

*Author's Note: In this novel, Jason Kolarich is forced to work undercover for the federal government as it investigates a corrupt governor and his top aides and fundraisers. One of those fundraisers, featured in this excerpt, is **Charlie Cimino**. For ease of understanding, references in this excerpt to the "**F-Bird**" is to the undercover recording device that Jason wears while he works with Charlie. In this excerpt, **Lee Tucker** is an FBI special agent assigned to handling Jason.*

Opening Statement

I am recounting this story in case I am not around when the dust settles. If some unfortunate accident should befall me, as they say, and I am unable to testify, I want to have some account of what I did and why. I will not try to justify my actions. I could tell you that they made me do it, but that's hardly the point, and it may not be entirely accurate.

I won't lie to you, which is to say I will not deliberately mislead you. I will give you the most accurate account of events I can muster, but I can't promise it will be the truth. Truth is a matter of perspective, and if you don't believe me, then just watch how this whole thing plays out. Everyone who is a part of this story will tell a different version, when their time comes. In most of those versions, the hero will be whoever is telling the story.

In many of those versions, no doubt, the villain will be me.

Chapter 54

At six forty-five the next evening, I unlocked the door to Suite 410. Lee Tucker was reading something on his cell phone. He looked up and held a stare on me.

"Hey." I nodded to the F-Bird.

"Number twenty-two today," he said, his voice flat. "Kinion Consulting."

"Right."

Tucker handed me the F-Bird. "I'll be here when you get back."

I grabbed the recording device, slipped it into my suit pocket, and left.

Outside, it was already dark. The temperatures had fallen below freezing again. Charlie was waiting for me curbside in the Porsche. It was just a minute or two after seven.

"Hey," I said. "Try not to get us killed on the way there." With the ice this time of the year, riding in the 911 was an adventure.

Charlie didn't answer. His eyes remained forward. His jaw was set tight. He put the car in gear and motored forward.

“So this is Kinion Consulting,” I said. I ran through the details on the guy with whom we were going to have dinner tonight, as well as our plans for tomorrow. “And after tomorrow we’re down to—”

“Why’d you ask me about Starlight the other day?” Charlie kept his eyes forward as he spoke.

“What? Who—who’s Starlight?”

Charlie didn’t respond. His eyes were locked in the forward position. His right hand was in a fist. His left gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were pure ivory.

“Charlie, what—”

“You asked me, the other day. Why they weren’t on our list. Starlight Catering.”

“Oh. Oh, right,” I said. “The company you skipped over on the list. It just stood out. I was just wondering why we were talking to all these other companies but not them.”

We came up to a red light. Charlie didn’t move. “Why so curious all of a sudden?”

“I just told you why.” My internal thermometer had kicked up a few degrees.

The light changed to green. The car moved forward again.

“What’s the problem?” I asked.

“Problem?” Charlie drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Why would I have a problem? I don’t have a problem.”

“Whatever,” I said, like I didn’t have a care in the world. But this was going badly. My antennae for all things dangerous and scary were at full attention. But I couldn’t see any sense in pursuing it, in protesting. At least, not yet. I tried to think down the road to what might lie ahead. Maybe this was just a stray comment. Maybe he was just in a bad mood.

I sneezed. It wasn’t a real sneeze but I thought I faked it pretty well. Illness can be helpful in a situation like this. Charlie was having his doubts about me. If so, he’d try to read me. And it’s always harder to read someone when they’re sick. I once interrogated someone on a sexual assault who had the flu. The way the guy was sweating and bobbing his head, I thought I was minutes away from a full confession. Instead, the only thing I got from him was the contents of his lunch all over the table in front of me. Turned out he wasn’t our guy. I’d been wrong, and I wasn’t wrong often.

I couldn’t manufacture vomit, but I could manufacture a sneeze and a head cold. I could fake being sick. It would provide cover.

I sneezed again. I pulled a handkerchief out of my pants pocket. Talia bought me monogrammed handkerchiefs a couple of years ago. During the hay fever season that gave me fits, she got tired of finding tiny balls of Kleenex on the nightstand or in my pants pockets.

I blew my nose with the handkerchief and stuck it into my suit coat pocket next to the F-Bird. “Christ, this cold,” I said, adding some nasal to my voice.

Up ahead on the right was the turn for the interstate heading north. We were still in the left lane. “That’s our turn,” I reminded him.

He stayed in the left lane and drove through the intersection. We’d missed the turn. It was clearly no oversight on Charlie’s part.

Not good.

“Change of plans?” I asked.

“Change of plans. They want us to meet down here.”

He kept driving due west, as the traffic filtered out. He was driving well over the speed limit, taking us past the gentrified loft housing into an area that was heavily industrial.

I faked a sneeze. And another.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“It’s not far.”

He made a hard left turn down a street I didn’t know. I didn’t know this area at all. It wasn’t residential. No bars or boutiques or coffee shops. It was the old-line factories. Many of them abandoned now. Desolate and dark, this time of night. It was a good location for a private conversation. It was a good location for a lot of things.

Charlie was driving recklessly. The city plows didn’t come through here, and there was thick ice. His car wasn’t cut out for it. The rear of the car was fishtailing, the wheels spinning, but he didn’t care. His anger seemed to grow the longer we drove.

“This is where they want to meet?” I said, unsure of the final destination, but wherever it was, it was in a dark, remote pocket of the city if it was in this neighborhood. It made sense to continue to play innocent, as if I really expected that the president of Kinion Consulting would be making this meeting.

He hit the brakes. The Porsche fishtailed a bit. He turned the car into an open space, a garage with a high ceiling that housed a few larger vehicles, construction equipment. Vehicles that hadn’t been in use recently. Charlie killed the engine to the Porsche and sat quietly.

“We’re just going to sit here?” I asked.

He didn’t answer. A few minutes passed. Then I heard the sound of another vehicle crunching over the ice. It drew closer. The next thing I knew, headlights were hitting the wall in front of us and a black SUV pulled up next to us. The driver got out. He didn’t look friendly. He was wearing a long coat, so I couldn’t make out his build; I couldn’t tell if he was fat or muscular or both, but he wasn’t small, and he wasn’t nice.

A door opened, off on one side of the garage. A man in a black leather jacket and jeans stepped out. I recognized him. He was the guy from Charlie’s club the first time I was there. That was back when they tested me. I’d left my clothes in an unlocked locker, and Leather Jacket here walked up to Charlie after we’d played racquetball and told him “everything was fine.” It had been a signal to Charlie that he’d searched my locker, my clothes and possessions, and I was clean. I wasn’t wearing a wire.

But I was wearing one now.

Charlie pushed open his door. “Let’s start that meeting,” he said.

Chapter 55

When you’re in a role, you stay in that role to the end. You focus on it to the exclusion of all else. You try to avoid bluffing, but if you have to, you bluff, without fear of your bluff being called. If you’re going to go down, go down in role. Even if you’re caught, totally and completely. Because even then, there’s always a tiny chance at succeeding, and you’re no worse for trying.

I am the son of a con artist. My father didn’t teach me much in the way of ethics or set any kind of an example for me. But I learned a lot about deception. I learned by watching him, by listening to him, and by surviving around him. I learned it because, in many ways, I was playing a role my entire childhood.

You’re good at this, Lee Tucker had said to me more than once.

I had very limited options. I could run. I could open the car door and take off through the open garage. I didn’t know if Leather Jacket or the guys from the black SUV—or Charlie, for that matter—had weapons. I could wind up facedown, for good, with a few bullets in the back. But I could stay and meet that same fate.

I could do something similar to headlong flight—not run, but walk. I could pronounce this entire exercise offensive and insulting and walk away. The “real” me—Jason Kolarich, not wearing a wire—would do just that. But it could produce the same result as running. These goons would probably grab me, and I typically liked my chances when it came to physical confrontation, but it would be three on one, not counting Charlie. And not counting any weapons they might have.

Either way, if I left and survived doing so, the operation was over. Completely. No doubt. Charlie would close up shop and make every effort to cover his tracks. Presumably, the FBI would move in before he had that chance. The moment I got word to Lee Tucker, they'd probably arrest him. Surely, they had plenty of evidence against him. But I'd be looking over my shoulder, at least for a while.

And I wasn't done. I was close, I thought. But I wasn't fully satisfied I knew the truth behind Ernesto Ramirez's murder. The moment I left this undercover operation, my access to the truth was gone.

Balance that curiosity against the likelihood that I was about to be exposed.

Curiosity killed the cat, I believe I heard once.

It was probably dumb of me. Probably smarter to run and take my chances. But it was dumb of me to step into that alley with Ernesto's friend Scarface, and that turned out okay.

You're good at this. I'd better be now. Nerves and fear are very difficult to conceal. They affect your movements, your speech, your actions. I had to stay in role. I had nothing to hide. I had to forget about the F-Bird. I had to be willing to hand my suit coat over to someone, to turn that pocket inside out if requested, without a care in the world. In fact, I might even volunteer to hand it over.

I got out of the Porsche and closed the door. I looked over at Charlie, to give him *ahey-what's-with-these-guys* look, but the lighting was almost nonexistent in here, and anyway, he wasn't making eye contact with me.

"Charlie, what's the deal?" I said over the car to him. It was what an innocent person would say. Unfortunately for me, it's also what a guilty person would say. At this stage, those two points of view would converge. Even an innocent person would be anxious at what was happening. Even someone with nothing to hide would be nervous about being interrogated and maybe roughed up.

Charlie, I had to concede, had been pretty smart up until now. He'd clearly been planning to confront me. But he didn't come out and say that while we were driving. He slipped a little bit with the comment about Starlight, but otherwise he'd kept his powder dry. Smart, because I might have had an opportunity to escape. I could have made a move for him while he was driving. I could have jumped out of the car while it was stopped at a red light or, if necessary, while it was moving.

Instead, he'd waited until I was here, and three of his goons were basically surrounding me.

Leather Jacket was holding the door open over in the corner. One of the thugs was directly behind me, the other—the SUV's passenger—was coming around the front end, and Charlie was coming around the back of the Porsche.

I still had the chance to abort. I could make it past these morons. I didn't have to win a fight. I just had to make enough of a mess to get away.

"After you," said the guy directly behind me.

I turned around, not too abruptly but not slowly, either. I stepped right up, face-to-face with this guy. My coat brushed against his. He had probably fifty pounds on me, but he was two inches shorter than me and had to look slightly upward to make eye contact.

His partner, the passenger, hadn't made it around the SUV yet. Charlie was well back in the darkness. That gave me about two seconds alone with this ape in the relative darkness. Two seconds that might be the most important two seconds of my life. Almost nose-to-nose with the guy, I said, "Hey, Vito, you must have me confused with someone who takes orders from you."

The thug I had named Vito was momentarily thrown by my comment, but then a wide, sick smile crossed his face. I would have preferred a scowl.

"Go inside, Jason," Charlie said, pulling up the rear.

I paused. Then I stepped back from Vito, shook my head, trying to show indignation. "Let's get this over with."

I walked past Leather Jacket holding the door, into a facility that looked like abandoned office space, space that once had been open to the public. There was a large room with a coffee maker and a small play area for children. There were several desk areas with chairs on each side. It reminded me of a showroom at a car dealership.

"I'll check the Porsche," Leather Jacket said to the others, but I thought he wanted me to hear it, too. He wanted me to know that if I had tried to dump off anything incriminating—say, an electronic bug—in the Porsche, he'd find it.

Vito took the lead. I was next, followed by the other moron and then Charlie. We were headed into interior offices, which was a smart move if you were concerned about people hearing what was transpiring.

Vito opened a door and walked into an otherwise empty room. It was about the size of two offices. There was a single chair in the center of the room. That was it. Floor, ceiling, walls, and a single chair.

"The Kinions aren't going to have anywhere to sit," I said.

Nobody thought I was funny. I found myself in the center of the room, near the single chair. The two goons, Vito and his pal, spread out at forty-five degree angles. Charlie stood in the doorway.

"I'll give you this one chance to make it easy," Charlie said. "Just give it up and get it over with."

“Charlie,” I said, “I don’t know what the hell has gotten into you. You think *I’m* working against you? I’m the best thing that ever happened to you.”

He remained stoic. “Take off your clothes. All of them.”

“The fuck I will.”

Vito’s friend, to my left, began his approach toward me. Apparently, he was going to enforce Charlie’s edict. “Charlie,” I said, holding my hands out. “Seriously, what—”

In mid-sentence, I turned and swung at Vito’s friend. Call him Brutus. Brutus wasn’t expecting it because I was talking. You don’t expect the punch when the other person isn’t braced. But I was braced. I just masked it by looking in the other direction and by talking to Charlie. Misdirection will do wonders in a fight.

Brutus stumbled backward and fell to the floor. He put a protective hand over what was left of his nose. That had to hurt. It wasn’t the hardest swing I’d ever thrown, but it was square on target, and he was completely unprepared for it.

I thought Vito might come at me, too, but he didn’t. He took a couple of steps back and drew a gun.

“This is crazy,” I said. “You think I’m wearing a wire, Charlie? Is that it? You want to check me out? Fine.”

I took off my overcoat and tossed it toward him. Then I removed my suit coat and tossed it in the same direction. I undid my tie, unbuttoned my shirt, threw off my pants, kicked off my shoes and socks. I tossed my wallet, keys, and money clip to him and slid my cell phone across the floor. I was down to my undershirt and boxers. Every other part of my wardrobe was in a pile near Charlie’s feet.

Brutus needed some medical attention. His face looked like a used tampon. He stumbled out of the room as Leather Jacket appeared and whispered something to Charlie Cimino. I had to assume his report was favorable, because the F-Bird was not in the Porsche.

Leather Jacket gathered up my clothes into a small laundry basket he’d brought for the occasion.

“Easy on the starch,” I said.

Leather Jacket thought that was humorous. “Underwear, too, sweetheart.”

“Like hell.”

He walked toward me, but not too close. He wasn’t here for the earlier fun, but he could see a pool of blood where Brutus had been lying and he probably had caught a look at Brutus, too. He

reached into his pocket. For a split second, I thought he was going to produce a weapon. Vito already had one trained on me, but two is always better than one.

Instead, he pulled out a balled-up pair of cotton boxers.

“Trade ya,” he said. “But you go first. Take it all off.”

I didn’t really have much of a choice. But I was in role, and in that role, I would be annoyed but ultimately willing to cooperate.

“Normally, you’d have to buy me dinner first,” I said. I stripped off the remainder of my clothes and flung them at his feet. Leather Jacket took only a quick peek, thankfully, just to make sure I didn’t have some wire wrapped around my nuts or something.

He tossed me the boxers, which I quickly put on.

“Sit in the chair,” Leather Jacket said. I was going to do that, anyway, because I figured they were going to need time to search my clothes.

Once I was seated, Leather Jacket showed me handcuffs and walked behind me. “Don’t give me trouble,” he said. “Give me your hands.”

“This is ridiculous,” I said, but I complied. He cuffed my hands behind the chair, through one of the bars, so if I tried to stand, I’d have to pick up the chair, too. Score one for them.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Now, you wait.”

Charlie walked out of the room. Leather Jacket followed, holding a basket full of my clothes.

Vito kept the gun on me all the way to the door. “Cheap shot,” he said to me.

“Sorry about his face,” I said. “If I realized you two were boyfriend-girlfriend, I would have hit him in the stomach.”

He gave me that same creepy grin, just like the one he flashed when we were nose-to-nose in the garage.

“See you soon,” he said. He closed the door behind him and locked it.