

# THE CYCLOPS CONSPIRACY

DAVID PERRY



# CHAPTER 1

Tuesday, September 19

Jason waited for the door to his tortured past to swing open.

Having just rung the bell, he fidgeted on the stoop. His secret had haunted him for thirteen years. Separated from it now by only a thickness of wood and glass, he couldn't believe he was actually standing here, once again, after all these years.

The door opened, and a hunched old woman peered at him. "I'm Jason—Jason Rodgers," he said, the words catching in his throat.

"Chrissie warned me you might be coming by," croaked the elderly woman in a heavy Italian accent, pulling her shawl tighter around her frail shoulders. "Please come in." Her voice was filled with kindness, but her eyes penetrated Jason Rodgers as if she were already familiar with his history.

Over the years, the deep pain had faded, leaving only hollow regret. His secret had been confined to a dull ache in the recesses of his analytical mind. Every once in a while, though, a sight or a sound would trigger an agonizing flashback. He'd remember the pained look on Chrissie's face. Or the hangdog visage of his mentor, Thomas, Chrissie's father.

Those ghostly memories never really went away, and now they stirred as Jason stepped through the door into the Newport News, Virginia, colonial-style house. It had been Thomas Pettigrew's home for thirty-plus years and where he'd picked Chrissie up for their first date. His lungs seized, unable to push out air.

Though not responsible, Thomas had been at center stage in the episode that had nearly ended Jason's pharmacy career before it began and—at the same time—doomed his love affair with Chrissie. The man's tutelage had shaped Jason's pharmacy career. In the thirteen years since he'd left, Jason felt as if he'd failed both of them. The least he could do was attend the funeral of the man who'd given him his start.

He'd seen Chrissie graveside. It was an awkward reunion, one that Jason had both highly anticipated and deeply dreaded. Thomas was, after all, her father. She had every right to be pissed off at Jason. Her first reaction was a nervous smile and a stiff hug. They exchanged a few words, and then she made an offer that shocked him: to join her at her father's house for the funeral reception. His internal struggle was a monumental one, but in the end, Jason knew it was an invitation he would not decline. Nonetheless, he was daunted by the thought of actually setting foot in this house again; of actually talking for the first time in years to the only woman he'd ever really loved.

Long ago, his actions had blindsided her, in an excruciatingly painful way. Of course, he hadn't been around to see the pain he'd caused. But Jason knew how deeply Chrissie had loved him. He could deduce from the agony he himself had suffered that Chrissie's pain was magnified by unanswered questions. For many reasons, and for many years, he'd hoped and prayed for the opportunity to make her understand his actions.

*The old woman said "warned."* Despite the ominous implications of the word, a question nagged him. Had Chrissie been thinking about him after all these years?

"Did you find the house all right?" asked the old woman, her voice chalky and exhausted by life.

Jason nodded. “Yes, thank you,” he replied, unable to force more than a whisper past the lump in his throat. *I’ve been here before!* he thought.

She offered him a hand spider-webbed with blue veins. “I’ve been Thomas’s neighbor for five years. I’ve been helping Chrissie with the funeral. I’m experienced with this sort of thing—my Giuseppe passed last year.”

Jason frowned, unable to muster any sympathy for the woman. “I’m sorry,” he said mechanically, looking over her shoulder to the small gathering of mourners.

“You and Chrissie were lovers many years ago, weren’t you?”

Jason’s gut clenched, and she saw his reaction. “I see the pain in her eyes when she speaks of you. These eyes,” she said, tapping her temple and then her chest, “and this heart have seen a lot.” She leaned closer. “What happened?”

Jason stepped back, too stunned to answer her question.

“I know it’s forward of me,” she said, touching his arm as if keeping him from running away. “But I’m an old lady who doesn’t have much time left. I speak my mind. No time for bullshit! And I see it in Chrissie’s eyes—she truly loved you. Whatever you did wrong, you might still have a chance with her.”

Jason felt his eyebrows lift at the audacity of the woman’s words. What stung more was their accuracy. It had been more than a decade since Jason had dumped Christine. And only one other person on earth had known why. Thomas, Chrissie’s father, had sworn Jason to secrecy. But Thomas was gone now. That left Jason holding the secret like a rucksack filled with the weight of a thousand universes.

Was he released from his obligation now that Thomas was gone? Jason had asked himself that question a hundred times in the last few days.

The old woman waved a hand. “But there are more pressing matters today, no?”

“Yes,” said Jason, relieved the conversation was veering in another direction.

“Thomas’s death was so tragic and so sudden,” she said, placing a hand to her cheek. “He was *un uomo buono*.”

“What?”

“A good man.” She leaned in once more. “I’ll tell Chrissie you’re here. There’s food and drink in the kitchen if you’re hungry.” She winked a paper-thin eyelid. “Good luck! Tread lightly!”

Jason shook his head slowly as he watched her shuffle through a klatch of mourners. He waited nervously in the foyer. Guests cast him sideways glances. He avoided them and studied the once-familiar surroundings.

The décor hadn’t changed. This house had been his second home during their courtship. The familiar layout was thick with painful memories. The sparkle in Chrissie’s eye as she descended the stairs on their first date. Bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches at the kitchen table. Late-night movies on the television, ignored in the darkened living room as hands probed hungry flesh beneath blankets.

Outside, the house had not seen a fresh coat of paint in years, though Jason noticed a small satellite dish sloppily attached to a downstairs window. Apparently, Thomas had made a weak attempt to enter the new century.

The six-foot portrait of Thomas and his wife, Eleanor, still hung on the same wall in the foyer. No one who entered could miss it. Thomas stood regally behind his wife as she sat in an ornate chair, smiling stiffly. The gilded frame’s tiny crevices were caked with dust. Surrounding the piece, the wallpaper’s glow had faded to a dull, matte finish.

Jason overheard a woman whispering about the tragic circumstances of Pettigrew’s death. The word “alcohol” reached his ear as if Satan himself had hissed it. Jason glared at the woman, ready to walk over to her and set her straight. But she was too engrossed in herself to notice him. His outrage rose another few degrees. There was no way he’d driven drunk! Not Thomas Pettigrew!

It was then that he spied Chrissie in the living room speaking with two older women. Probably acquaintances of Thomas. She was

not facing him, but he studied her face from an angle. To say Christine was attractive was a gross understatement. She was drop-dead, you're-in-heaven-before-hitting-the-floor gorgeous. Her chestnut hair cascaded to her shoulders, curling gently behind petite ears. Sexy and understated, the style framed a perfect face and reminded you that a brain that crunched numbers like a supercomputer resided beneath. Her conservative dress, a tan blazer with matching skirt, low brown pumps, and an ivory blouse open at the neck, could never hide the firm curves of ample breasts and sleek hips. Then there were the eyes. The sweet caramel gaze would, Jason knew, still clench his soul the moment it was directed his way.

Her cherubic appearance and rambunctious, passionate nature had, most certainly, been tempered by the travails of life. Travails to which, he was certain, he had in no small part contributed. What had happened in her life? What had he given up? The sight of her told him one thing: she was not a frail, broken woman crushed by the weight of a failed love. Hers was a tested, demure confidence set in an unflappable foundation of femininity.

Christine caught his eye, excused herself from the women, and walked toward him. As she approached, Jason's stomach flipped as if he were on the first death-defying plunge of a roller coaster. *God, she's still gorgeous*, he thought.

Her lips formed a thin line. "Jason," she said. "I'm glad you could come." Her eyes were rimmed in red as she forced a smile and took his hands in hers.

Her voice sparked something in his chest. "I'm so sorry about your father, Chrissie. He was a great man, and a giant in pharmacy," he said softly. "He gave me my start."

"I remember, Jason. I was there," she replied, releasing his hands. "Come into the kitchen."

They faced each other from across a small island.

"How are you?" she asked stiffly. "Are you still over at Keller's?" Her eyes alternated uncomfortably between the counter and Jason.

“Actually,” he replied. “I’m sort of between jobs right now.” He didn’t mention that, only three days ago, he’d resigned from his position as pharmacy manager at Keller’s Food and Drug. The poor and potentially dangerous working conditions, which he’d tried so hard to redress, had finally defeated him.

“Really? Daddy told me a year or so ago that you seemed to love it over there.”

“How would he know? I hadn’t spoken to him in years.”

“He had a lot of connections in pharmacy. He kept tabs on you, I’m sure. So, why the change?”

“Well,” he said, ignoring the question, “I’m not completely out the door yet. They’re trying to lure me back.”

“Interesting.” The word had an ominous tone. Unasked questions and issues floated beneath the surface like submerged icebergs.

“The question is, how are you?” asked Jason. “I know how hard all this is.” He meant to sound solicitous. But after all this time and his lengthy absence, it sounded lame to his own ears.

“Thanks. It’s easier than it looks.”

“What do you mean?”

Christine waved the question away. The old woman returned with a glass of iced tea for Jason. “Would you like some swedish meatballs or finger sandwiches?” she asked Jason.

“No, thank you.” Jason set the glass on the counter and ignored it.

The woman looked at them. “Christine, if you need anything I’ll be in the living room.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Liggieri.”

“She seems like a big help,” he said, when they were alone again. He thought about the woman’s earlier comments and cringed.

“You have no idea. The night Daddy died—” She choked. “I came to the house looking for him. When I couldn’t find him, I called the police. Mrs. Liggieri came over to make sure everything was all right. Later, after we found out he was—dead—she helped me with

everything. I think she enjoys it. She knows how to bury someone properly.” Moisture glistened in her eyes.

Jason smiled and said, “Old people always do.”

Christine chuckled, blinking back tears. He wanted to reach out to her, to comfort her. But he was too far away, physically and emotionally, so he stood frozen in place.

Mrs. Liggieri reappeared. “Christine, honey,” she said, “Ms. Zanns and her doctor friend have stopped by.”

On the heels of the old woman strutted a small, elegant woman dressed in a navy business suit. She wore no expensive jewelry or rings, yet wealth and authority oozed from her. Her prim ensemble contrasted oddly with an ancient-looking amulet hanging from her neck. Wisps of gray dotted her temples, but her smooth skin gleamed like tan porcelain. The woman appeared irritated at the slow gait of Chrissie’s neighbor, as if she were late for a meeting and did not have time to be held up.

Close behind the new woman followed a tall, lithe, and much younger woman. They were introduced to Jason as Lily Zanns and Dr. Jasmine Kader.

“Please,” Zanns instructed Jason when he used their last names. “It’s Lily and Jasmine.” Zanns turned to Christine. “I apologize, Christine, but Sam couldn’t be here. With your father’s passing, we have a hole in our staffing. He’s covering the pharmacy until we can find a suitable replacement. Of course, I don’t think anyone could replace your father.” Her thick Mediterranean-French accent was roughened by a guttural throatiness.

Christine forced another tight smile. “Thank you, Lily.” Mrs. Liggieri motioned to her once again. “I’d better go see what my neighbor needs. Excuse me.”

Kader, Zanns, and Jason smiled stiffly, enduring a pregnant awkwardness.

Jason broke the silence. “So you own the Colonial now?” It was more statement than question. Thomas Pettigrew had sold the Colonial

Pharmacy to this woman three or four years earlier. Pharmacists Jason had spoken to over the years had given her stewardship mixed reviews.

“Yes,” replied Zanns. “For three and a half years now.”

“And Thomas stayed on to work for you?”

“Yes, he said he wasn’t quite ready to retire.” She paused, then added, “His death was so...tragic.”

Jason nodded solemnly. Jasmine Kader caught his eye. They shared an awkward smile.

“And how is it that you knew Thomas?” Zanns inquired.

“I was a pharmacy student of his.”

“Of course. The pharmacy profession, like most, is a small community, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. In fact, I work at Keller’s, and I’ve filled many of the prescriptions your colleague Jasmine here has written.”

Zanns’s dark-brown eyes suddenly seemed to become alert with possibility. “I see,” she said slowly. Then she quickly excused herself and moved off to speak with someone who was waving at her. Jasmine wandered in the direction of the food, leaving Jason alone.

The urge to bolt was formidable; he felt as if his sins against Chrissie were being broadcast on a moving teletype across his chest, like sports scores, for all these strangers to see. And naturally, Chrissie was distant, distracted and in mourning. *She just buried her father*, Jason thought. *Had you truly expected...?*

He ambled through the house, trying to shake off his uneasiness. The mere act of walking eased his anxiety slightly. The dining room table was covered with potluck platters, which were largely being ignored. He scanned faces, hoping for a friendly port in which to drop a conversational anchor. But he was miles from shore, and the seas were choppy. He circled twice.

On his final lap, he noticed a tall man who looked as out of place as he did, standing alone in a corner. With a gray, fuzzy ponytail, a fraying tweed jacket, and cratered skin, the man looked like a cross between a beardless Abe Lincoln and Willie Nelson. His eyes darted

about, studying everyone, and locked on Jason's. They each nodded, kindred souls stuck in the abyss of social awkwardness.

Jason was about to drift over and strike up a conversation with the fellow misfit, when he spotted Christine, moving through the kitchen into the dining room. She was alone, trying to find some privacy. Tears lined her cheeks. She was overcome with emotion. Jason entered from the living room. Though it was not his to give, he wanted to offer understanding, support. A small voice inside him cautioned him to leave her alone, but he ignored it, intercepting her near the oak buffet.

Christine spotted him, wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand, and avoided his eyes. She let out an exasperated sigh, communicating with a wave of her hand what words could not. Jason reached for a paper napkin from a stack on the table and handed it to Chrissie. "Come with me," he said. He grasped her hand, and an electric jolt coursed through his body. He led her out the back door onto the porch, and sat on the top step. He patted the spot beside him. "Sit."

Chrissie complied. They stared out at the backyard in silence for a long moment as Jason tried to organize his thoughts. "I remember how hard it was burying my father five years ago," he began. "He had a massive heart attack. Died where he was standing and was gone before he hit the floor. I know how you feel, Chrissie."

Chrissie studied the steps and did not speak. Jason saw her lower lip quivering. "Jason, why did you come by today?"

"You invited me when I saw you at the funeral. Remember?"

"I know that. I didn't think you'd actually accept."

"I guess I owed it to your father...and you," Jason replied. He turned to look at her. "Why did you invite me?"

Christine sighed. "Seeing you at the funeral brought me back to happier times. At least, they were happier until you..." Her voice trailed off.

Jason scanned the backyard. The lawn was dying, yellow, and overgrown, sprouting weeds. He wanted to crawl into it and die himself.

“Maybe someday I could explain it all to you. But I know now’s not a good time.” He removed a Keller’s business card from his suit and scribbled his cell number. “When you’re ready, let me know.”

Christine accepted the card and turned it in her hands. “We’ll see,” she whispered.

Jason cleared his throat and changed the topic. “I hadn’t spoken to Thomas in years, but I think about him every so often. Was he in good spirits before the accident?”

“I wouldn’t know,” she replied. “Daddy and I weren’t close in the last few years.”

“Really? Why not?” Jason remembered how Chrissie had adored her father and hung on every word he uttered.

“Daddy changed. It got worse with each month that passed.”

“I know it’s none of my business, Chrissie, but I have a hard time believing what I read in the papers. The article said he was drunk and ran off the road. Is that what you’re talking about? Because that’s not the man I knew.”

“Tell me about it. I grew up with him. I got all the Southern Baptist lectures.” Christine squeezed her nose with the napkin. “I’m not talking about drinking. There were other things about Daddy that were strange.” She placed her hand on Jason’s arm. Her touch was magnetic through the sleeve of his suit. “I’m talking about his obsession.”

“What obsession? What are you talking about? Your father wasn’t the obsessive type.”

“Daddy changed. It’s complicated—and somewhat embarrassing. I can’t get into it here, I have to get back to my guests,” she said.

“I understand.” Jason studied her swollen eyes. “Chrissie, if there’s anything I can do...”

Christine held up the card he’d just given her. “Maybe we’ll have that conversation and we can talk about...the past. And I could tell you about Daddy’s transformation, as disconcerting as it was. But it would be much easier if I showed you.”

## CHAPTER 2

As Lily Zanns smoothed her bulky sweater in the mirror, she heard Oliver, her powerful jack-of-all-trades, moving about above her in the yacht's command center. She knew that he was watching the weather radar and the electronic jamming equipment like a nervous mother. *Vengeance* shuddered as the keel scraped the bottom of the hidden cove. They were well beyond the Coleman Bridge, miles into the York River.

Her stomach tensed. After she'd made the appropriate, polite appearance at Thomas Pettigrew's house after the funeral, she'd raced back to the mansion with Jasmine Kader. They'd changed clothes and hopped on the waiting yacht. This was their seventh cruise up the river to discuss the details of their plan. If all went well, there would be only one more before the fateful day.

The intercom crackled with Oliver's rich voice. "We are in position, Ms. Lily."

Sam Fairing and Jasmine Kader waited, sitting on the cushioned seats lining the main salon inside Zanns's sixty-eight-foot motor yacht.

The sun had descended behind the treetops, and the moonlit water sparkled through the large windows.

Zanns scuffed her leather deck shoes into the thick carpet and regarded herself in the mirror a moment longer. Rather than evaluating her appearance, though, her thoughts wandered to the secret faction led by the mysterious man with only one name. Hammon. The word was of Greek derivation and meant “hidden one.” It was an apt description. The only portal through which Zanns could contact Hammon was the weasel, Steven Cooper. Cooper was Hammon’s eyes, ears, and mouthpiece. Through him, Hammon had expressed his deep concern over Pettigrew’s discovery of the drop site and the archaic delivery method they were employing. Of course, Pettigrew hadn’t known what he’d stumbled upon, thinking it merely a prescription scam. Their plans were put on hold while steps were taken to bury the nosy bastard. Several tense days of dialogue with Hammon through his intermediary had ensued. She’d finally managed to convince both of them that all was in order.

They had come too far and sacrificed too much to turn back now. Her lover, the man for whom she was carrying out this mission, had been executed nearly three years ago. Their plan had been hatched before he was gone. The time of reckoning was nearly at hand. Three long years of work and worry would be rewarded in a mere nineteen days.

On the table in the center of the room rested a map and a package. Moving from the mirror, Zanns checked the coordinates she’d given Oliver an hour earlier. It was time to take the next step. She faced her two illegitimate children, studying them with analytical aloofness.

Jasmine Kader broke the trance and walked to the table beside Zanns. She was taller and younger than her brother, floating with the graceful, long-legged stride of a prima ballerina. Long black hair hung down to her perfectly formed breasts, framing a face that rarely smiled, and black eyes that devoured weakness.

Sam Fairing, on the other hand, was shorter and seemed to be constructed of rigid, inflexible fibers. Every part of him was exact,

never out of place. Zanns studied his eyes as he took a spot beside his sister. Both of them possessed the black, soulless eyes of their dead father. She had grand plans for her son. Their mission would vault him onto the world stage and catapult him into the vacuum created by his father's death.

Zanns's gaze was not that of a loving, nurturing mother. She did not recall with fondness bygone days of birthday parties, graduations, and recitals. No, Zanns analyzed and evaluated her children as perfect killing machines. They were weapons that would deliver fatal blows and bring—as the yacht's name so succinctly described—vengeance for all the world to witness.

"This is the second-to-last delivery," she said, running her hand over the torn plastic of the package. "The information has been confirmed and is finalized. The words and diagrams on these pages will allow us to seal the fate of the two cowardly infidels and leave our mark on history."

A cardboard shipper wrapped in black plastic sat open on the polished oak table beside the map, its contents—two simple pages—resting beside it. An overhead lamp illuminated the documents in the otherwise-dark cabin. Zanns continued, "Pettigrew's death, though necessary, has put a crimp in our plans. Now that he is gone, we have no one on whom we can hang the blame. Fortunately, someone to take his place has fallen into our laps."

"Who?" Fairing shifted nervously in his tall swivel chair. He drummed the armrest with his fingers and expelled a breath.

Zanns explained about her earlier encounter with Jason Rodgers. "He has no idea at the moment, but he will soon be joining our team at the Colonial."

"He hasn't been offered a position with us yet, Mother," Fairing observed.

"Oh, he will be. And when he accepts, Jason Rodgers will provide us with the needed diversion in the aftermath of our decisive blow."

Zanns studied her bastard son. *He's holding something back*, she thought.

“How will you frame Rodgers? We had a plan for Pettigrew. There is no time to develop a new one now,” said Sam.

“You’re wrong. I’ve devised one as we sailed. It will be crude, but it can work,” she said. “Come, and we’ll review what our colleague from the north has sent us.” Zanns turned back to the table.

She lifted the first document, an eight-by-ten, hand-drawn map. The package had been delivered by a mole Zanns’s team had recruited years ago with Hammon’s help. Without the information provided in the packages, their mission would not have been possible.

“This is the seating chart,” she said. “Note the positions of our targets. Your shots will be taken while Torpedo is at the podium. Thunderbolt will be seated—here. After he has introduced his father.” Her index finger tapped the penciled *X*. Zanns glanced at Kader, her unflappable—and also bastard—daughter.

Kader leaned over the drawing. “I will eliminate Thunderbolt. Sam will kill Torpedo, correct? Two shots, two kills!”

“Yes,” replied Zanns. She picked up the second page, a typed list of names. “This is the agenda for the event. The numbers beside each name represent the length of time they are expected to speak. This will give us an idea of when Torpedo will be in place.”

Fairing leaned in, placing his face inside the cone of light. A bead of sweat had formed above his upper lip. “And Cyclops will be ready? These shots are difficult enough. Without Cyclops, they’re impossible.”

“Cooper assures me it will be ready,” said Zanns.

“This would be an excellent chance to inflict maximum casualties—” said Kader.

“The mission is Torpedo and Thunderbolt. Do not forget that!” interrupted Zanns.

Fairing cleared his throat and dabbed the sweat from his lip with a napkin.

Zanns crossed her arms in front of her chest. “What is it, child?”

Fairing and Kader exchanged nervous glances.

“What are you not telling me?” insisted Zanns. She was answered with silence. Zanns leaned on the table, placing her weight on her knuckles, which whitened under the burden. Suddenly, her hand sliced through the air and connected with Fairing’s cheek. “Now! Sam!”

Fairing did not flinch. His eyes remained locked on the shiny wood in front of him. “Thomas Pettigrew kept a box of files,” he whispered.

“And you learned of these files when you tortured him? Before he was killed?”

Fairing dipped his head in a slow, single nod.

“Why did you not mention this before?”

“We didn’t think it important. After all, the man is dead.” Fairing lifted his eyes once again, pleading with his mother.

“What is in these files?”

Kader jumped to her brother’s aid. “He had a sketch”—she pulled up the sleeve of her sweater, revealing a small, quarter-sized tattoo on her left forearm—“of this.”

“He saw our tattoo? He knew about the Simoon?”

“He saw the tattoo,” said Fairing. “He did not know what it meant, nor anything of our true plans. We’re done with Pettigrew. It’s over.”

“It is not a good idea to pursue the matter, Mother,” added Jasmine, braving her mother’s icy stare. “It might draw additional scrutiny. The box is of no value with Pettigrew dead. There are only weeks left before we complete our task.”

“I want no loose ends. Oliver will go there when the time is right, find the box, and remove it. Then we will have—as they say in American baseball—all our bases covered. There must be no connection to our organization.” She turned to Fairing. “And nothing is over until I say it is.”

Zanns sucked in a lungful of air and expelled it. She waved away the remnants of her frustration with a flick of her wrist. It was time to plan for the coming days. “Both of you will increase your trips to the Camp. You must continue to hone your skills,” she said. Her children were top shots. But the difficulty of this mission would challenge even their skills. “Oliver will shuttle you down to the site, alternating your visits

so you are not out of town together. We must not draw attention.” She motioned toward the papers. “Have you memorized these?” she asked.

They nodded in unison. Zanns folded the documents and placed them in her pants pocket.

“Don’t you want me to burn those, Mother?” Jasmine offered. “We always destroy the documents.”

“Not this time. These will be useful later for what I have planned for Jason Rodgers.”