 a.m.

First came anger. Then anger turned to rage. Then rage led to confusion. He was becoming more and more confused. It was all becoming more and more confusing. He had not always been this way. Things had not always this way. *But I will prevail. I must prevail.*

~

There she sat, one week earlier, frightened, miserable, and all alone, in the lobby of the psychiatric ward of that local Washington, DC, Metropolitan Hospital. Paige Rogers Norman wondered how all of this could have happened so quickly, in the blink of an eye one might say.

Blink once. There was Paige, with husband Cliff and their young son Ryan. It was early 2008. They were on top of the world, happily married for twelve years, the owners of a highly successful local electronics business they had toiled together for more than a decade to build. Paige was now retired from the business and in charge of all family matters, including Ryan and their beautiful Georgetown home. Cliff was in the midst of merger negotiations to sell their company to a large national

electronics firm. They were both looking forward to more family time together, and hopefully an addition or two to the Norman clan.

Blink again. It was still 2008, but a few months later. The economy had come crashing down around them. Paige first thought the economy was just a problem for others, not for the Normans. But then their business began suffering too. Company accounts began drying up. Cliff was forced to lay off employees that were like family to him, and to Paige as well. If that was not enough, the merger fell through and their business failed altogether. The low teaser rate on their home mortgage expired, and the value of their home fell below the amount of their mortgage, making a sale all but impossible. The bank foreclosed on their home. They were now living in a tiny one-bedroom apartment, depleting what little savings remained while Cliff looked for a job to sustain their family—unsuccessfully.

When it seemed like nothing more could go wrong for them, something else *did* go wrong for them, terribly wrong. Ryan became ill. They found a tumor. It was malignant. Ryan's only chance was a prohibitively expensive new course of treatment. The Normans had a healthcare policy, one of the few remnants left over from their failed company, but the insurer wouldn't cover the procedure because they said it was "experimental."

Cliff had no family to help. Paige had only her parents, retired in Flagstaff, Arizona, barely making ends meet. Frantic, Cliff went to New York and tried to meet with senior executives of the insurance company, but they were in the midst of a weeklong corporate “retreat” at some fancy island golf and polo resort, and unavailable. His messages went unreturned.

Conventional treatment proved inadequate. Ryan died barely two months later.

Blink once more. Cliff had all but died with Ryan. The Normans were hardly functioning, or even speaking. Paige would watch Cliff go off in the morning without a word, not returning until late at night, again completely silent and withdrawn.

Still grieving the loss of Ryan, Paige worried more and more about Cliff. He wasn’t eating. He wasn’t sleeping. He had nothing to say, except on rare occasion when he barely muttered to himself. Paige begged Cliff to let her take him for medical help. He just quietly stared back at her.

Then, one night, Cliff just didn’t come home. Not that night. Not the next day. Not *any* time thereafter. Paige went to the authorities. They said there was nothing they could do, which was exactly what they did: nothing.

Weeks went by. Nothing changed. Paige finally decided there was nothing more she could do. Heartbroken, she gave the

authorities a forwarding address and reluctantly went to live with her parents in Arizona.

One more blink. Ten days ago, DC authorities contacted Paige. Cliff had finally turned up, on the steps of the Capitol Building. He was physically and emotionally disheveled, ranting at the top of his lungs. “It’s all your fault. You did it. You killed Ryan. Now I’m going to get you.”

The police were quickly summoned. Cliff was committed to a local psychiatric facility. The authorities contacted Paige. She returned overnight to DC, all to no avail. Cliff was completely unresponsive, to the doctors and to Paige. After seventy-two hours, under mandatory DC law, the hospital was forced to release Cliff. He vanished all over again.

~

On the same day of Cliff was released, a short story appeared in one of the back pages of *The Washington Post* under the headline:

DISTRAUGHT LOCAL MAN TRAGICALLY LOSES FAMILY, IS ARRESTED

Anger turned to rage. Rage turned to confusion. He read the words again. *It’s all your fault. You did it. You killed Ryan. Now I’m going to get you. Am I crazy? Maybe, who knows? But I will prevail. I must prevail.*

Chapter 6

Friday, February 6, 2:15 p.m.

A little before the noon crowd, Lotello and Barnet met at Tia Maria's, their favorite local eating spot. Sitting at their regular Friday table, they washed down the weekly Cocida special with a couple of cold Cervezas, and talked through their next moves.

It would be another day, maybe longer because of the weekend, before the coroner would have any information for them. It wasn't rocket science that Wells had been sexually assaulted, but, Lotello asked, "*Why*, what's the motive?" Unless they got lucky, Lotello ventured, the coroner wasn't going to be much help.

From Wells' legislative aide and driver, Ayres and Grant, they already had a rough window during which the attack had taken place, but without any meaningful suspect pinning down the time any further, this wasn't going to be of any real value. To Lotello, the scene was simply too clean to suggest much chance of any prints or DNA, or anything else from the coroner, that would be particularly useful.

What continued to bother Lotello most of all were the two unexplained telephone calls, one to the police station and one to

the journalist, Santana. Only the killer himself would likely have known so quickly what had happened. “Why in the world,” Lotello wondered aloud, “would the killer have wanted to draw any attention to the crime?”

“Beats me. I Googled the senator. A little over a year ago, she went through a messy divorce back in her hometown, in Kansas. There were rumors that she was quite a . . . player. We obviously need to check out her ex, who was reportedly embarrassed by it all, and pretty bitter. Also have to dig into who she was seeing after the divorce, perhaps *before* the divorce, too. Maybe we’ll turn up some jealous suitor, or some other crackpot, maybe both.”

Lotello did not feel very optimistic. “Wells was a public figure. Not likely to find a calendar or a little black book with a list of her conquests or wannabes, but we have to look.”

Barnet nodded. “I checked the townhouse for calendars and the like this morning. No luck. I’ll go by Wells’ office this afternoon and see if there’s anything there, although, based on his attitude, I don’t expect much help from that legislative aide, Ayres.”

“Don’t sweat Ayres. He’s harmless, just a little full of himself, and no doubt a bit on edge over what happened to his boss.

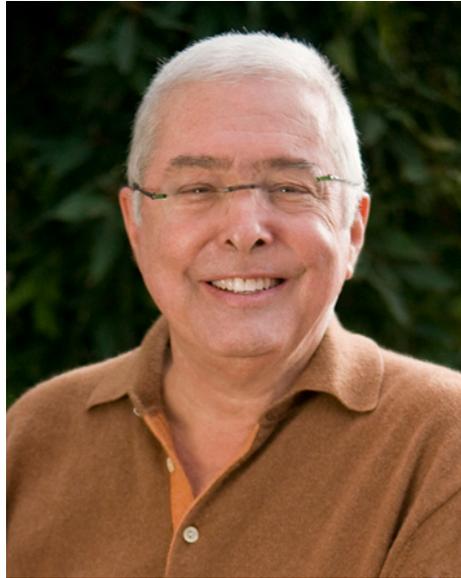
“Some family things I have to do this afternoon with the kids. We’ll talk in the morning.” As Frank headed out, the two early morning telephone calls continued to nag at him. *I’m worried there’s something more here than meets the eye, Beth. No reason I can see for an angry ex or jealous lover to have made those calls. I have a bad feeling about all of this. What about you, Beth? What do you think?*

Lotello’s questions were met with silence.

Find out where to buy the book at

<http://www.ronaldsbarak.com>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ronald S. Barak is the author of several prior legal publications and an *Order of the Coif* Law Review Editor. He graduated from the University of Southern California Law School and has practiced commercial law, mediation and arbitration for some 40 plus years. Ron resides in Pacific Palisades, California with his wife, Barbie, their cat, Maccabee, their dog, Ryder, and his golf clubs, where he is hard at work on his law practice, his next novel and his golf game, but not necessarily in that order.

Find out more at <http://www.ronaldsbarak.com>.