

# Prologue

"I've been arrested!" Gasko croaked over a cell phone as the FBI agents watched his every move. Seconds earlier, a neighbor had scolded the officers for the way they surprised and roughed up the old man in the storage area of his seedy Santa Monica apartment complex. She noticed that Gasko seemed ashamed as he looked down at the grimy floor. Soon, Gasko's "wife," Carol, also would be sporting silver bracelets.

When Osama Bin Laden was caught and killed in May 2011, bald, bearded, eighty-something Charles Gasko knew he was in trouble. With Bin Laden gone, Gasko became the most hunted man on America's fugitive list, thanks, he thought, to those rich cake-eaters in Tulsa.

It wasn't much of a life anyway, if one of Gasko's neighbors could be believed. Gasko couldn't lift a laundry basket or keep up with Carol on the Santa Monica boardwalk nearby, or so it seemed. Charles and Carol lived like lower-middle-class pensioners getting by on next to nothing, trapped in four small rooms with bare, bashed-in walls that hadn't been painted in years. They walked around on dirty gray carpet from the 1980s.

But the price was right, thanks to rent control. The Gaskos paid only about \$900 per month, a bargain in that pricey city. The place was dark most of the time, thanks to the black curtains covering the windows facing a nearby luxury hotel – that is, when Gasko wasn't window peeping.

Unlike most pensioners, however, the Gaskos had nearly \$1 million in cash hidden away in their apartment at the Princess Eugenia complex.

They came for him on June 22, 2011, two days after the FBI rolled out a \$2 million reward for the old man's arrest. They offered \$100,000 for Carol, almost as an afterthought.

Gasko had been ratted out by Anna Bjornsdottir, Miss Iceland 1974, a neighbor who had noticed how well he had cared for an abandoned cat named Tiger. The day before, she had recognized the Gaskos on television from her summer home in Reykjavík, Iceland, and called the authorities immediately. After all, \$2 million is a lot of money.

The tired old man who pretended to be losing a battle against Alzheimer's disease back in Santa Monica wasn't Charles Gasko. His real name was Bulger, which sounded vaguely German or Polish but was actually Gaelic for "yellow belly."

Back in South Boston, they called him Whitey.

Thirty years earlier, the Winter Hill gang assassins drove past the swank Southern Hills Country Club gatehouse in Tulsa as if they owned the place, up the oak-lined road that climbed gently leftward past the championship golf course that Tiger Woods would praise years later. The day was Wednesday, May 27, 1981.

Johnny Martorano and Joe McDonald probably didn't notice the polo fields, skeet-shooting range, or the bare grass, where first-class stables and a riding arena had been before a tragic fire five years earlier. Nor did they care much for the classic architecture or evident attention to detail, right down to the pristine trash cans. The assassins were far too preoccupied with their assignment to appreciate the tidy gardens or the children at the pool basking in the sunlit spring afternoon.

Martorano had killed at least eighteen people by then, many dispatched with a quick pistol shot to the back of the head in cars, trucks, bars, and alleys, often in the company of

the victim's friends. Most of the men Martorano killed never knew it was coming, but this time, with Roger Wheeler, president of Telex Corporation and World Jai Alai, it would be different.

A few days before, Martorano and McDonald had flown into Oklahoma City as "Richard Aucon" and "John Kelly." They had rented a car, driven the 120 miles or so to Tulsa, and stayed in a series of mediocre motels. Their last stop was the aging and neglected Trade Winds West, which had once hosted presidential candidates, where they waited for the hit kit containing weapons, bulletproof vests, and assorted goodies to arrive from South Boston. Martorano later claimed that they used detailed information provided by Wheeler's own trusted security chief, former FBI agent H. Paul Rico, to determine where best to assassinate the target.

They also looked for a fast car to steal. The ideal ride could be quickly driven away from the hit and dumped elsewhere to distract authorities while Martorano and McDonald highballed to Oklahoma City in their nondescript rental car. When the bulky hit kit arrived at the Art Deco Tulsa bus station downtown, the killers moved their plan forward. It had been shipped to "Joe Russo," another prolific assassin then working in Boston, perhaps to deflect attention to Russo's bosses in the Sicilian Mafia.

Martorano had decided they could not kill Wheeler at his mansion, at the back of a largely open, seven-acre estate. Witnesses at the house could have easily observed their escape. Nor was it practical to take him out at the Telex Corporation headquarters, high atop a hill surrounded by acres of bare ground. So, they decided to kill him where Wheeler would be most relaxed and least on his guard—after his regular Wednesday afternoon golf game at Southern Hills.

Less than a month later, a Canadian writer visited the scene of the gruesome murder and said, "On the practice tee, scions of Tulsa's moneyed class, blond, each of them, are learning to correct a slice. A golf cart, canopied against the

sun, wheels silently down the lush green fairway and stops, depositing a solitary figure clad in white. A dull splash rises from the swimming pool. From the pro shop bright with chrome, one can watch the Cadillacs and Lincolns come and go. Outside, an unmistakable sound, the patricians tread of golf cleats on asphalt. This is Southern Hills Country Club, sheltered preserve of Oklahoma gentry.”<sup>1</sup>

Ordinarily, Wheeler played in a foursome and capped the game with a scotch and milkshake in the clubhouse. Today, he quickly showered and joked with golf shop manager George Matson about his score on the way out. His scorecard said that he had shot an eighty-eight and lost five bucks. Wheeler carped, “These boys are killing me.”

Earlier that day, Martorano and McDonald had parked a stolen Pontiac at a large apartment complex near the country club and donned cheap disguises purchased at a Tulsa theatrical shop. Now, they scouted the parking lot just behind the swimming pool, found the Cadillac they were looking for, and waited for Wheeler to appear so they could finish the job and fly back to Florida. Today, Wheeler parked on the far southern edge of the asphalt next to a light pole, facing a small, placid pond surrounded by willows. The killers didn’t have to wait long. Soon, the trim figure in a gray pinstriped business suit walked briskly out of the clubhouse, past them and towards the Caddy. Wheeler was late for a meeting back at Telex.

Wheeler opened the door and climbed in, but he didn’t see or hear Martorano rushing from behind on his left. Martorano testified a quarter-century later that he grabbed the door to keep Wheeler from closing it and shot him between the eyes with a .38 snubnose pistol just as Wheeler jumped—or fell backward—into the seat. The pistol fell apart as it fired, dropping four bullets, but Martorano didn’t stop to pick them up, although he did manage to retrieve the cylinder. Or perhaps he left the bullets on or near Wheeler as a stark warning to others, a common occurrence in the underworld.

Once Martorano was back in the Pontiac, McDonald careened eastward out of the parking lot, passing the party barn called Snug Harbor and the tennis courts. After a sharp right turn, they sped beyond the eleventh hole of the golf course and slipped out a back gate into traffic. Although newspapers reported that the pair promptly disappeared, within a few days an anonymous caller told police that a few minutes after the killing, the assassins stopped long enough to pick up a second car on the residential road paralleling the winding contours of Sixty-First Street to the north.

Of course, Wheeler never knew that he'd been taken out on the orders of Whitey Bulger, a thug for all seasons whose sanction of Wheeler's killing became his own downfall. Nor did he know that Bulger had spent most of his life outside prison in South Boston, less than fourteen miles from the streets where Wheeler started his climb to success as a boy in Reading, Massachusetts.

Wheeler braved through those last seconds of consciousness comforted by club manager Dean Matthews but surrounded by curious kids in swimming suits staring at the spectacle, his head nestled inside a gym bag filled with his own blood. He never knew that an assistant district attorney closely resembling his daughter, Pam, would be standing alone nearby just a few hours later in the dusk, watching detectives investigate his murder. Wheeler may have wondered how in the world he ever thought he could buy a cash business ready-made for Whitey Bulger and other Irish gangsters, whose traditions were centuries old, say no to the skim, and live to tell the tale.

Yet, the fate he unwittingly fashioned for himself had been there all along, obscured by the brightness of a late spring afternoon but mostly hidden by his own unbridled confidence: the specter of violent, lonely death and destiny in a cheap, fake beard, with sunglasses hiding lifeless eyes, rushing into his face from out of nowhere, from behind his own blind spot.