



Sample Chapter

DEADLY DINING

A STAN TURNER MYSTERY
VOLUME 11

by

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Chapter 1

Stan Turner

It's bad enough to be sick, but when the doctors have no idea what's wrong with you, that is pure torture. Such was the case with Stan Turner's wife, Rebekah. Her mysterious illness had plagued the Turner family for over a year. During that time she had suffered stroke-like symptoms that left her weak, lethargic and very depressed.

It was a dark, stormy day in early May 1997 and Stan had just brought Rebekah home from the hospital after she'd undergone a parathyroidectomy. It had rained all the way home and thunder could be heard in the distance. Stan drove their new Honda Accord into the garage and then helped Rebekah into the house since the surgery had left her weak and a little shaky. After enduring this ordeal for so long, Stan hoped it was the end of her poor health and their life would get back to normal. After guiding her into an overstuffed chair, he turned on the TV, took his cell phone from his pocket, and called for pizza delivery.

"Well, are you happy to be home?" Stan asked.

"Yes. I can't believe I had to have surgery."

"Well, it's a good thing you did. They said the tumor was the size of a walnut."

"I know. I wonder what caused it."

"Maybe it was from chasing the mosquito truck around when you were a child?"

Rebekah smiled. "Yeah. That probably wasn't too smart in retrospect. But all the kids in the neighborhood did it. It was hot and the cool mist felt good."

"Yeah, but back then they were spraying with DDT. They don't even allow that to be sold anymore."

"What kind of pizza did you order?" Rebekah asked, deliberately changing the subject.

"Don't worry, I ordered your favorite, pepperoni."

"Good. What's on TV?"

The news and then Ally McBeal."

Rebekah nodded approvingly and then focused on the TV. The news was just beginning. A flashing headline and dramatic music indicated there was breaking news.

"This is Nikki Lane at Emilio's Italian Restaurant in Dallas where four patrons apparently have become violently sick from food eaten at the popular north Dallas restaurant. Police and ambulances are on the scene where witnesses say four customers eating a variety of entrees all got sick at about the same time. Three of the four customers have been rushed to Medical City Hospital and the fourth is being loaded into an ambulance as we speak.

"Now if you have a young child watching you will probably want them to leave the room before we show this video taken by a customer at a nearby table. It's quite graphic."

The restaurant's interior appears where a man at a table is holding his throat and coughing uncontrollably. Then the woman across from him turns pale and starts to throw up. The man next to her stands up, grabs his throat and then collapses to the ground. The final woman at the table screams and then begins to convulse. Two waiters come over to try to help but there is little they can do. The woman's convulsions finally stop and her head falls forward onto the table, her eyes wide-open. There are screams and general panic as people flee the restaurant. Sirens can be heard in the background and then the video ends.

"Well, that image will probably keep many of us awake tonight. We apologize for showing it but it's our commitment to bring you the latest news no matter how unsettling it might be," Nikki Lane said. She hesitated, listening to something being said to her in her earpiece. "We just got word that two of the victims were DOA at Medical City Hospital. No word on the other two victims. The police on the scene have advised us that many customers at Emilio Italian Restaurant fled the scene shortly after the four victims got sick. Police are requesting that anyone who ate at the restaurant tonight go to their local emergency room to be checked out. No one knows right now what caused these terrible reactions, so it's imperative that anyone who ate at the restaurant see a doctor immediately.

"To summarize two people have died tonight while eating at Emilio's Italian Restaurant and two others have been admitted to Medical City Hospital in Dallas. We'll keep you updated as new information is learned about this terrible tragedy. This is Nikki Lane for Channel 4 News."

"Oh, my God!" Rebekah said. "We've eaten at that restaurant, haven't we?"

Stan nodded. "Yes, we have. I did some estate planning for Emilio Bellucci and his wife Eva. I took you to lunch there about a year ago. He's a really nice guy and everybody loves his restaurant."

"Oh, right. His wife was much younger and very beautiful."

"Yes. Eva was an aspiring model who worked as a waitress before she landed her first contract. Emilio was a cook's apprentice at the same restaurant."

"How romantic."

"Yeah. I'm a little surprised that Eva stayed with Emilio after she made it big, but she did and even financed his restaurant."

"Ah, well. I'm afraid you'll be handling his bankruptcy soon," Rebekah noted. "Then we'll see how strong their love is."

Stan sighed. "Yeah, you may be right. I can't believe this happened."

When the ten o'clock news came on Stan watched to find out the latest on the story. The news anchor went immediately to Nikki Lane who was still on the scene.

"Three people have died tonight, possibly of poisoning, according to reliable sources at Medical City Dallas. A fourth victim is in stable condition and expected to fully recover. The police have refused to comment but we have it from reliable sources at the hospital that Parmesan cheese laced with some kind of pesticide or rodenticide was responsible for the three deaths there earlier tonight. No one knows how or why the cheese was laced with poison, but the waiter who served the cheese and the owner of the restaurant were taken into custody for questioning about the incident."

Stan and Rebekah watched the video again and then shut off the TV. That night Stan couldn't sleep. He felt so badly for Emilio and wondered how something like that could have happened. He knew the restaurant business was a perilous one as he'd put several through bankruptcy himself. More than eighty percent ultimately failed, according to the research he had read about it. Emilio had been lucky that his restaurant had always flourished. Stan worried that Rebekah was right. There would be no way he could survive something like this. Stan had tried to call Emilio before he went to bed but hadn't been able to get through. He tried again in the morning, but there was still no answer at his home and there was a message on the restaurant's answering machine that it would be closed until further notice.

When Stan got to work Maria reminded him he had a 9:00 o'clock appointment with Ramadan Bakira, a Pakistani who had some kind of problem with a business partner. Stan cringed at hearing this. Business disputes were bad enough, but when they involved immigrants they were usually a nightmare. As he was getting himself some coffee his partner, Paula Waters, walked in the office kitchen.

"Good morning," Paula said. "How is Rebekah?"

"Okay, I think. She was a little tired yesterday but she seemed to be feeling better today. Her nurse friend is going to stay with her just to make sure she's okay."

"Good. You can't be too careful."

"The doctor said she should be back to normal in a few days."

"Glad to hear it."

"Did you hear about Emilio Bellucci?"

"No. What happened?" Paula asked.

"Three people died at his restaurant from poisoned Parmesan cheese."

"What? You've got to be kidding?"

"No. I wish I were. There was a video that was pretty grotesque."

"Oh, my God!"

Maria walked in and smiled. "Mr. Bakira is here to see you."

"Oh, right. Okay. Talk to you later, Paula," Stan said leaving with his coffee mug in hand.

After Stan set his coffee down he went out to the reception area, greeted his new client, and brought him back to his office. Mr. Bakira was a slight man with a dark complexion and talked with a strong accent.

"So, what can I do for you, Mr. Bakira?"

"Oh, you can call me Ram. That's what everyone calls me."

"Okay, Ram. You said something about a problem with a partnership?"

"Yes. I recently immigrated to Texas and bought into a grocery store in Richardson, Pakimart Grocery."

"You bought into it?"

"Yes. Saman Keashkear sponsored my immigration to the United States so I bought into his restaurant."

"I see. So, how much did you invest?"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It was all the money my family and I had in the world."

"Where are you from?"

"Lahore, Pakistan," Ram replied.

"Did you come alone?"

"No. My wife and daughter came as well. Sammy sponsored me for a work visa."

"Okay, so you two are partners now?"

"Yes. He has fifty-one percent and I have 49%."

"Oh really?" Stan said glumly.

A minority partner was usually in a bad position since the majority partner could do pretty much whatever he wanted and the minority party was forced to live with it. Stan usually advised his clients against buying a minority interest in any small

business unless he really knew his business partner well and trusted him implicitly.

"So, how did you meet Sammy?"

"He was referred to me by a friend back in Pakistan."

"How well did your friend know him?"

"I don't know? I'm not sure he actually knew him. He just heard he was the man to talk to if you wanted to immigrate to the U.S."

Stan sighed. "Okay, so what's going on that's got you upset?"

Ram took a deep breath. "Well, business has been bad and I need money to buy inventory and pay the rent, but Sammy won't give me any."

"Okay, what happened to the \$250,000?"

"Sammy took it. He said it was the purchase price of the 49% interest I bought. I asked him to let me have some of it to pay the bills and buy inventory but he refused."

"Does he work in the business?"

"He did at first but now I seldom see him."

"Do you have employees?"

"Just my wife and I."

"So, you're behind on the rent?"

"Yes. The landlord is threatening to lock us out."

"Do you have a written partnership agreement?"

"No. He just gave me a bill of sale for my share of the business."

"You obviously didn't consult an attorney before you bought into the business."

"No. In Pakistan, we don't often use attorneys."

"Well, America is different. You should always consult an attorney before you get into any business relationship."

"Yes, now I know that, but there must be something I can do? If the business goes under I'll have to return to Pakistan in disgrace. My parents, sister, and brothers gave me all their savings. It was my hope to sponsor them all to come to America someday. I can't tell them I lost all of their money! Please help me, Mr. Turner. My wife just had a new baby and she would die if I told her we had to go back to Pakistan. You've got to help me."

Stan wished he had some magical solution for Ram but he knew the cards were stacked against him. Sammy was a con artist and even if they sued him and got a judgment the odds that they'd ever collect anything from him were slim to none. Nevertheless, Stan wasn't the type of attorney who could just turn away a person in desperate circumstances.

Stan sighed again. "Well to be honest with you, it's not likely you'll ever see your \$250,000 again, but there may be a way to keep you in business."

"Really? How?" Ram asked hopefully.

"Well, there is what is called a Chapter 11. It's a type of bankruptcy but it's actually a reorganization."

"I have heard of Chapter 11, but how will that help me?"

"Well, first of all, it gives you at least four month's protection from creditors during which time you don't have to pay a dime to anyone."

"But what could I do in four months?"

"A lot of things—line up new financing, find new suppliers, reject leases, sell inventory and most importantly stockpile cash."

"Stockpile cash?"

"Yes. For four months or maybe even longer you can save all the cash from your sales and then propose a payout to creditors of as little as ten cents on the dollar. You'll have to pay your landlord everything he's owed eventually, but you can do it over five to seven years."

Ram's face lit up. "That sounds good, but can't Sammy stop me?"

"He could if he wanted to spend a lot of money on an attorney, but my guess is he doesn't really care about the grocery store. Selling you a portion of the business was just a way to steal your \$250,000."

"But if I turn the business around and start making money won't he try to come in and take it over?"

"No, because we'll structure the Chapter 11 plan in such a way that partners will lose their equity interest unless they make a capital contribution and you'll end up owning the business free and clear."

"You can do that?" Ram questioned.

"Yes, if I'm right and Sammy doesn't contest the bankruptcy or want to put any money in the business. But, if he does contest the bankruptcy then we'll sue him for fraud and there is a good chance the court will award you his interest in the business as damages."

"That sounds good, but it also sounds expensive? I don't have much money."

"I'll need a ten thousand dollar retainer and the rest you can pay down the road when the business gets turned around. Can you raise that much?"

"I don't know. I'll have to see if there is something I can sell to raise the money. I'll let you know."

Stan gave Ram a list of everything he would need for a Chapter 11 filing and wished him good luck in finding the money. In the old days Stan would have taken the case on a contingency but with a partner and an associate now he couldn't do anything that financially reckless. He felt sorry for Ram and hoped the business could be turned around in a Chapter 11. Realistically most Chapter 11s failed, but Stan had a better track record than most attorneys because he didn't quit on a client the moment they ran out of money to pay attorney's fees.

The moment Ram left, Maria advised Stan he had a call from Emilio Bellucci. Stan sat up and picked up the phone. "Emilio. I have been trying to call you."

"Yes. I got your message but I haven't had a minute to return the call."

"I saw the news last night. What a nightmare?"

"Yeah," Emilio groaned. "You don't know the half of it."

"So, how are you holding up?"

"Just tired. I didn't get any sleep last night."

"Any idea how the poison got in the Parmesan cheese?"

"No clue, but I know it didn't get there by accident."

"Do the police have any suspects?"

"They haven't told me one way or another. They've questioned me, all my employees and the customers who were there last night."

"Well, I just wanted to remind you to notify your insurance carrier right away. There are bound to be claims and lawsuits over the three deaths."

"Right. I'll call my agent right away."

"And if the police question you again you should have an attorney present."

"Okay."

"Do you have a criminal attorney?"

"No. Can you recommend one?"

"Well, my partner is very good. You've met Paula haven't you?"

"Yes, briefly."

"Well, she used to work in the DA's office, so she knows her way around the courthouse."

"Couldn't you do it?"

"Well, I'm not a criminal law specialist like Paula. You'd be better off with her. But in actuality, if you hire her I'll end up working a lot on your case anyway."

"Good. Then I'll call her if the police want to question me further."

"Also, if you get served with any lawsuits, even though you have insurance, it's a good idea to hire your own attorney to monitor the case because the attorney the insurance company hires will be looking out for the insurance company and not necessarily act in your best interest."

Emilio took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You do bankruptcies too, don't you?"

Stan laughed. "Yeah."

"Well, I have a feeling that's where all this is going to end up."

Stan wished he had some words of encouragement for Emilio but he couldn't think of anything right off the bat. "Well, hang in there Emilio. I know things look pretty bleak right now, but when everything is sorted out it might not be so bad. If some lunatic decided to use your restaurant for his murderous acts, your customers

will understand that it was not your fault. So, in time, your customers will come back and your business will be as strong as ever. In the meantime, there are some things we can do to protect you, if necessary."

"Okay. Thanks, Stan."

After Stan hung up he went to tell Paula about the situation. She was in her office working diligently on the computer when he walked in. She looked up and smiled.

"You've been busy this morning," she said.

"Yes, another victim of an immigration scam."

"Oh, God. How much did he lose?"

"Two hundred and fifty grand."

"Ouch!"

"But, that's not the case I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh. Something juicy I hope?"

Paula and Stan had met in law school and become good friends. They studied together and even helped the FBI with a case against a Mexican drug cartel. After they graduated Paula went to the DA's office to get criminal law experience and Stan went into private practice because he didn't like criminal law all that much. But as fate would have it, Stan immediately got a high profile murder case and Paula found herself stuck prosecuting misdemeanor cases. When one successful murder case led to another, Paula got so jealous that she decided to approach Stan about a partnership. Since Paula was a woman who didn't take 'no' for an answer, the law firm of Turner and Waters was born.

"Did you see the news reports about the three people who died yesterday at Emilio's Italian Restaurant?"

"I heard something about it."

"Well Emilio is a client and he insists it was no accident. Somebody laced the Parmesan cheese with poison."

"Oh, my God!"

"So, somebody is going to be charged with the murders. If it turns out to be Emilio or one of his employees, then you'll probably get the case."

Paula's face began to glow and Stan could see the wheels beginning to turn in her head. Paula had just finished up a high profile murder case. She'd successfully defended a woman accused of repeatedly stabbing her husband with an ice pick. The case was doubly difficult because it wasn't the first time the client had been accused of killing her husband. The jury had deadlocked in the first case and the prosecution had elected not to try the case again. So, Paula pretty much had to prove her client innocent of both crimes to get her off.

"Let me know the minute you hear something," Paula said gleefully.

"Don't worry. I told Emilio to call you directly."

"Good. In the meantime, I'll start doing background work just in case the call comes in."

Stan nodded and left. When he got back to his office Jodie was waiting for him.

"Hi, Jodie," Stan said smiling.

Jodie Marshall had been with Stan since he first opened his law practice. Stan fell in love with her the first time she stepped into his office, but she was very young and they both were married, so he managed to keep their relationship professional. Jodie started off as a secretary, got promoted to a legal assistant after a few years and then decided to go to law school. When she graduated Stan hired her on as an associate. Jodie was tall, blond and jaw-droppingly gorgeous. She was divorced and had no children, so when she took on a case there were no distractions. She was like a bloodhound. Turn her loose and whoever she was after had better watch out. In her very first case, she put so much heat on a sweatshop owner that he had her kidnapped, but she survived to ultimately bring him down.

"Hey. I wondered if you would sit in on an initial interview with me. It looks like a pretty complicated case."

"Sure. What's it about?"

"It's a Good Samaritan case that went awry. This guy tried to stop a robbery at a jewelry store and somehow managed to shoot the store owner."

Stan laughed. "Oh, wonderful. I can't wait."

Jodie shrugged. "Don't laugh. The store owner wants a million dollars in damages."

Stan rolled his eyes. In most cases, if you were suing the average private citizen it didn't matter if you sued them for ten thousand or ten million. They rarely had non-exempt assets to go after, so a judgment was worthless. If a defendant owned a home then he might have homeowner's insurance which had general liability coverage of up to \$300,000 built-in and if you were really lucky he'd have a million dollar umbrella policy.

"So does our client have any assets?"

Jodie sighed. "Nothing tangible, but he says he has a business that he thinks is pretty valuable."

Stan groaned. "Okay. What about insurance?"

Jodie shook her head. "None."

"Okay. I guess we have us a lawsuit. When is your client coming in?"

"Right after lunch."

"Okay, I'll join you in the conference room when he comes in."

Jodie left and Stan went over and sorted through his telephone messages. He was glad Jodie had an interesting case to work on. After her last case was over she'd

been relegated to bankruptcies and divorces which were tedious and depressing. He was worried if she got bored she might take one of the offers from the big downtown law firms who were constantly trying to lure her away from Turner and Waters. Now she'd have something more worthy of her talents and energies to work on, something that would excite and challenge her, and something that would generate cash flow.

The firm's overhead had skyrocketed a year earlier when Jodie was hired. They'd been able to manage it when each of them had major cases to work on, but they'd gone several months now without any significant new business. So Stan had been sweating to make each payroll, but with his new Chapter 11 bankruptcy, Jodie's new lawsuit, and Paula's new murder case, he wouldn't have to worry about cash flow for a while. He just prayed everything would fall into place.

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THE STAN TURNER MYSTERIES

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Deadly Distractions

Black Monday

Cactus Island

Act Normal

Deadly Defiance

Deadly Dining

Deadly Blood