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Ultimate Suggestions

by Darrell Bain

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Thriller/Suspense

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To Michael and Linda Bain

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Darrell Bain

CHAPTER ONE



THE HOUSE was old and creaky and was badly in need of painting, as was every other house in the almost abandoned neighborhood. The once verdant lawn was overgrown with weeds and bushes and the swimming pool, located in what was once a well-tended back yard, was covered with a green scum. The place had been

easy to rent. Several years ago an oily, toxic mess had begun bubbling up from underground, residue from an abandoned industrial disposal site which the development had unknowingly been built upon. Most of the homes were now in receivership, tangled up in a mess of legal maneuvering. Destitute squatters and a few unlucky families who had nowhere else to go occupied those few which weren't. It was an ideal location for the manufacture of illegal drugs, which was what the two men inside were occupied with.

The older of the two men, Benjamin Worthington, was clearly in charge. He sat at a worn card table, rubbing his bald forehead while splitting his attention between a chemistry text open before him and a tangle of glass tubing, retorts and mixing vats against the opposite wall. A half full bottle of cheap whiskey and a glass occupied a spot on the table by his left elbow. An overflowing ashtray by his right, containing a forgotten cigarette, smoldered and threatened to ignite the pile of butts. He watched as an oily yellow liquid swirled through one section of the tubing and dripped into a shakily assembled retort holding another liquid substance, this one murky with suspended particles. He didn't like the look of the way the reaction was going. The oily liquid had a faint off-color tinge, different from the appearance of previous batches and the reaction in the retort seemed to be proceeding slower than it should have—and the suspended particles weren't precipitating; they were going into solution.

"It doesn't look right to me," the other man said, for the second time. The words were spit out with the jerky quickness of a person on an amphetamine high. A nervous tic twitched below his left eye and he constantly fingered his thin mustache, as if urging it to grow.

"I know it damnit," Worthington said, trying to read the chemistry text and pay attention to the reaction at the same time.

"It's leaking, too," Worthington's subordinate said, pointing at a joint in the tubing above the retort where a thin, almost inaudible hissing had begun. Bubbles of a clear liquid were forming and breaking along the joint, disappearing into an almost colorless vapor immediately afterward.

"It will hold," Worthington said. "The reaction is almost over."

"No it won't," the other man said. He paced frenetically around the leaking joint then leaned down to sniff the escaping concoction.

"Goddamn it, I said it's okay."

"No it's not. It's fucked up."

Worthington watched him sniff again, like the idiot he was, good only for distribution once the product was ready. He was irritated, knowing his dealer was right; the reaction had gone wrong somewhere, but carping at him wasn't going to solve the problem. He looked up from his text, feeling anger bubble up inside him. Pushers shouldn't use their own product. He stared balefully at the man then said, "Listen, why don't you go jump in that fucking swimming pool out there and drown

your fucking self? I don't need your fucking comments."

He went back to reading his text, trying to figure out what had gone wrong, then cursed. There! Sonofabitch! Reading from the water-spotted pages of the old textbook, he had misplaced a decimal point. No wonder! He looked back up. The second man had disappeared. Good. He read back over the pertinent section of the text, taking his time. This whole batch would have to be discarded, leaving only enough reagents for one more run—and money was getting low. Only after he closed the text did he become aware that he had heard splashing noises in the background, long minutes ago.

The renegade chemist wondered what was going on, then got up to go look. He unlatched the back door and went out through the weeds to the edge of the abandoned swimming pool. The body of his dealer floated lifelessly, splayed-face down in the green scum, supported by the heavy growth just enough to keep it from sinking.

"Goddamn," Worthington breathed to himself. "I will be goddamned."

Excitement raced through his body like a jolt of electricity. His brilliant mind made the connection immediately. There was nothing wrong with his brain; he had once been a first class chemist at the University of Houston until a series of sexual escapades, compounded with clandestine manufacturing of illegal substances in order to pay off his ex-wife to avoid having her press child-molesting charges against him had lost him his tenure. His life had gone downhill ever since. But now—

Now. What would customers pay for a substance so hypnotic that a simple suggestion could induce suicide? And what else could he use it for? A series of sexual fantasies raced through his mind like a speeded up pornographic film. He smiled, gloatingly to himself and went back inside and began dismantling the chemistry apparatus. There was just enough money to rent another place. Then another thought occurred to him: soon, he wouldn't need money, nor anything else, not if the drug worked as well on other people as it had on his subordinate—and he knew just who had an excess of cash and would like to try it.

"BUT WHY NOT?" Gene Wilson asked, having to raise his voice over that of the lead singer, who was belting out a jazzed up rendition of The Tennessee Waltz. Gene didn't care much for it; he preferred the original. It had been one of his favorite songs ever since hearing it played as a child on the old stereo his parents still kept even though it no longer worked. They used it as a wall table now, next to the big easy chair where the answer phone lived.

Francis Stafford didn't answer for a moment, trying to phrase a reply in her mind that wouldn't offend Gene. She hated having to do that but it was becoming more and more of a habit the longer she lived with him. In the three months since she had moved in with Gene it had become apparent that he was a controller, always wanting his own way. And he was jealous, inordinately so. A little jealousy was flattering,

Francis thought, but he carried it to extremes. Finally framing her answer, she leaned across the table so that she didn't have to shout.

"It's too soon to think about marriage. Ask me again in a month or two." That answer was simply putting off the inevitable, Francis knew. She wasn't going to marry him, and in fact intended to move out sometime soon, but she didn't feel like getting into an argument now.

Gene's face clouded up into a petulant frown before he forced a grin. He took her hand and used it to hold her in position for a moment, head and shoulders leaned forward, the gentle, slightly mischievous smile that he loved so much lingering on her face. She looked beautiful to him, with her mop of curly auburn hair and bright hazel eyes, along with a sprinkling of freckles across her nose, which he liked and she hated and tried to conceal with makeup. It wasn't just her beauty which held him, though. Any man is attracted to beauty, he thought, but he was really in love with her personality. Francis was so caring, yet so at ease with herself and who she was that it wasn't immediately obvious. And she was thoughtful, always doing little things to please others, especially him. One day she would surprise him with a small gift. On another day she might spend the whole of one of her days off shopping for just the right consumables then cook a gourmet meal just for him. Her beauty, though, was a two-edged sword. He couldn't stand the thought that other men might have possessed her or might still want to. It drove him to questioning her about her previous lovers and her activities outside their home past the point of curiosity, especially since her job as an Emergency Room nurse frequently had her working unanticipated overtime and unexpected odd shifts. Maybe I've been a policeman too long, he thought. I'm always suspicious. He knew it was a failing, but seemed unable to do anything about it.

When Gene failed to reply, Francis withdrew her hand and picked up her wineglass and drank the last little bit.

Gene sipped his own wine, a house Chablis which really wasn't bad at all. He lifted the bottle from the table and made pouring motions rather than having to shout across the table.

Francis shook her head and pushed back her chair. She came over to his side of the table and leaned over him. "Be back in a minute," she said.

Gene nodded and watched her as she walked toward the alcove hiding the entrances to the restrooms. As always, he couldn't help but notice how other males—and some few females—looked at her. She was tall and slim, yet carried a figure which had all the necessary curves and then some. When she walked, her hips swayed with a motion that evoked a sense of sensual grace rather than overt sexuality. Gene watched her until she turned into the alcove, thinking of how lucky he was to have found her—and how close he might be to losing her. Almost daily now, he sensed a distancing in their relationship by Fran and it made him sick. He could hardly bear the thought of losing her. He felt a surge of jealous animosity as he watched admiring eyes tracking her movements. He tried to dispel it by thinking of

how his college marriage had fallen apart soon after he went to work for the Houston Police department, mostly, he thought, because of his ex-wife's liberal attitude toward the role of the police in contemporary society. He was unable to admit to himself that his present attitude toward Francis was the same as it had been with his wife.

They had met while he was a patient at St. Luke's Hospital in the huge medical center which took up a goodly portion of southwest Houston. A bullet wound in his leg from an encounter with a teenage hoodlum had put him there, which in retrospect he had considered the best thing which ever happened to him. That was when he met Fran, a nurse in the emergency room trauma center. She had seen enough of the malignant effect of drugs in her own line of work for her attitude toward the perpetrators to jibe pretty well with his own. And she was a caring individual, which he had played on. They began dating and within a couple of months were living together. He had cooked up this night out to again ask her to marry him. He was puzzled and resentful that she still wouldn't accept his proposal. He poured more wine and idly brooded while he waited on her to return.

FRANCIS SAW with relief that there was no one waiting in the alcove other than a middle-aged man with a bald forehead and thin, humorless lips standing near the entrance to the restrooms. He was dressed in slacks and a mismatched sports coat. For just an instant Francis wondered what he was waiting for but the thought flitted away. The wine was imparting a sense of urgency to her bladder. She turned right and pushed through the door to the women's room. There was a stall open and she finished her business quickly.

While she was washing her hands, she decided to suggest that she and Gene call it a night. Poor Gene. He tried so hard to please her that she would never tell him that she would rather have stayed home to talk rather than go out. Not that it would have made a difference. The dinner had been fine, but she could have done as well or better and the little band was playing bad music too loud and too frequently for the intimacy she preferred when dining out. Between the loud music and the wine, she was beginning to get a dull headache. She wondered if Gene would get mad if she suggested that they leave now? He's probably already mad, she thought, after me turning him down again. But she wasn't comfortable with the thought of living with him for the rest of her life. In fact, she admitted to herself, I'm not really comfortable living with him now. She pondered briefly on what to do about the situation then discarded the thought. It was too late and she had too much wine to think clearly. Leave it alone for now.

The middle-aged man was still standing in the alcove when she came out of the women's room, shifting his feet nervously. He looked past her then said, "Miss?"

Francis stopped, annoyed but generous enough with her thoughts to give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he had a daughter in the women's room, still in one of the closed stalls and was wanting her to go back in and check on her. She stopped

and turned toward the man. He raised his right hand, an unlit cigarette clutched between his first two fingers.

“Could I trouble you for a light?” He brought the cigarette almost into her face. Just as she was about to tell him that she had left her lighter back at their table, she saw his thumb, partially hidden behind his fingers, make a peculiar stabbing motion. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but she thought she saw a misty, almost invisible vapor emerge from the tip of the cigarette. Francis felt an ephemeral dampness envelop her face just as she was drawing in her breath to speak. An odor like old vanilla tickled her nose. She was startled at the sudden smell and the tightness she felt in her lungs as she drew in more air, still intending to speak to the man. The additional breath of air brought on a momentary dizziness, like the first deep drag on a cigarette after a long shift where she was too busy to go outside to smoke. Reflexively, she put out a hand to steady herself, touching the man’s shoulder.

“Don’t scream. Don’t say anything to anyone,” the man said softly, glancing warily around to be certain that he wasn’t overheard.

Francis let her breath out without making a sound, even though she hadn’t been intending to scream; the man had not made any threatening gestures but simply asked for a light. The momentary dizziness was already fading away. Seconds later it was entirely gone, along with whatever she had intended to say. She no longer had the desire to use her voice. She started to walk away.

“No, come with me,” the man told her.

It seemed perfectly natural to Francis that she should accompany the man when he told her to come with him. She walked along by his side, silent but comfortable in his presence, with no thoughts of Gene, waiting back at their table for her return. Going with this man seemed much more important now.

The man led her to his car, an old off-white Mercury Marquis and pulled out his keys. He pointed the popper attached to the key chain and pressed it with his thumb. The door locks snapped open. “Get inside,” he said.

Francis opened the passenger door and slid into the seat, closing the door behind her. She pulled the seat belt over her chest and attached it, as naturally as if it were Gene in the driver’s seat beside her rather than a total stranger.

The man started the engine and drove out of the parking lot and onto the boulevard. As soon as he had merged with the traffic, he spoke again. “You probably want to forget about that cigarette I was holding, don’t you?”

Francis nodded but still didn’t speak. It didn’t seem like the thing to do.

“You can talk now. My name is Benjamin. Call me Ben.”

“All right Ben,” Francis said.

“And you still want to come with me, don’t you?”

"I sure do, Ben," Francis said. Traveling in the car with Ben made her feel secure and comfortable.

"And you like me, don't you?"

Francis considered the question for only a moment before deciding that she did indeed like her new acquaintance. "Of course, Ben. I like you a lot."

"That's great," Ben told her. "You probably want to do anything I ask, don't you?"

What was he going to ask? Francis wondered. Not that it mattered. She was suddenly eager to fill any request he made. Francis turned her head to look directly at her companion. "Of course, Ben. Whatever will make you happy."

Francis waited impatiently, noticing that Ben's hands seemed to be trembling with nervousness even as they gripped the steering wheel. His voice was shaky when he did speak. "A blow job while we're driving would make me happy. You'd like to do that, wouldn't you?"

"I sure would," Francis replied, smiling. She punched the seat belt restraint button even as she turned her gaze to Ben's crotch, the bulge of his erection showing plainly under his pants. Eyeing it with all the anticipation of a three-year-old child preparing to unwrap an all day sucker, she reached for his fly, eager to get started.

It works! Worthington thought. By damn, it really works!

GENE WAITED fifteen minutes, lost in gloomy thoughts of Francis' refusal to marry him and how happy she had made him before he began to get impatient. Francis was really taking her time. Probably fooling with her hair, he thought. Her curls were unruly, especially in the springtime humidity so common to the Gulf Coast. He poured another glass of wine, but now he shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he sipped from the glass, checking his watch every few minutes to see how much time had passed.

Once he got halfway to his feet, intending to go look for her then changed his mind and sat back down. Maybe she had started her period and was using the extra time to take care of herself. He hoped not; that would spoil whatever might still be salvaged from their night out. At any rate, he felt the normal male uneasiness, if not outright embarrassment, at the thought of intervening in an emergency of that type, which was the only reason he could think of for the delay.

Gene drank the last of the wine and looked at his watch again. Ten-thirty seven. She had been gone a little over a half hour and now he was definitely getting uneasy. Had she met some man who attracted her and was busy talking to him? The thought was obnoxious.

He pushed his chair away and stood up. He hesitated briefly then make up his mind and began walking toward the restrooms. Once in the alcove, he hesitated again, unsure of how to approach the matter. He couldn't just barge into the women's room; he might wind up being arrested and made a prisoner in his own jail. He let a woman with a small child in tow pass by him then stopped an elderly lady right behind them.

"Ma'am?"

The woman stopped, wondering why the young man was speaking to her, then realized what it probably was. She looked around for his girl child as she answered.

"Yes?" She frowned. There was no child present.

"Ma'am, my wife went inside almost forty minutes ago. I'm getting worried. Would you mind checking to see if she's having problems?"

The elderly woman replaced her frown with a smile of assent. "Certainly. What does she look like?"

"She's tall, has curly auburn hair, and is wearing a black cocktail dress."

"All right. I'll be out in a minute."

"Thank you. I appreciate it," Gene said, feeling relieved. Fran must still be inside, not talking to some stranger or old boyfriend met here by accident.

A few minutes later, the relief turned into a burgeoning anxiety when the woman came back out.

"I'm sorry," she said. "There is no one inside matching your description."

Gene had trouble believing her. "You're sure?"

"Yes I'm certain. Maybe she stepped outside for a breath of air. Why don't you look there?"

Instead, Gene made a round of the nightclub, checking each table and all the seats at the bar, thinking that Francis might possibly have run into one of her friends, got to talking and forgot the time. She was nowhere in sight.

He examined each of the couples on the dance floor, even while knowing in his mind that she wouldn't be there either. Unlike most women, Francis didn't particularly care for dancing, one more of the traits which so endeared her to him.

Panicked now, Gene began asking each of the waitresses if they had seen her, giving each of them a hurried description. He soon found out that they had all been too busy to notice. By this time his wanderings were beginning to draw curious stares. He ignored them and kept up his search and questioning until he was certain that Francis was nowhere inside.

He began recalling cases of abducted women he had had to deal with, many of

them never seen alive again. A dreadful collage of corpses he had viewed, some dead for weeks or months before being found, skittered through his mind. He tried to push the images back down into his subconscious but they persisted in popping back up, like unwelcome relatives coming again and again to visit. But God! Women weren't abducted from public restrooms, far removed from an exit! It was in parking lots and while walking or jogging that they usually were taken.

Gene suddenly thought of the old woman's remark. Had Francis gone outside to their car for some reason? He hurried out to the parking lot. His car, a three-year-old Taurus sat innocently where he had left it, doors securely locked. Bewildered, the panic now rising inside him like a gut full of bad food trying to escape, he ran back to the entrance of the club. But wait, there was one place he hadn't checked: the cashier's booth and hostess station.

The cashier was unhelpful. She brushed him off with an irritable manner that brought him close to rage, remarking in a snide voice, "I can't take time to keep up with wayward women."

Gene turned to the hostess, who had been listening. She spoke up before he could repeat his description of Francis to her. "A black cocktail dress, you said?"

"Yes," Gene said eagerly, "and curly auburn hair. She disappeared an hour ago now. Have you seen her?"

"I think so. It seems like about an hour ago. She walked out with a man in a loud sports jacket and green trousers." The young woman smiled superciliously. "I noticed because they didn't look like a typical couple."

"What do you mean a typical couple? Goddamit, that was my—" Gene had unintentionally raised his voice and the oath had burst from him like the yelp of a frustrated greyhound which had stumbled at the beginning of the race and was trying to catch up with the pack.

The hostess stepped back from him and looked around, a sign of alarm beginning to appear on her face.

Gene caught her reaction and forced his voice back to calmness. He apologized. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to speak like that. Please help me. Can you describe the man?"

"I'm very busy."

By this time, Gene was too upset to care about how busy anyone was—and too confused. How could a man possibly have forced Fran to go with him? A concealed weapon, maybe? It almost had to be. There was no reason on earth she would have left without at least telling him why. And in any case, he could think of no reason for her to have left without him, in the company of another man. Unless—no, surely not. Just because she had refused his proposal again, that didn't mean she would have left him sitting and gone off with someone else. Would it? He pulled out his badge

and flipped it open.

The hostess's eyes opened wide, a combination of curiosity and malice vying for her attention.

"Let's go somewhere we can talk. Right now, if you don't mind," Gene ordered.

The cashier had been listening. "She can't leave. I don't have anyone to replace her."

"That's too bad. I don't have anyone to replace my girlfriend, either, and if you hold me up while she's been kidnapped you're going to regret it for the rest of your life. Understand?" Gene was a big man. He had a deep voice and when he put it into the command mode it got attention.

"Go with him, Mary. Use the office. Come back as quick as you can." The cashier stopped a passing waitress and told her to go find the manager so she could get a relief hostess from the waitress pool.

Thirty minutes later, Gene had a description. Mary had been quite observant, but the picture she painted did nothing to allay his confusion and apprehension. Fran had left with a middle aged, balding man, badly dressed, with no overt sign that she was being coerced. It was unfathomable but no less real. Fran was gone and he didn't know why or where but dark suspicions were clouding his thoughts.

As a last resort, Gene called their home, hoping against hope that Fran would answer. He dialed twice but got only a recording each time. Ordinarily a person has to be missing for at least twenty four hours before a police report or any sort of activity is undertaken but Gene Wilson wasn't the ordinary complainant. He was a Police Lieutenant. He called the precinct and arranged for them to bring a police ID technician in, then took Mary Travez out to his car and drove her to the station, where the technician swiftly began putting together a picture of the stranger from her description, using an Identikit first and a computer to finalize the portrait.

THE MAN Francis was calling Ben pulled into the first all night convenience store he came to which was vacant of customers. He was tired and as satiated as he had ever been in his life, but so excited at the possibilities open to him now that his mind was fairly racing with them.

"You can get out here," Ben said. "Try to forget as much of what happened tonight as you can. Okay?"

Francis opened the car door and stepped outside onto an oil-spotted pavement. She looked back at Ben, whose thin lips were split in a predatory grin, revealing nicotine stained teeth.

"I'll try," she said. She stood there as the big Mercury drove away and attempted to relieve her mind of the night's events.

She wanted to carry out Ben's last request, but the mind works in contrary ways. Deliberately trying to forget an event is much more likely to emphasize it. After awhile, she realized that her feet were hurting. She noticed a concrete bench, replete with advertisements, placed to the side of the entrance to the store. She walked over and sat down, still trying to stifle her memories of the last few hours.

I HOPE SHE forgets, Worthington thought as he drove back toward his home, but I sure won't! God, what a body. And what a great time! The woman had fulfilled fantasies he had been carrying with him all his life. And she followed his suggestions enthusiastically, not like some street prostitute or hundred-dollar call girl just going through the motions. All he had to do was plant the suggestions and she complied eagerly, as if he were the only man in the world she cared for.

He had been leery at first, but in the end he had taken her anyway, unable to resist her fresh young beauty. And what could anyone do about it, even supposing she remembered everything and could describe him? So far as she or anyone else could tell, she had gone with him willingly and performed every act he suggested of her own volition. He certainly hadn't had to use any force! And he had very carefully seen to it that she kept out of sight as they drove, even though he had almost run the car off the road when her busy mouth brought him to his first climax.

She couldn't possibly know where he was living now, or even what his full name was. All he had given her was Ben, the diminutive of his first name which was so common as to be useless for identification.

Other possibilities rushed through his mind. How much of the stuff could he produce and what would be a good asking price? For what it could accomplish, he thought there probably wasn't an upper limit, once the word got around. The only thing, he had to keep the formula a secret. It wouldn't do for the cartels or the big boys to learn how to manufacture it. They would quickly undercut his prices. In fact, it would probably be best to sever all his old connections and start fresh. Keep the supply limited. Sell only to Boyd Murphy, a dealer he trusted and who usually associated with upscale customers. And use it himself, of course. Maybe with two women next time?

God, after a lifetime of being the poor relation, the last choice, the nerd who couldn't get a date, the last to be promoted and the first to be laid off, the lonely boy grown to bitter middle age and reduced to manufacturing crank in his basement to support himself, he now had the whole world in his hands, to use and abuse as he pleased. And he intended to use it.

CHAPTER TWO

FRANCIS' MIND began swirling with conflicting thoughts. She was still trying to forget the period of time she had spent with Ben but images of Gene, vainly waiting for her to return to their table were beginning to intrude. The images brought a dawning knowledge that she had no idea of where she was. She became aware of the hardness of the concrete bench beneath her and the fact that her purse was sitting beside her. She looked around, trying to shake loose from the web of confused thoughts. Where was she? What was she doing here? What time was it! She turned her wrist to bring her watch into better light from the overhead fluorescents and felt a well of horror rising inside her. It was four o'clock in the morning and she had been gone from Gene for almost six hours!

Francis could hardly believe her eyes—or her thoughts. A kaleidoscopic array of the sexual acts she had entered into over the last few hours flashed through her mind like a jerky film clip. She saw pictures of herself straddling the balding man, his thin lips split in a rictus grin over stubby, yellowed teeth, his hands covering her breasts, pinching and pulling and squeezing and telling her how much she was enjoying herself. She remembered intermittent bouts of fellatio and other acts, some she had never performed before, not with anyone. She thought of the number of times she had orgasmed and how enjoyable it had been, how intense and satisfying.

But why? Why had she done those things with...with...oh, it didn't matter. Why had she gone off with a perfect stranger—and a singularly unattractive one, leaving Gene for hours and hours without a word of warning? It was incomprehensible. And yet...the whole episode still seemed natural, like having gone to work or out to see a new movie. And she had enjoyed every minute of it, though now she was wondering how that could have been possible. The more her rational mind reviewed the episode the more she thought she must have gone temporarily insane. It was a scary feeling, as if some secret, long-buried personality had suddenly surfaced and took control of her every thought and action for hours on end and had finally left her as exhausted and confused as a disoriented bird trying to fly through a plate glass window.

Oh Lord, I've got to call Gene, Francis thought. He'll be going crazy by this time. No telling what he'll have done—or might do! She stood up and walked over to the pay phone and stopped there to open her purse and fish for a coin. She started to drop it into the coin slot, and then hesitated. What will I tell Gene? How can I explain this to him? God, how can I even explain it to myself? The whole thing was inexplicable, as if a second, previously unknown personality had manifested itself and taken control of her mind. But if that were so, why did she remember so much of what had happened? That wasn't how personality disorders worked; she knew that from psychology studies back in college. It had to be a mental aberration of some sort. She could think of no other explanation.

Francis dropped the coin in the slot. She would have to call Gene; there was no getting away from that. But there was no way she was going to tell him exactly how she had spent the missing hours. It would kill him. She shuddered. The way he had been acting lately, he would probably feel like killing her if he ever found out where

she had been and what she had been doing. She dialed their home number.

Gene picked up the phone on the first ring. He had finally returned home, unable to do anything else until the morning crew arrived. He felt shaky and washed out, the residue of wine mixing with old coffee in his mouth, making it taste and feel like he had been drinking thin, sludgy old oil. His teeth felt slimy.

“Wilson,” he said, feeling his heartbeat speed up with a renewed surge of optimism. Maybe someone had found Fran. He avoided thinking of worse possibilities.

A tremulous voice answered, like a defendant being forced to respond to unwanted questions from a defense lawyer during a trial. “Gene? I—I don’t know what happened. I—”

“Fran! Where are you?” Gene almost shouted into the receiver. “Where have you been? What have you been doing?”

The tremor became more obvious, apprehension of some sort obviously tingeing her voice.

“I’m at—the sign says Prescott Load ‘N Leave. I don’t know where it is. Please, come get me. I want to come home.”

“Can you see a street sign?”

There was a pause which seemed to go on forever before she spoke again. “I asked inside. It’s off the Gulf Freeway, a few blocks east of the 610 loop. Please hurry Gene. Some...something happened.”

“Are you hurt? Are you all right?”

“I’m not hurt, at least physically. Please hurry.”

“I’m leaving right now. Stay right where you are.”

GENE HUNG up. He grabbed his jacket and rushed for the garage, his thoughts in a turmoil. What was Fran doing way up on the Gulf freeway, miles from where they had been? Who had she gone off with and what had she been doing all this time? It was nearly five in the morning. He gripped the steering wheel with the urgency of a racecar driver and headed north at nearly the same speed. Fortunately, no patrol car spotted him. He didn’t know if he would have been able to control himself long enough to stop and explain why he was speeding. He was sickened with the thought that Fran might have been raped or abused. She had said that she was all right—physically. That didn’t leave much else he could think of.

Gene spotted her as soon as he pulled into the parking lot of the convenience store. She was sitting on an outside bench, huddled down into herself like someone who had just gotten news of a close relative’s death. He bumped to a stop against

the curb and fairly leaped from the car. He ran to Fran and enclosed her in his arms as she stood up. He felt her tremble and hugged her even closer as she began to cry.

“It’s all right sweetheart. I’m here now. God, I’ve been so scared. I thought—”. He didn’t want to tell her what he thought.

Francis finally got her sobbing under control. She was so glad to see Gene that she hadn’t been able to help herself. The sight of him had brought memories of more pleasant times into the very forefront of her thoughts and she had simply gone to pieces when he appeared. How could she have betrayed him like that? How could she possibly have left him to go off on an undiluted, purely sexual liaison with a stranger? Was it her subconscious mind which had somehow taken over and goaded her into actions—actions which would certainly drive Gene into a rage and practically assure a break-up? She shivered inside.

“Are you okay now?” Gene asked in his deep voice, looking at her and noticing how bereft of makeup her face was and how rumpled her clothes. Any feeling of empathy was immediately replaced by a nasty little urge to find out exactly what had happened. It began nibbling at his mind, like a rodent gnawing its way into a feedbag.

“I think so. Please, let’s go home.”

Gene led her over to the car and helped her inside then went around to the driver’s seat. Before he started the engine, he gazed at her. He had a hard time getting the words out of his mouth, but they had to be said. “Do we need to go—to go to a hospital first?”

“I said I wasn’t hurt. I want to go home.”

Gene turned the key in the ignition but held up before shifting into reverse. Maybe she hadn’t understood. “I know, but—the guy you left with. Did he—did you—”

Fran avoided his eyes. “No. I don’t know what caused me to go off. Please, Gene, take me home. Let me think. Let me try to remember.”

Reluctantly, Gene put the car in gear. On the way home he asked her several times what had happened, wanting reassurance, both for her and himself, but Fran was unresponsive, answering in monosyllables, occasionally wiping at her eyes. Eventually, he gave up and just drove. Maybe back in the secure and familiar surroundings of their own home she would open up. She’d better, he thought.

Gene was glad to see the house they shared come into view. It was situated on a big corner lot in one of the new subdivisions in northernmost Houston, far enough from the Eastex freeway that sounds of traffic went unheard. They had rented it only a few months ago and were still engaged in landscaping and buying furnishings, working and shopping together to make it into a place where he had thought they eventually would opt to buy.

Gene unlocked the front door and was surprised that Fran separated herself from him immediately, hurrying toward the bedroom. He followed, at least until she went

on into the bathroom and closed the door. Presently he heard the sounds of the shower running and went back into the kitchen. He seldom drank during the week, and almost never in the morning, but right now, he thought, he deserved one, if for no other reason than to calm himself down and hold a growing suspicion at bay.

As he splashed bourbon into a glass and added a couple of ice cubes, he remembered how Fran had turned her head when he tried to kiss her. And now that he thought about it, was there a miasma about her reminiscent of their own sexual interludes—interludes where they had stayed awake far into the night, staining the sheets and their bodies with fluids?

Had something like that happened to her? Had she been forced to have sex with the man she left with and was too ashamed to say so? He knew that some women reacted like that, wanting only to wash and wash, as if soap and water could erase an indelible stain from their bodies. Surely, though, she would tell him. She was a nurse, and an emergency room nurse at that; she had seen and cared for rape victims on numerous occasions.

Gene suddenly remembered that there was still a bulletin out for both Fran and the unknown man sketched by the technician. He finished the remnants of his drink and picked up the phone. He told the desk sergeant to cancel the alert for Fran and left word that he would be late coming in if he made it at all. He was pouring another shot of bourbon into his glass when he heard footsteps behind him. He turned around and Fran was standing there, clad in a silk bathrobe. He set down the glass and went to her immediately. This time she did allow him to kiss her but she was unresponsive. When she pulled away, he picked up his glass. "Could you use a drink, Hon? I was just going to make another one for myself."

"I guess so," Francis answered listlessly.

"Go sit down. I'll bring it to you," Gene told her, thinking that although her face was clean and she was no longer crying, her eyes looked haunted, as when she had finished a shift where a particularly horrible array of mutilated patients had come into the emergency room, then died under treatment.

Gene brought the drinks back out into the living room where Fran was sitting at one end of the couch, feet curled up under her and her arms around herself as if trying to assure herself that she was inhabiting the right body. He sat down beside her and handed her a glass, sitting his own down on the table fronting the couch.

Francis took a large drink of the bourbon. Gene waited until she took another sip before he spoke. "Honey, you've got to tell me what happened," he said as he reached out to take her hand.

"I don't know what happened," Francis said.

"Well, think. What do you remember?"

"I—I suddenly got an urge to leave. I don't know why. I don't understand it."

“All right. What happened next? Do you remember leaving with anyone?”

While she was showering and brushing her teeth, Francis had finally decided to claim partial amnesia and hope nothing like this ever happened again. “No. I just remember leaving.”

Very carefully, Gene said, “Earlier, you told me the guy you left with didn’t do anything to you. Have you forgotten?”

“I don’t think I went with anyone. I just went.”

Gene was experienced enough from questioning suspects to know an evasion when he encountered one. It made him angry, and more suspicious than ever. He picked up a copy of the sketch the technician had drawn from the hostess’ description, which he had left on the table face down. He showed it to Francis, watching for her reaction.

“Someone thought they saw you leaving with a man who looked like this. Do you recognize him?”

Francis studied the sketch then shifted her gaze away from Gene’s eyes which was now looking at her from beneath brows creased with frown lines. She remembered the face all too well.

“No. I don’t remember,” Francis said. She couldn’t face Gene as she told the lie. What would he think?

“Do you remember where you went?”

“In a car somewhere, I think.”

“To a house? To a hotel?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who was driving? Was it this man?”

“I—”

Francis suddenly realized that if she tried sparring with Gene, he would eventually catch her in so many lies that the whole story would come out. He had too much experience questioning suspects for her to avoid being trapped in inconsistencies that he was so adept at ferreting out.

“I don’t remember. I don’t remember much of anything. Please Gene, I think I need to see a psychologist or a neurologist. Something happened to me tonight that shouldn’t have. Maybe I have a brain tumor or something.” Suddenly the idea of a tumor seemed almost benign, if that could explain her actions.

Gene picked up his drink. It had already become obvious to him, through subtle signs he was so used to interpreting, that Francis was concealing the truth from him. He didn’t understand, and in some small way he didn’t want to understand. The idea

of her with another man was kindling a rage inside that he was barely able to suppress. Finally he decided not to confront her with the, to him, unexplainable behavior he suspected her of. Not yet, anyway. And God, what if she did have a tumor? He felt a pang of fear in his chest, almost like he had experienced the time over three years ago when he had drawn his gun, suddenly realizing that a suspect was going to shoot it out rather than be arrested. He took Fran's hand and tried pulling her to him. Francis resisted, knowing what he was thinking.

Gene shrugged. "All right. As soon as the clinics open we'll get you an appointment. In the meantime, how about some breakfast? Bourbon on an empty stomach at six o'clock in the morning doesn't sit so well."

Francis smiled weakly at Gene. She knew he didn't believe her, not entirely, but what else could she have said, knowing how Gene would react? She stood up. "All right. I'll start some bacon. While I'm doing that, would you call the hospital and tell them I won't be in today?"

"Sure," Gene said. "What shall I tell them?"

"Just say I'm sick and that I should be back to work tomorrow."

Later, that night in bed after Fran avoided Gene's embrace, he knew in his heart that, forced or otherwise, Francis had experienced sex with someone, probably the man described in the sketch. She was showing all the typical behavior he had read about and it was tearing at his emotions like a rampaging virus let loose in his brain. He was glad then that he had forgotten to call and pull the sketch from the computer files. Even if the man he was almost certain Francis had left with was completely innocent, he might be able to provide some answers. Something here wasn't making a great deal of sense and he intended to get to the bottom of it.

CHAPTER THREE



FRANCIS INSISTED on seeing a neurologist first rather than a psychologist. As bad as the thought of a brain tumor might be, she almost hoped that would provide an explanation for her inexplicable behavior. When she was unable to get an immediate appointment, she reluctantly allowed Gene to use the excuse of possible police involvement with her case as a basis for working her into the schedule the same morning. She insisted on going alone, despite Gene's objections, telling him to go on to work. He did so, but with bad grace.

Francis left right behind him, then headed downtown toward the medical center, St. Luke's, which had a medical clinic annex next door. It seemed strange to be so close to where she worked, yet not to be entering the hospital. She parked and went

inside the clinic building and briefly scanned the lobby directory for the office she wanted. It was on the first floor. She found it quickly and stepped inside. She gave her name and sat down to wait, nervously avoiding eye contact with the receptionist and the two other waiting patients.

When she was called into the neurologist's office, Francis tried very hard to impress him with her story, stressing how unusual her actions had been in light of the fact that she had had less than a half dozen other lovers in her life and had never even considered sex with a man until she got to know him.

The neurologist, Dr. Herbert Cummings, didn't seem very impressed although he did give her a rather thorough physical exam. When he was finished with that, he had her get dressed. His nurse led her into his office a few minutes later and seated her in front of his desk where he was already waiting, perusing a medical journal. He set the journal aside and picked her chart up from his desk. He leaned back in his chair, holding the chart in one hand and gestured meaninglessly with the other.

"Miss Stafford, I found nothing at all extraordinary on your physical which might have a bearing on your, umm, episode. No neurological symptoms at all. So far as I can tell right now, you're perfectly normal," he said.

Francis started to speak. Cummings held up his hand to stop her then continued, "Secondly, the—umm—the abnormal behavior you described seems more likely to me to be the result of a psychological aberration of some sort, the type of thing which might show up in an adult as a result of something like sexual abuse as a child." He raised his brows slightly.

Francis took it as a query. "I was never abused. I had a very happy childhood."

Cummings shrugged. "Well, here's what I suggest. Just to rule out any organic causes, I'd like to schedule you for a CAT Scan. In the meantime, you might think about consulting a psychologist. I can recommend one if you like. You can always cancel the appointment if the CAT Scan turns up anything."

"Let me think about it," Francis said. "Thank you."

"Certainly. The nurse will arrange for the scan and some blood tests." Cummings stood up to shake her hand and that was that.

The appointment left Francis with a feeling that she was playing a supporting actress's role in a bad movie. Nevertheless, she did make the appointment for a brain scan. She was still half-hoping that an organic cause would manifest itself. After that she decided that she might as well go on to work. Maybe taking care of other people's problems would divert her thoughts away from what she had done.

GENE HAD been at work, or at least at the precinct station, since eight o'clock, though he hadn't gotten much accomplished. The story of Francis' sudden disappearance and just as sudden return had spread through the ranks and he had

spent a lot of time accepting congratulations on her return and fending off explanations for her actions. When he was finally able to get into the office and sort through reports from the previous day, he was glad to see that nothing urgent had come up while he was gone. The Kingwood Precinct was enjoying a period of relative quiet with only two major cases working and both appeared to be easy.

One of them involved a lower level pusher with a long arrest sheet who had been found dead in an abandoned swimming pool. The autopsy report was back and Gene read it with surprise. Drowning? He had been certain that it was a simple overdose perhaps administered by someone the pusher had stiffed. Strange, but not of much concern other than the fact that he could now close the case. Accidental drowning while under the influence of methamphetamines. Since drugs were involved, he routinely forwarded a report upstairs to the narcotics squad. He doubted that O'Neal would have much interest in the case. This pusher had never been into hard drugs. He liked speed too much.

UPSTAIRS IN the same building, Lieutenant David O'Neal was sitting in his office reviewing his own cases. The file he was reading involved an attempt to infiltrate a new heroin distributorship with undercover agents. This one, he thought, might work out all right. Danny Tartwright, one of his best undercover agents, had gained tentative acceptance into the middle ranks of the organization and there was a good chance he would be able to set up a major buy before too long. David made a note to touch base with the judge he worked with and have the paperwork ready for phone taps, surveillance and recording of the phony purchase.

The other case concerned an older organization dealing mostly in powdered cocaine supplied to the upper class, though lately they seemed to be dealing a good bit of heroin as well. David knew who was behind this gang, though enough proof to prosecute was still lacking. The head of the upper echelon there was Melvin "The Mole" Segram, a former stockbroker who had turned to dealing after having his stockbroker's license lifted for insider trading. David was uncertain whether Segram was going to be worth their while. He was a heavy user of his own product and would probably be cut from his position by one of the young Turks under him before too much longer. Users usually wound up making major errors eventually and went down faster than they came up.

There was one new note, from Lieutenant Gene Wilson downstairs in homicide informing him that a lower level pusher with a long arrest sheet had been found dead in an abandoned swimming pool and did he want details of the autopsy? David signed off to have a copy sent to him without much interest. He recognized the name, a user who used speed but left the hard stuff alone.

David stretched, trying to get the tension out of his shoulders then got up to pour himself another cup of coffee. He kept his own coffee pot in the office on a corner table where piles of papers, reports, statistics and articles for review threatened to bury it. He glanced at them guiltily, promising himself he would get to them soon.

Even though drug use had declined slightly overall during the last few years, teenage use was up again. That one statistic still upset him the most. David concealed a deep pride in his work with a sometimes flippant attitude but he never lost sight of the young lives he saw being destroyed by drugs.

It was mid-afternoon before David had his paperwork caught up and was ready to start seeing his staff as they arrived to write up their own activity reports before the end of the shift. He poked his head from the door to his office and saw Jantz Bellingham, a big dark-skinned detective who coordinated and investigated teenage drug use. Bellingham was also his whip and best friend on the force. They had gone through the academy together and worked together for several years as they each rose in the ranks.

“Hey, Bell,” David called, using the diminutive he responded to.

Bellingham turned from where he had been making entries into his computer files.

“Hey, Boss. Be right with you.”

David waited at the door until Bellingham saved his work and came over, then he closed it behind them.

“Sorry I wasn’t here to help you shuffle papers this morning,” Bellingham said. “I had to give that lecture to the kids at the high school first thing this morning.”

“Thanks, Bell. I appreciate it, but don’t guess there’s anything you could have done that I didn’t do worse. How did the lecture go?”

Bellingham shrugged. “Beats the hell out of me. Sometimes I think talking helps and other times I’ve got my doubts whether a damn one of them ever listens to a word I say. You know how kids are. They think they’re immortal and can handle anything at that age.”

David smiled thinly. “Of course we never felt that way when we were teenagers, did we?”

Bell spread his hands and returned the smile. “What can I say? I remember feeling the same way, right on up til the Gulf War. After that, I knew I could die. How do you convince a sixteen or seventeen year old though?” Bellingham’s smile disappeared. “The thing is, I care about those kids. It makes me sick to my stomach every time I have to bring one of them in, especially after they’ve gotten addicted. Not much I can do for them after that.”

David agreed. The drug problem seemed to be intractable, and getting worse instead of better, despite the billions of dollars spent by the government for “The War On Drugs.” And, like Bellingham, David hated to see kids get started. Some of them were salvageable, but once addicted, most seemed to continue a downward spiral into depths of degradation and violence which no person of that age was really prepared to handle.

“Not much I can do either,” David said. “Guess we have to keep trying, though. Anything new for me?”

“Might be. I got a call yesterday from one of the kids at the school who saw my name on the lecture notice. A girl by the name of Melanie Fisher, thirteen years old. Says she can give me the name of a couple of the student dealers if I promise to keep her out of it.”

“That’s pretty young,” David frowned sadly, making him look older than his years.

“They start young, nowadays. Anyway, this kid is mad because she caught one of her friends snorting.”

“Are you going to follow up on it?”

“Can’t hurt. Might help.”

“OK. Keep me posted.”

“Will do. Hey, you hear the latest?”

“What?”

“Gene Wilson’s girl got snatched last night, he thought, then she turned up hours later and doesn’t remember anything.”

“Hmm. Sounds peculiar.” David visualized Gene Wilson’s girl friend in his mind from the couple of times he had seen them together. Somehow, he had never thought they fit. His face became even sadder as he wondered whether that feeling wasn’t simply a reflection of his own self-induced loneliness. Since his divorce, he hadn’t made much attempt to find other companionship and the occasional date never seemed to generate enough interest for more than a casual relationship.

“No more peculiar than Wilson is. He’s a controller, according to the gossip. Tries to run everything.”

“Not our problem. Anything else?”

“Nope. See you later.”

David watched his friend leave. Bellingham was a good man. He had to be to still care so much after all he had seen. He called the next detective in, and the next and before he knew it, the time had slipped past five o’clock. He plucked his jacket from the coat hanger and closed and locked his office and headed for home.

Driving toward the two-bedroom apartment where he had lived since his divorce, David’s thoughts turned vaguely to Gene Wilson’s problem with his girl. He remembered seeing her a couple of times. A looker, friendly and unassuming, as if unaware of how she turned heads, unlike most beautiful women. He wondered what her problem was and hoped for her sake that it would soon be resolved.

“SO AFTER that did you make an appointment with a psychologist?” Gene asked. He noted without saying anything that Fran still appeared to be depressed. They were seated together in the kitchen where they usually ate their informal meals, many of them take-out since they both worked. This evening it had been his time to stop and he had picked up Chinese on the way home.

“Not yet,” Francis said.

“Why not?”

“I was thinking maybe I’d wait until after the CAT scan.”

“I don’t think you ought to wait, Fran,” Gene said. Work had allowed him to push the memories of their night out below the surface of his mind but they were back now, as strong as ever.

“Gene—”

He put down an egg roll and held up his hand. “Honey, please. This whole thing was so bizarre I don’t think you ought to wait. Cover all the bases now. I can get you an appointment with the guy who handles some of our work. He’s good and—”

“No!” The word shot out of her mouth like a cannonball.

“Why not?” Gene asked, already knowing the answer. She was concealing knowledge from him, knowledge he wished he had never suspected her of hiding. The abruptness of her answer told him clearer than words that she didn’t want to take a chance that the police psychologist would break confidentiality and talk to him.

“I’d rather use someone I know.”

“Who?”

Having to come up with a name so quickly made Francis mention one of the psychologists the emergency room doctors frequently used for counseling in rape cases, though what she had done, or had done to her, was far removed from rape. “Porter Thomas. The ER doctors think well of him.”

Gene made a mental note of the name, just as he had of the neurologist she had seen. “All right, but I still don’t think you should wait.”

“It will be all right,” Francis said, wishing there was some way to remove the hurt, confused look from his face. She was so ashamed of what she had done. On the other hand, she doubted there was anything she could do now to help his feelings, not after his failure to empathize with her. He should have been supportive, not accusatory.

That night, when he again made a sexual overture, Francis submitted, trying to make herself care. If anything would help put Gene’s fears to rest and let her get on

with trying to understand what had happened to her, having sex with him again might do it. She tried her best to enter into the act with all of her old enthusiasm, but it was hard pretending that there wasn't something occupying part of her attention. And there was. She was still seeking some rational explanation for her strange behavior. That, and the fact that she found herself resenting Gene's attentions, made the act more difficult than she had expected. For the first time in her life, she faked an orgasm, just so he would quit and leave her alone.

Gene's mind was acutely tuned to her reaction to his love making, even over his excitement. Her responses followed the normal pattern, but he detected a subtle difference in her attitude from start to finish. She was trying just a little bit too hard, responding a shade more rapidly than usual, as if she were trying to use the act as a means of stifling some internal devil. He had a hard time getting to sleep afterwards. His mind would not shut down. And he remembered, as Francis had hoped he wouldn't, that she still hadn't given him any explanations. He decided that the next day he would have a talk with that neurologist. Jealousy was eating at his soul.

IN ANOTHER part of the city, that evening while the malls were still open, thirteen-year-old Melanie Fisher was shopping with her mother. At least she had been until they separated, agreeing to meet back at the fountain where there were benches to rest on while waiting. Melanie was pleased with herself. She couldn't wait to tell her best friend, Margie, that she had managed to convince her mother that she had outgrown training bras and was ready to go up a step. The need was problematical. She looked down at her chest, annoyed that her budding young breasts still didn't do much to fill out her tee shirt. Maybe the new bra would help. While she was occupied with checking the progress of her body's development, she caught a movement from the corner of her eye. She glanced up just as a nervous looking man with black hair and a mustache sat down beside her on the bench. He was sweating profusely, even in the air-conditioned mall. Wet blotches were apparent at his armpits and excess moisture beaded his forehead and upper lip. He stuck an unlit cigarette in her face.

"Got a light, Miss?" The man said. His request came out as a shaky squeak.

Before Melanie could look around to see if anyone else was present, she felt a dampness cover her face. She sucked in her breath and started to get up. She had been well warned about strangers approaching young girls when they were alone. Through a sudden dizziness, she heard the man's voice.

"Don't run away. Don't say anything."

Melanie made one more effort to get up, but then suddenly lost the desire to move.

"All right. You want to come with me now, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," Melanie said, politely, as she had been taught to respond to elders.

“Come along, then. You want to go with me.” The man held out his hand and helped her to her feet. He walked away from the fountain and Melanie skipped along beside him. She didn’t know where they were going, but she was sure it was all right. She liked the man. He was nice.

Two hours later, Melanie still thought he was nice, even though it had hurt when he entered her and was hurting again, now. Somehow, it didn’t seem to matter, and even through the pain for her immature body, she responded to his suggestions that she was enjoying the attention. She continued to do everything the nice man suggested, offering her naked flesh to him in ways which had only been inaccurately whispered about at school. When he finally finished and drove her to a mall, different from the one where he had picked her up, she was almost too sore to walk.

She staggered to a bench and sat down as she had been instructed to do. She ignored the glances thrown her way, not realizing that there were bright purple bruise marks covering her neck. There were other marks which were not visible, over her little breasts, her belly and her thighs where the man had sucked and bitten her body.

An hour later she was still sitting there, but now she was huddled into herself. She gradually became rationally aware of what had gone on over the last several hours and was beginning to feel shame and bewilderment. She decided that she could never tell anyone what had happened, not even her best friend and especially not her mother. She was unaware of the purple marks on her neck which would certainly give her away and had no way of knowing that when she failed to appear to meet her mother, a search for her had been initiated.

Eventually she wiped away her tears and began hunting for a phone booth. She had to call her mother, who she figured would be angry by this time. As young as she was, she really had no conception of how frantic her mother would be over her absence, nor how angry after worming most of the story out of her. Some parts she kept to herself. She would never, ever admit them to anyone.

BEN, THE rogue chemist, got a phone call the next morning. He was expecting it and answered eagerly.

“Hello.”

“Ben?”

“Yeah, that you, Harwell?”

“It’s me. I want some more of that stuff. As soon as possible.”

“How much?”

“All you’ll sell me. It worked just like you said it would.”

Ben grinned before answering, rubbing his crotch, imagining what his customer had used his new product for—something he had always been scared to try again

after almost going to jail over his stepdaughter. “I’m making another batch. It’s going to cost a lot more, though. Now that you know it works.”

“I can afford it. Let me know when it’s ready.”

Ben hung up the phone and got busy. As he worked, he began to think of another possibility. He was surprised that he hadn’t considered it before, except for the fact that again he would be scared to do it himself. There were other acquaintances that wouldn’t be, though. He began humming to himself as he mixed reagents.

CHAPTER FOUR

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GENE WILSON flipped his badge at the receptionist in the alcove outside the office of Dr. Cummings. The receptionist, a middle-aged woman with gray hair and a prim hairdo was insisting on an appointment. “I don’t think I need an appointment,” he said. “This is an official investigation.” He was stretching the truth almost to the breaking point, but it wasn’t anything he hadn’t done before. And he couldn’t stand not knowing any longer—not knowing for certain.

The receptionist looked startled but picked up the phone and pressed a button.

“Dr. Cummings? There’s a policeman here to see you.” She paused. “No I don’t have any idea.” She listened for another moment then answered. “Okay.”

The receptionist looked up at the detective. “Dr. Cummings says he can see you, but he can’t give you but a few minutes of his time right now.”

“This won’t take long,” Gene said. He let the woman lead him into Cummings’ office.

The neurologist sat behind an oversized desk, staring curiously at Gene as he was ushered inside. He couldn’t imagine what the police would want to see him about. Nevertheless, he rose and leaned forward to shake hands. “Detective Wilson?”

“Yes, sir,” Gene said, starting off by being very polite. Sometimes that worked; sometimes it didn’t. He had found that it was usually a profitable opening gambit with professionals, though.

“Have a seat.”

“Thanks,” Gene said and did so, crossing his legs and opening his jacket so that his service pistol showed. Sometimes that helped, too.

“Now, what can I do for you, Detective?”

“This concerns a patient you saw yesterday, a Miss Francis Stafford. We need

some information on that visit.”

Cummings frowned. “Such as?”

“Such as what she came to see you about.”

“Why is it a police concern?”

Gene decided to ratchet up the pressure just a little. “I’m in the process of deciding on whether to bring the FBI into her case.”

Cummings looked startled. “The FBI? What on earth for?”

“Her experience may be construed as a possible kidnapping.”

“Kidnapping? No way, Lieutenant. She went with that man voluntarily.”

Gene smiled inwardly. Good. He was talking.

“Really? Did she have sex with him voluntarily?”

“Of course. At least according to what she told me—” Cummings stopped, suddenly aware of how far he had gone past the bounds of patient confidentiality.

“And what did she tell you, Dr. Cummings?” For Gene, it had become a rhetorical question; he no longer needed to hear the answer. He already had the information he had come for and he felt a sickness grip his insides like a virulent intestinal flu.

Cummings tried to back off. “Detective, I’ve already said more than I should have. Haven’t you talked to Miss Stafford yourself?”

“Of course we have,” Gene said, allowing the “we” to include no one but himself.

“And what did she tell you?”

“That whatever she did with the perpetrator was involuntary,” Gene lied. “We need details. Besides kidnapping, it may turn out to be a rape case.”

Cummings thought about it. It seemed unfair to him that a person might be indicted for rape when the woman had plainly told him that everything she had done was both voluntary and enjoyable. The guilt and questioning of her motives had only come later.

“It wasn’t like that,” he finally said, deciding to cooperate.

“Like what? What exactly did she do?”

“She left with a man she had no previous knowledge of, had various kinds of sex with him, then was dropped off at another location. It seemed to me to be a mental lapse of some kind. We’re going to check further for possible organic causes.”

“What kind of sex?” Gene asked, the sickness building. He felt like vomiting.

“Is that really germane?”

“Believe me, doctor, it is. Trust me.” Gene forced the muscles of his face to relax, maintaining a pleasant yet professional expression.

“Well—there were various positions involved. There were numerous episodes of fellatio and anal sex. She felt guilty about it afterwards, but believe me, I don’t think you have a kidnapping case.”

Gene got to his feet, still maintaining a professional façade, but the interview was over. He had to get out of there now before he really got sick.

“Well, we’ll see, doctor. Thank you for your cooperation.” He shook hands formally and steeled himself not to run from the office. He walked at a normal pace, out of the office, back past the receptionist and out to the parking lot where he leaned against his car and was violently ill. The bitch! The dirty bitch!

FRANCIS WAS grateful that she held a respected position at St. Luke’s Hospital. That had enabled her to change the CAT scan appointment to the next day, ahead of other previously scheduled patients. She felt moderately guilty at placing herself ahead of other, possibly acutely ill patients, but nevertheless let the appointment be set up for noon. She didn’t think she would have been able to wait another day to find out whether the cause of her strange sexual escapade was a mental or physical illness.

As the technician prepared the apparatus and gave her instructions, she realized how other patients felt as they waited on test results. Apprehensive. Curious. Nervous. It was a good experience for her, she decided. From now on she would show a little more sympathy when patients prodded for answers before results were ready.

“Now don’t move,” the technician said loudly. Francis felt a mechanical meshing of moving parts and ever so slowly, felt herself being trundled through the tunnel of the CAT Scanner. What was it seeing? Or rather, what would the composite of hundreds of pictures show? She was beginning to believe she must have a tumor. Over the last 24 hours, more memories had begun returning, in ever more vivid detail, as if a computer was loose in her mind and enhancing the images, making them sharper and more detailed. She was glad her face was hidden from view as a particularly vivid picture impinged on her mind. She knew she must be blushing. The noise of the scanner continued as she forced herself to think of something else.

Hours seemed to have passed before she heard the technician’s voice again. “All right Fran, that’s it. You can get up now.”

Francis blinked her eyes open. My God, she thought, I was almost asleep. She swung her legs over the edge of the table and got to her feet.

“Thanks, John. How long before you’ll have the results?” She chided herself

mentally for asking that question the first thing. John was probably used to hearing it though, she thought.

The technician grinned. “There’s not much waiting anymore. I’ve already sent the results to Dr. Jordan, directly to his computer.”

“Oh. Well, thanks again.” Francis glanced at her watch. She knew Jeremy Jordan, the chief of radiology well, having dated him a couple of times before meeting Gene. He was probably in his office now. The usual protocol, she knew, would be for his secretary to call her but she couldn’t stand to wait. Jeremy should still be in his office. He almost never went out for lunch. She hurried away.

“Come on in, Fran,” Jordan called from the inner recesses of his office when he heard Francis and his secretary talking beyond the half-open door.

Francis stepped inside, forcing herself to smile. “Hi Jeremy.”

“Hello Fran. Have a seat. How have you been lately? I haven’t seen much of you since you became a cop groupie.” He smiled to take the sting out of his remark.

“I was fine up until a couple of days ago—and maybe I’m not quite so much of a groupie anymore.” Fran’s eyes couldn’t help but wander toward the computer screen behind Jordan’s desk. It showed the picture of a brain with the darker outline of the skull surrounding it.

“Really? Well, that sounds like good news for the medical profession.” He took note of the tension in her features and stopped the banter. “Fran, I’m about ready to dictate my interpretation of the scan. Want to know what it says?”

“Of course, you dummy.”

“Completely normal. Whatever other problems you may have, there’s nothing wrong with your brain—other than dumping me for a cop, of course.”

Francis didn’t know whether to be relieved or even more upset. If the cause wasn’t physical, it must be mental. But—she didn’t believe in a lot of the psychiatric jargon thrown about so casually, that repressed childhood memories caused adult aberrations, and certainly not in her case. So far as she knew her childhood had been happier than most and her parents had always been both loving and caring toward her and her two brothers.

“You’re sure?”

“As sure as I’d like to see you again.”

“Thanks, but I’m still living with Gene—for the time being anyway.”

“Okay, but you know where I live.”

“Sure. Thanks, Jere.”

FRANCIS BEGGED off the rest of her shift. She knew she wouldn't be able to concentrate and it might even be dangerous to have her around in a trauma unit. She walked slowly to the parking lot, idly watching the lunch crowd in their coming and going, dressed in every gamut of the medical profession, scrubs, whites, lab coats and variously styled and colored tops and bottoms. She wondered if any of the other people she was seeing had ever had a problem like hers. If so, she felt sorry for them.

Francis popped the lock of her new Jeep, remembering how Gene had laughed at her when she bought it, asking her why such a macho vehicle, as if he thought women should be confined to station wagons or Saturns. She slid inside then drove slowly away from the huge medical center and north to US 59 which led to the Kingwood subdivision on the northern outskirts of Houston. She was surprised to see Gene's Taurus parked in the drive. He rarely came home during the day.

Francis zapped the car locks and stepped through the front door. Gene was standing there waiting. She didn't like the look on his face, as if one of his convicted felons had been released on a technicality. "Gene. What are you doing home so early?"

He smiled, but it was more like the rictus of heartburn than an expression of amusement. "I might ask you the same thing," he said.

Francis ignored the rude implications of his remark and replied, "I had my Cat scan today. It was good news, I guess. No tumor. Completely normal."

"I could have told you that," Gene said. "Do you still not remember what happened when you went off on your little jaunt?"

"No," Francis lied.

"Bitch!" Gene said. Before he quite knew what he was doing he stepped forward and slapped her hard, knocking her head sideways with the force of the blow.

"Ow!" Francis yelled. "Damn you, Gene, what did you do that for?"

She held the side of her face with her hand, feeling the numbness beginning to turn into pain.

"That's what you get for lying to me. What else have you been keeping from me?"

"Listen—" Francis began.

"You listen. What are you doing home so early? Getting ready to go see your lover again?"

"You're crazy!"

"And you're a lying bitch!" Gene raised his hand again.

Francis stepped back out of reach, appalled at Gene's anger. She knew what he

was talking about but that was no excuse.

“Stop right there!” She shouted. “You sonofabitch, if you ever hit me again I’ll report you!”

“Like I couldn’t kill any report filed against me,” Gene sneered, but he held back the projected blow, even though his hand was trembling with the urge to strike her again. He might be able to suppress a violence complaint against him, but word would get around anyway. It always did.

Francis stared at him for a moment. She was shaking with anger. No man had ever hit her before. And no man ever would again, if she could help it.

“I’m leaving,” she shouted. She twirled and ran for the bedroom, slamming and locking the door. Behind her, she heard the thud of Gene’s footsteps on the carpet then the door rattled as he crashed into it. She stood with her back to the door, tears streaming down her face as he kicked ineffectively against the barrier, shouting imprecations of infidelity against her.

Eventually the kicks against the bedroom door ceased and Fran began packing suitcases, just two of them, all she thought she could carry. She threw in casual clothes, uniforms, cosmetics and bathroom articles, then waited, wondering whether Gene had left or was simply being quiet and biding his time, waiting for her to come out. She didn’t want another confrontation.

An idea suddenly occurred to her. They had separate phone numbers, almost a necessity for two people in their respective professions living together where either of them might be called out for extra duty at any moment. Quietly, she picked up the bedroom phone and dialed the other number, hoping Gene was so angry that it wouldn’t occur to him what she was doing. She listened, letting their other number ring until the answer phone intervened with its recorded message. She hung up, then unlocked the door and peered out cautiously. Gene was nowhere in sight. Nevertheless, she proceeded slowly, ready to bolt back to the bedroom if Gene made an appearance. He was nowhere around.

Francis threw her suitcases into the back of the jeep and drove away, not exactly sure yet where she was going, but anywhere was better than staying where she was. So far as she was concerned, she and Gene were finished. As she drove toward US 59, unconsciously heading for an area sure to have a choice of motels, a suppressed memory suddenly surfaced, as others had been doing.

It was like watching a re-run of a home video. The strange man asking her for a light. The motions of his fingers and thumb. A puff of almost transparent vapor sprayed into her face. The man’s voice, tinged with excitement, telling her to forget it, to come with him. The implication of the suddenly remembered episode hit her like a flashbulb popping in her face.

My God! Could that be it? A drug, something hypnotic that she was just now remembering? That would explain everything! She frowned. Had there been any

reports, anything Gene had said or that she had read recently about such a drug? No, but that didn't mean that there wasn't one like that on the street. Designer drugs were becoming an increasingly complex problem for authorities battling the drug epidemic.

Francis pulled into the entrance of a Best Western Motel, the first she came to. Anything would do for a day or two until she could collect her thoughts. She felt herself blushing as the clerk glanced knowingly at the side of her face, still smarting from Gene's blow. If he had broken anything damned if she didn't think she might still press charges against him. On the other hand, maybe it was best just left alone. She didn't intend to be seeing him anymore. If he didn't bother her again, she decided to let it go.

Once inside the motel room, she dropped her luggage and hurried to the bathroom. In the mirror, she examined her face. Her left cheek was bright red, but so far there wasn't much swelling. Maybe it wouldn't leave a bruise.

The Best Western didn't have room service but she had noticed a liquor store right next door. Francis washed her face and reapplied makeup then walked over to the liquor store and bought a corkscrew and a bottle of white Chablis, cold, and took it back to her room, settling for the plastic wrapped glasses from the bathroom to drink it from. As soon as that was done, she settled into one of the uncomfortable chairs and began to think. She turned on the TV with the volume set low, simply to give her eyes something to track besides the bare walls and began reviewing the whole sexual episode again, enhanced memories in the forefront of her mind.

As Francis thought and watched the TV, she paid little attention to the report of a bank robbery. Apparently a bank employee had handed over a considerable amount of money to a lone robber, and then failed to press the alarm. The robbery had been discovered only hours later when her cash drawer came up way short. The police had arrested the woman, suspecting her of collusion even though she denied any memory of the robbery.

The report barely impinged on Fran's consciousness. The wine was relaxing, allowing her to organize her thoughts. It had to be a drug of some sort, she decided, not for the first time since remembering the incident of the cigarette in her face. The problem now was what to do about it. Well, she could do one thing first. Francis picked up the phone and called to cancel the appointment with the psychologist. Better to believe that she had been drugged than that she was insane.

CHAPTER FIVE



DAVID O'NEAL was having lunch at Lupe's, a cafeteria-style restaurant just off the

Beltway, with Marcus Neelsby, a friend of long standing. Lupe's was near enough to Bush Intercontinental Airport that they could hear the big passenger jets coming and going over the hum of conversation. Neelsby was a detective sergeant in the CAP Division, crimes against persons, a short burly man with a full head of dark hair. When both of them were free, they usually ate together on Wednesdays.

As usual, they chose a seat as far away from other patrons as possible and kept their voices down. Neelsby took their trays after they had removed the plates from them and slid back into the booth.

"I don't see how you can eat those things," he said, motioning with his hand toward the platter of chicken livers in front of David.

David grinned. "What about that crap you're eating? Salisbury steak is fit only for dog food. Or I suppose you could dry it out and use it as a paperweight."

"That's a thought. I need a new one for all the paperwork on my weird cases."

"The bank robbery?" David asked.

"Yeah, that and one other." Neelsby paused as a jet roared overhead then continued. "That bank job puzzles me."

"I thought you had the teller pegged as one of the perps, Marc."

"So did I. It looked open and shut at first. The damned woman claimed she couldn't remember anything. Shit. Now she's telling us her memories are coming back. She says some guy approached her right after lunch, asked for a light, then suggested that she give him all the money in her drawer when he came into the bank after she got back—and not step on the alarm button."

"So? It still sounds like a lay-down to me."

"There's more. She says she doesn't know why she did it—and you know, I'm beginning to believe her. There's nothing in her background that we've discovered so far to indicate a problem. Married, two kids, no financial problems."

"She could be holding back."

"Could be, but she's being very cooperative. She even gave us a detailed description of the alleged contact. The picture will be on the news tonight and in the paper tomorrow."

"Hmm. Well, sounds interesting. What was the other one?"

Neelsby frowned. "A bad scene. We're just getting into it. In fact, I have to go to the medical center as soon as we've finished and question the kid again."

"Kid?"

Neelsby grimaced. "Yeah. Thirteen years old. She was abducted at a mall and raped for several hours. Except—well, the kid claims there was no force involved. Says she doesn't know why she went with the perp. Her mother wormed that out of

her, finally, then called us.”

“Has the kid been taking drugs maybe? And trading sex for them? It’s not unusual, Marc, even at thirteen.”

“No, she’s clean so far as we know.”

“What’s her name?” David asked. “Maybe we have a line on her.”

“Melanie Fisher.”

David frowned and pushed his plate away. “Now that’s interesting, Marc. Unless it’s a duplicate name, she’s one of our contacts at the High School. No way she’s on drugs.”

Neelsby stared at his friend for a moment. “Hmm. Doesn’t make much sense, does it?” He glanced at his watch. “I gotta run, Dave.” He picked up the meal tickets. “My turn, though I don’t know why in hell I should have to spend money on chicken livers. They ought to pay you to eat them.”

David slid out of the booth and accompanied his friend to the cash register, then on outside. As they shook hands, David said, “Keep me posted on those cases, will you?”

“Sure. Glad to.”

As David watched his friend drive off, he wondered why he had asked that. He had enough going on in his own department to keep him more than busy. On the other hand, there was something about Neelsby’s cases that didn’t ring true—or at least fell outside the bounds of the usual. He tucked the fact down into his subconscious to let it wander around in his mind. Maybe it would correlate with some other facts there and re-surface in clearer form. In the meantime, there was paperwork waiting. There always was.

FRANCIS SHOWERED in the unfamiliar motel room the next morning, grateful that she didn’t have to go in to work at the hospital. This was the beginning of her regular week off, which alternated with a week of seven 12-hour shifts. After drying herself off and dressing in casual jeans and blouse, she walked over to the adjacent restaurant. She stopped in front of the entrance and searched her purse for a couple of quarters. She dropped them into the slot of the newspaper dispenser for the Houston Chronicle and plucked out the morning edition.

Inside, Francis ordered waffles and sausage and hash browns, feeling the effects of not having eaten much the last few days. Her stomach rumbled and she felt saliva suffusing her mouth at the breakfast smells. After the waitress had poured her coffee and departed with her order, she opened the paper and began to read. A headline down on the right hand corner of the front page caught her attention.

Mystery of Willing Teller In Bank Robbery Still Unsolved

Laura Hanks, the teller at Lamarks Bank in Humble which was robbed Thursday, continues to insist that she has no idea why she handed over the money to a lone robber. Police spokesperson Manley Weston disclosed that she is still undergoing both police and FBI interrogation and will remain in custody, pending bail hearings today. Hanks' attorney, Sean Wiley, insists that his client, though admitting to the facts disclosed by police, must have been coerced in some fashion. "That is the only way she could possibly have been involved in this thing," he stated. Lead detective Marcus Neelsby and FBI agent Timothy Preston refused comment when questioned.

Laura Hanks is reported by sources to be distraught and is...

(see robbery, pg. 13A)

Reading the story jogged Francis' memory of seeing a television report the previous evening, showing an attractive but bewildered looking woman being led from a bank in handcuffs. She thumbed through the pages of the newspaper to find the rest of the story, barely noticing when the waitress placed her breakfast on the table and refilled her coffee cup. It sounded to her as if the bank teller might have been the victim of a hypnotic drug, just as she now believed she had been. The fact that she was telling of meeting the robber during her lunch break then performing an action completely out of character sounded all too familiar. She noticed her cooling breakfast only after finishing the story and began eating, though her appetite had again deserted her. What if there really was a new drug on the streets, a hypnotic powerful enough to compel victims to follow even the most bizarre suggestions? If there was, did the police know? Should she report it, and if so, to whom? Those thoughts burgeoned in her mind while she finished eating.

Francis paid her tab with a credit card then walked back to her motel room. She had intended to use this day to hunt for an apartment but now she decided that it could wait, at least until the afternoon. She stopped in the motel lobby at an ATM machine to get some cash before going to her room, thankful now that she had refused Gene's request to combine their checking accounts. As upset as he was, it wouldn't have surprised her if he had closed it and taken all her money. Thinking of Gene, she hoped she wouldn't run into him when she went to the police, as she had decided to do. Or should she report the matter to the FBI? No, the local police already had a record of her bizarre though brief disappearance. Best to start there. She knew from discussions with Gene that there was a department in the precinct which specialized in illegal drug activities. And if she was lucky, Gene wouldn't be around, or if he was, she could hope that he was ensconced in his office.

Decision made, Francis stopped briefly back at her room in order to touch up her makeup then headed toward the Kingwood police precinct building.

BEN WORTHINGTON was feeling extraordinarily exuberant this morning as he counted stacks of greenbacks, his share of the bank robbery proceeds. It had gone

just as he had promised when he parted with a prepared vial of his new drug. My God, but this was great! He could do anything now! He rubbed his fingers along the sleeves of the new white linen shirt he had bought and shifted his buttocks in the chair, liking the feel of the fine, custom-tailored slacks he was wearing. The new clothes and a shave had considerably improved his appearance. He poured another shot of Jack Daniels Black label over ice and glanced around at his hotel room, a considerable cry from the last place he had rented. He had chosen carefully, taking a ground floor unit with parking right near the entrance, leaving only a few steps to get his next victim inside and out of sight. This time he was going to take a younger woman or—hell, why not two? He fantasized deliriously for a moment about all the things he could do now—besides fulfilling his every sexual desire. There was another idea forming. What might some of the big players pay for a drug which would induce their competitors to commit suicide? Without leaving any evidence? That was for later, though. Tonight he had other plans.

FRANCIS PAUSED in the alcove of the precinct building before entering. She had never liked coming here. It always reminded her of the end result of so much of the trauma she dealt with in the emergency room. The building was getting old, too, and in need of repair. There had been plans once for a renovation, but that was back before the Kingwood subdivision had been annexed by the city of Houston. Now it stood, stark and out of place among the newer buildings surrounding it.

Francis entered and stopped in the overly small lobby, crowded with the coming and going of complainants and suspects. Through the mingling of bodies she could see the desk sergeant listening to a scruffy looking man who was talking in a loud voice to the bored policeman. Francis waited until he had finished and left in a huff of unsatisfied cursing then pushed through the other pedestrians to gain access to him.

“Sergeant?”

The uniformed officer looked up from his desk, appeared puzzled for a moment, then recognized Francis from her appearance though he didn’t recall her name. His bored manner changed immediately, Francis noted with amusement as he tried unsuccessfully to conceal his scrutiny of her body, something she was overly familiar with. It didn’t bother her as it did some women; she knew that it was an inevitable accompaniment of the male psyche, programmed into their genes.

“Good morning. How can I help you?” The sergeant asked.

“I need to see the person in charge of drug enforcement,” Francis said.

“That would be Lieutenant O’Neal. May I tell him in what regard you’re calling for?”

Francis was amused all over again at his polite formality and convoluted syntax. “I want to talk to him about a possible new illegal drug.”

“Okay. Wait a moment please. Oh—can I give him your name?”

“Francis Stafford.”

The sergeant picked up his phone and pressed a button, then spoke. “Lou, I got a lady here wants to talk to you. Francis Stafford. Says it’s about a new drug, something like that.” He paused for a second, then hung up. His gaze took her in again as he connected the name with the face and body. Lieutenant Wilson’s girl. This would be gossip for the mill. “Third floor, room 312, ask for Lieutenant O’Neal. He’ll be expecting you.”

“Thank You,” Francis said and headed for the elevator, feeling his eyes following her, not a sexual scrutiny now but more as an object of curiosity.

The elevator door opened and as she started to step inside she stopped in mid-stride.

Gene stared at Francis like a talk show participant suddenly confronted by an unsavory acquaintance from his past. “What are you doing here?” He said, grabbing her upper arm in a painful grip.

Francis tried twisting free. “None of your damn business. Let me go.”

Gene retained his grip. “I asked what you’re doing here!” His face was suffused with blood, turning it an angry red.

“Let me go or so help me I’ll scream bloody murder.”

Gene relaxed his grip on her arm but blocked her path into the elevator. “If you’re here to swear out a complaint, save your time. I can make it embarrassing for you.”

“And I can report you to internal affairs if you don’t get out of my damn way,” Francis said, knowing that was one thing all police officers feared.

“You do that and you’ll be sorry,” Gene said, but he stepped aside.

Francis entered the elevator and punched three, all the while enduring Gene’s angry stare. She shuddered and took a deep breath when the door finally closed, wondering why on earth she could ever have been attracted to the man. Why hadn’t she seen the signs? He was a bully and a batterer and she wanted nothing further to do with him.

THE THIRD floor consisted of a large bay area with an ill-defined hallway down the middle, fronting some open areas where cops were working at computer stations, loafing or talking on the phone. There were a few closed doors. She walked past one of the open areas where a suspect was being fingerprinted, past a closed door then stopped in front of another, the one she was looking for, 312. She knocked, heard a muffled response and pushed open the door.

David O'Neal had recognized the name from gossip and had been waiting ever since the desk called, inordinately curious over Francis' request to report a "new drug." He had been wondering why she hadn't just gone to Gene with the information. As she entered his office and closed the door behind her, he thought of what a striking woman she was, even dressed casually in jeans.

Francis had seen David once or twice when meeting Gene but had never been introduced. In retrospect, she suspected that Gene's excessive possessiveness was the real reason he had introduced her to so few of his friends. She gazed at the police lieutenant behind the desk in the small crowded office, liking his looks even though no one would ever call him handsome. His brown hair was prematurely flecked with gray and cut short, revealing an incipient bald spot. He possessed a nose which appeared to have been broken sometime in the past, set over a sad mouth lined at the corners. He had a strong chin and china blue eyes, his most striking feature. Overall, he reminded her of one of her favorite uncles though he wasn't nearly that old, perhaps in his mid-thirties. He was dressed almost as casually as she was, in blue slacks and a white, short-sleeved shirt.

"Good morning, Miss Stafford. Nice of you to stop in to see me. Please have a seat."

"Thank you," Francis said. She seated herself in the chair fronting his desk and crossed her legs.

David leaned back in his chair. The woman looked apprehensive and worn out, as if she were recovering from an illness. And that spot on her cheek. Was that a bruise?

David tried a bit of casual conversation to put her at ease before getting down to business. "I'm glad to finally meet you," he said. "Gene has spoken of you often enough."

"I don't want to talk about Gene," Francis said firmly. Was this one of his friends? Perhaps she should have gone to the FBI after all.

Whoops! David caught the expression of malice in her voice.

"Sorry, just asking," he said. Evidently, the mysterious disappearance of a couple of days ago had somehow turned her against Gene.

"Well, don't. That's not what I came here for."

David smiled and spread his hands in a gesture of appeasement. "All right, Miss Stafford. Let's get to business. What can I do for you?"

Francis hesitated. She had rehearsed what she planned to say on the way to the station but now, sitting under the calm scrutiny of this detective, it sounded wild enough that she doubted she would be believed. Maybe she should sort of ease into the story.

“Detective O’Neal, has there been a new drug reported lately, a...a hypnotic drug, say?”

David rubbed his chin. “There are always new drugs being reported. I can’t say I’ve heard of a hypnotic, though. Are you talking about the date-rape drug?”

“No, this is something different. I—I think I was a victim.”

David sat up a little straighter. His smile disappeared “Tell me about it.”

Francis began, slowly at first, speaking in a low voice then picking up the pace as she saw that the detective seemed to really be listening.

“...I didn’t remember hardly anything at first, but as time passes, more and more comes back to me. I think the drug was somehow dispensed from a cigarette when that man asked me for a light. I remember feeling something cold on my face and a tightness in my chest.”

“Did you see a vapor of any kind?”

“No, it was too dark, but I do remember now how he told me to forget about the cigarette, and how he told me not to scream and to go with him.”

“And you did go with him?” David already knew that from Gene’s almost hysterical routing of the police in search of her but he wanted to hear what Francis had to say. Besides, he enjoyed looking at her as she talked.

“Yes, there wasn’t any question about not going. It seemed perfectly natural at the time.”

“And then what happened?”

“He—he made me do things. No, that’s not right. He suggested that I do things and I did, without hesitation. Can’t you see? I would never have gone off with a stranger and acted like that under ordinary circumstances. He must have drugged me.”

David had been making notes on a legal pad as she talked. Now he looked up and nodded. “Miss Stafford—”

“Please don’t call me Miss,” Francis said.

“Sorry. Ms. Stafford—”

“I don’t like that either. My name is Francis, or Fran if you like.”

David grinned, transforming his sad-looking face into a much younger and more boyish visage. “All right Fran. You can call me Dave. Now as I was saying, or rather starting to say, I can’t tell you that there is a new hypnotic drug on the market now. I certainly hope not. On the other hand, I can’t say there isn’t, either. All I can do is send around a memo to my men and to the other precincts to be alert for similar occurrences.”

“Can’t you go looking for that man?” Francis asked, indignant at the idea of so little action being taken.

“Do you mean the one that Gene has described from the Identikit? He withdrew the request after you reappeared.”

“Well, can’t you put it back out?” Francis asked.

“I can if you file a formal complaint, but that’s not in my department. That would be the CAP, Crimes Against People department.”

Francis rolled her eyes. “Bureaucracy! This reminds me of the hospital.”

David grinned again. “It’s everywhere, Fran. The world couldn’t run without a ton of paper being generated for every person in the nation.” He looked back down at his pad and ran over his notes. “There are a couple of other things. That Identikit picture. Have you seen it?”

“Just for a moment,” Francis admitted.

David rummaged through piles of papers in three different baskets before he found the picture, glad that he hadn’t discarded it. He held it up for her to look at. “Is this the man?”

Francis felt herself shivering at the sight of a likeness of Ben.

“Yes, that looks like him, but not exactly. It could be improved.”

David made another note. “I’ll send you back to that department, too, and let you go over it with the technician. Is there anything else you remember?”

“No—yes! He was driving a Mercury Marquis. I remember that now.”

“Good. That will help. What model? What color?”

Francis frowned. “I can’t be sure of the model. I think it was several years old, though, and a sort of off-white color.”

“How about the license plate?”

“Sorry, I didn’t pay any attention to it.”

David asked some other questions, more because he enjoyed talking to her than in hopes of gaining any further information. She really was a beauty and she was easy to talk to. Finally, though, he had to let her go. He pushed back his chair and got to his feet, prompting Francis to do likewise.

“I’ll take you up to Detective Neelsby’s office,” David hesitated then added, “I’ll need to know where to contact you in case anything comes up.”

“Right now I’m staying at the Best Western in Humble, but that’s only temporary.” Francis made a sudden decision. “I’m going to take some vacation time and find an apartment, though.” Unconsciously, she touched her cheek. “May I ask

you something?”

“Sure. Ask away.”

“I don’t know if Gene has said anything, or whether you even knew we were living together, but I’ve moved out. When I get ready to move my things, would it be possible to have an escort?”

“Certainly,” David said, catching her meaning immediately but not mentioning it in order to save her from embarrassment. So that was where the mark on her cheek came from. That sonofabitch ought to be horsewhipped! He plucked one of his business cards from the holder on his desk and wrote his home phone number on the back. “Here. Keep this and call me when you get ready to move. Or if anything at all comes up or you remember more details. I’ll see if I can’t come myself when you’re ready to pack, but if not I’ll send a patrol car.” If at all possible, David intended to be there himself, whether it pricked Gene’s little ego or not.

“Thank You,” Francis said. She glanced at her watch.

David took the hint. He escorted her to Neelsby’s office, introduced her and left her with him. On the way back to his office he happened to think: If what she said proved to be true, he might have to bring the FBI into the case—it would then have all the aspects of a kidnapping.

CHAPTER SIX

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THIS IS HOW I’ve been using it, but any sort of nebulizer would work just as well,” Ben said, tearing open a cigarette to show the shortened insulin syringe with the hair-thin altered needle, burred so that the drug would be delivered as a spray rather than a stream.

“Yeah, yeah,” Melvin “The Mole” said, but he wasn’t looking at the torn cigarette. Most of his attention was concentrated on the two women making enthusiastic love to each other on the king-sized hotel bed. The redhead was kissing and fondling the blonde’s voluptuous breasts while the other had her hand between the redhead’s open thighs, two of her fingers completely out of sight inside the other woman and working vigorously.

Melvin was finally getting an erection strong enough to overcome the effects of all the lines of coke he had snorted since the evening began. Ben Worthington had approached him with a highly unlikely tale of a terrific new drug and finally convinced him to watch a demonstration of its effects. He had been astounded at how easy it had been to compel the women, chosen at random by himself, to accompany them and then further amazed at how they enthusiastically carried out

every suggestion he made. He licked his thin lips like a puppy salivating at the smell of a steak and unzipped his fly. As soon as he was finished with the women he intended to place a big order for the drug, but that wasn't all he intended. He wanted the formula. This was too hot to be left in the hands of someone like Ben, nothing more than an itinerate crank manufacturer.

"Can I have the front money now?" Ben asked. He wasn't interested in the women right now.

"Yeah, yeah," Melvin said. "In a little while."

"I need to go. I want to get started."

Melvin cursed and sat on the edge of the bed, squeezing one of the redhead's breasts. He pulled his mobile phone from his jacket and dialed. "Mack? Yeah. Bring 15K around to room 114. Yeah, now." He hung up the phone and turned to Ben. "How long will this stuff last?"

Ben checked his watch. "It will wear off pretty soon. Here. I'll fix you up." He picked up the bare syringe taken from the cigarette and stood by the bed. He tapped the blond on the shoulder. "Stop that for a minute." The blond raised her lips from the redhead's nipple and looked up.

"Breathe this in," Ben said. He pressed the plunger, releasing half the drug in a fine mist into her face. She breathed deeply. He repeated the process with the red headed woman.

"That will hold them a couple of more hours. Have fun." He turned as a knock came at the door. Melvin reluctantly stopped what he was doing and went over. He cracked the door, spoke briefly to his henchman and took a large envelope from his hands. He walked over to Ben and handed the envelope to him. "When can I have delivery?"

"A couple of days. I'll be in touch."

Melvin had instructed Mack to follow Ben when he left but the chemist was taking no chances. He left by the back way, abandoning the stolen car he had been using. After all, it would be ever so easy to get another one.

DAVID O'NEAL sat for a few moments at his desk, rubbing his chin as he habitually did when turning a problem over in his mind. The idea that an awful new designer drug might be hitting the streets was part of it but there was something else bothering him that he couldn't quite put his finger on. It involved the hypothetical new drug somehow. Was there really one? Francis had seemed awfully sincere. Sincere and irate at the same time. If everything she had told him was true, he couldn't blame her. So, where to go now? He thought for a moment and decided to call a friend over at the regional DEA office, Bobby Jenkins. If anyone knew about a new drug, he would. He dialed the number.

“Hi Bob,” he said when his friend answered. “Fine. How ‘bout you? Good. Hey, look, I got a question for you. Have you got any info on a new drug, purportedly a hypnotic, just now hitting the street?”

David had to explain further, then listened to the DEA agent answer.

“Nothing I know of, but I’ll send a memo around and we’ll keep our eyes open. If it’s as powerful as you say it might be, I sure want to know quick so we can get a bill drawn up to make it illegal. You know we can’t do anything about it otherwise, even supposing it exists.”

“Damn, you’re right, Bobby. I had forgotten that aspect. Well, if worst comes to worst, we could always call in the Fibs and try to hang a kidnapping charge on the perp.”

“Yeah, that’s an idea. Keep me posted, okay?”

“Will do.”

David hung up and wondered for a moment whether to call in the FBI now. He decided against it. There wasn’t enough evidence and besides, he didn’t like the idea of federal agents getting involved in his cases. They tended to be a pain rather than a help. While he was still trying to dredge up whatever puzzle was bothering him, down below the depths of conscious thought, Gene barged into his office. David knew right away that word of Francis’ appearance at the station must have already spread to every office in the building.

“What was my girl friend doing in here?” Gene demanded without any preliminaries.

Gene had always irritated David. He looked at the big blond detective and answered forcefully. “The way I get it, she’s not your girl friend anymore.”

David saw Gene force himself into a resemblance of calm. “That’s not decided yet. What did she want?”

In all fairness, David saw no reason not to tell him, though he was standing up to do so, just in case Gene’s famous temper got the best of him. He tensed the muscles of his slender, compact body without being aware of it as he spoke. “Fran told me she remembered that the perp she disappeared with the other night doped her with some sort of hypnotic and used it to make her go with him. It wasn’t a pretty story Gene.”

Gene turned that remark over in his mind, before deciding that he didn’t want to believe it, at least in Fran’s case. “You’re telling me there’s a drug on the street now that can make a person do anything they’re told to do? That’s bullshit, Dave.”

“Not according to Fran it isn’t, and—” Suddenly the pieces of the puzzle which had been bothering him popped to the surface of his mind.

“Fran is it? You sure got on a first name basis awfully quick, my friend.”

“Forget that. I suddenly thought of something. Remember that bank robbery from a couple of days ago, where the bank teller handed over the money and claimed she didn’t know why she did it?”

“Oh. Yeah. I remember that one. You think there’s a connection?”

“Could be. At least it wouldn’t hurt to check it out, even if it does mean talking to the Fibs.”

“Those bastards,” Gene exclaimed. “You do it.” He turned and left abruptly.

David shook his head in disgust. He had seen not a hint of understanding or sympathy for Fran at the mention of a possible reason for her actions. He picked up the phone and dialed the regional FBI office in Houston. There was no avoiding taking his information to the feds now. He was put on hold and while he waited, he remembered Marcus Neelsby and the case of Melanie Fisher. Could it be related, too? Good God. He vowed that as soon as he got the time he would call Fran and let her know that there was beginning to be some correlation and validation to her story. It would make her feel better and would give him an excuse to see her again.

Timothy Preston, the lead agent in the odd bank robbery wasn’t in just yet, but was expected momentarily. David left his name and number and hung up. He went over to the cluttered table and poured more coffee then sat down and searched his desk for the quarterly statistical report to begin working on. It was almost due. While going over it, he found his mind wandering again. A hypnotic drug. How would it impact society in general and his job in particular if it became as common as, say, marijuana? Gradually the numbers he was staring at began to mean less and less as he turned the problem over in his mind. He didn’t like the implications, not at all.

GENE WAS back in his office behind closed doors, thinking furiously. Was it really possible? He couldn’t make up his mind. Even if it was, and even if it applied to Fran, he didn’t believe that the purported drug was completely responsible. Give a woman a good suggestion and they spread their legs, every damn time. The bitch probably liked every instant of it. But goddamn, what if there was such a drug? He pictured using it on all the scumbags he knew of who were guilty as hell of everything up to and including murder. Wouldn’t it be nice to blow some of that stuff up their nose and ask them to write out a confession? And not call a fucking lawyer? Hell, it would be nice to have a little of the stuff around the house for his own use. He thought of using it on Fran. Wouldn’t that be something now? He could control her utterly. He smiled to himself. O’Neal wasn’t going to be the only person checking this thing out. Like many immature men, once he became emotionally involved with a woman it was hard for him to turn loose, whether the feeling was reciprocated or not, but Gene was hardly aware of the personality defect. He was imagining how he could control Francis with some confiscated samples of the hypnotic drug in hand. She would do anything he told her to and if she did remember later, so what? The drug wasn’t illegal. He thumbed through his Rolodex

then picked up the phone. Soon he was talking to one of his street snitches, an informant he had been using for years.

CITING A “medical problem”, Fran stopped by the hospital and arranged for a week’s vacation time to start after her regular week off was over. After that, she drove to a mid-scale apartment complex near the hospital where many of her friends in the medical profession lived. She thought herself fortunate to find a vacant unit on the ground floor and took it, even though it sported two bedrooms rather than one as she had originally intended to rent. She paid the deposit, and headed back toward the motel, intending to catch a nap. Once there, she was given the message David had left for her, stating simply that there were some new developments and that she should call him. She did so, immediately.

When he answered she could hear a cacophony of background noises and then the sound of a door closing.

“Sorry,” David said to her. “This place is a madhouse today.”

“That’s all right,” Francis said. “You said there were some new developments?”

“Yeah. I can’t tell you everything and I don’t want to go over it on the phone in any case. Could you meet me after work?”

“Sure. What time?”

“How about five o’clock. Do you know where Marty’s is?”

“Yes,” Francis said, “but I’ve got a better idea, so long as you still want to be around when I do some packing. Why don’t you pick up some fast food and meet me at my old place. You can tell me while I’m getting my things together.”

“Suits me,” David agreed. “Anything special?”

“Oh, pizza will do if that’s okay with you.”

“I like pizza. Give me the address and I’ll be there.”

Francis gave him instructions, then began to plan on what all she was going to pack. It would take more than one trip, she knew. Maybe David would help. He seemed interesting—and interested in her if she knew the signs. She just hoped that his presence would turn out not to be necessary so far as Gene was concerned. In fact, she hoped Gene wouldn’t show up at all while she was there. Maybe he wouldn’t. Lately he had begun stopping by one of the cop’s bars for drinks after going off duty.

DAVID GOT very little satisfaction from Tim Preston, the lead FBI agent investigating the bank robbery when he called back. Not only was he reticent about whatever facts he had turned up on the case, he implied in a supercilious manner that

Francis' story and the bank teller's excuse for handing over the money were both unbelievable. David hung up after telling the agent he would get back to him if anything else came up, thinking as he did, that it would be a cold day in hell before he told that federal agent anything else other than maybe the time of day.

Jantz Bellingham, the sergeant working with drug problems among teenagers, popped into his office soon afterward, interrupting David's hurried attempt to catch up on his paperwork before leaving the office.

"Hi Bell," David greeted him. "I'm glad you dropped by. I was going to try to catch you before leaving. Have you heard about the Melanie kid, your contact at the school?"

Bellingham looked pained, his big body slumping at the mention of the child.

"Yeah, Neelsby told me about it. Damn, I hate that. She's a nice kid. There's something screwy there, though, that I don't understand."

"Maybe this will help."

David told him about Fran, then mentioned the bank teller.

Bellingham perked back up. He ran his hands through his thick black hair.

"Be damned. What do you think, Dave? Anything to it?"

"It's beginning to look like there might be. The feds don't think so, but fuck them. Anyway, put some feelers out on the street and see what you come up with. If there's anything to it, we're going to have a world of trouble."

"As if we don't have enough already. Okay, I'll get busy. Overtime?"

"You got it. For a couple of days anyhow. Let me know," David said.

If anyone could find out whether a new drug was circulating, Bell could.

BEN PATTED his latest conquest on the rump and told her to get dressed. The young woman, probably not even eighteen, smiled and began gathering her clothing. He watched her bending over, young firm breasts swaying with the movement and thought what a lucky accident it had been when he misread that reaction scheme. Sex whenever he wanted it now, never a rejection. And money. He already had the next batch cooking and no telling how much he would make from that, even after delivering the Mole's consignment. He began getting dressed himself, pausing to explore the girl's body one more time before taking her somewhere and leaving her. She stood compliantly, not even wincing when he squeezed her breasts hard enough to hurt. Not after he told her she liked it.

Ben dropped the woman off on a lonely residential street and drove back toward the new place he had rented to manufacture his drug. He wondered how others were making out with the hits his new dealer had sold from the first batch. Maybe there's

been something in the paper, he thought. It would be fun reading about it if there was. He stopped by a Stop 'N Go and picked up a Chronicle to read while he watched over the apparatus cooking his new batch of stuff, thinking that he was going to have to come up with a catchy name for it. A name that would spread on the streets, like Ecstasy, or Crack. Probably, the street would name it before he could, though.

Once inside the sparsely furnished old warehouse he checked to see that the reaction was proceeding properly then opened up the newspaper and began reading. Seconds later he sat upright with a start, chemical reactions forgotten. Goddamnit to fucking hell! They did remember! There was a picture of him—or a reasonable likeness. Why hadn't he thought to look at a paper before now? There were other stories. The little girl that pederast who had used a hit on. The bank robber. Who else? The first woman he had taken? The others? No, these were the only incidents being covered so far.

After a moment he began to relax. At least he had been smart enough to take all of his victims in the dark. A good lawyer could always do something with that. And again, it wasn't as if the drug was illegal yet. Besides, they had all gone with him willingly and a good lawyer would eat them up on the witness stand if it ever came to that. And other than that first one, he had been perceptive enough, or perhaps just being cautious, but he had taken them to places other than where he was living or working. No problem, he thought. Now that I know.

CHAPTER SEVEN



DAVID STOPPED for pizza, berating himself for not asking Francis what sort of topping she liked. Well, he thought, everyone likes pepperoni. He ordered a double topping of that, plus sausage and green peppers on half of it. He would trust her to have something to drink in the house. He just hoped like hell that Gene Wilson didn't show up while he was there. He didn't care to get into a fight with the big man if he lost his temper. On the other hand, he liked Francis. He sure as hell didn't intend to just stand by if he did show up and began abusing her again.

Francis answered the doorbell with a smile, dressed in fresh jeans and a man's old shirt with the tails tied above her beltline, leaving a couple of inches of bare midriff showing. Her hair was pulled back with a scarf. David thought she looked much younger and fresher than when he had seen her in the office. Apparently, his call about new developments had calmed her down. She also looked more rested, as if she had napped sometime during the day. He held out the pizza.

"I hope you like pepperoni and sausage."

“Sure. Love it. Come on in and I’ll find us something to drink.”

Dave followed her inside, automatically examining the furnishings as if he were trying to get a comprehensive gestalt of a suspect from the way the home was furnished. He liked the way she had done things. The den was decorated with patchwork armchair covers and throw rugs and the miniblinds were disguised under curtains of the same design, though of lighter material. A collection of antique medical apparatus was displayed in a corner hutch and pictures on the wall were both homey and attractive.

“I like the way you’ve done your place,” he remarked.

“Thanks. I wish I could stay here, but...well, never mind. Anyway, I’m going to take most of it with me. It’s mine, not Gene’s.”

She set out paper plates and opened the refrigerator and took out an unopened bottle of Chablis, then fumbled in a drawer for a corkscrew. She handed it to him.

“Here. You can do the honors.”

Dave opened the wine and poured them each a glass. He sniffed the pizza.

“Mmm. That smells good. I just remembered I haven’t eaten today.”

“No one to fix you breakfast?” Francis asked.

“Not for a long while. I’ve been divorced for several years.”

“I’m sorry,” Francis said, picking up a piece of the still hot pizza and capturing a string of melted cheese with her forefinger.

“Don’t be. We were married too young in the first place and she found out pretty quick that she didn’t like having a cop for a husband.” He shrugged and sampled the pizza then took a hurried gulp of wine to bank the pain of hot cheese on his tongue.

Francis laughed, a merry chuckle. “I do that, too. Always try to hurry it and burn my tongue.”

Conversation lagged until they finished eating, then Francis could stand it no longer. “You said there were some new developments.”

“There have been. I can’t go into details, but it’s beginning to look suspiciously like yours isn’t the only case where someone has been induced to do something they wouldn’t have ordinarily even thought of.”

“The bank robbery!” Francis exclaimed. “The bank teller who didn’t know why she handed over the money. Was that it?”

David looked surprised and he was. She had made the connection where the feds were still disbelieving.

“Yes,” he admitted, “along with another case. Oh, hey—I just remembered

another one besides that! An unexplained suicide that might be connected. Damn. I have to admit, I think you're about to make a believer out of me."

"Good. I hope you catch that SOB that raped me. Don't let me near him if you do!"

"I won't, but Fran, that's something you ought to try putting behind you if you can." David thought that she already appeared to be handling it well, at least outwardly.

Francis got up and disposed of their plates. "I can put it behind me, but I'd still like to kill that SOB. I said it was rape, but it wasn't as if I were forced—at least directly. There was no violence and I wasn't hurt other than emotionally. Listen, I need to get busy. Want to help?" She smiled impishly.

"Sure," David said. "Just tell me what to do."

Two hours later, all the boxes Francis had brought were packed into the jeep, leaving no room for the remaining luggage containing her clothing and some other odd items. David offered to put them in his car and Francis agreed to the plan immediately. Just as he was finishing loading the last suitcase, Gene drove up. He got out of his car, an astounded expression of disbelief on his face.

"What in hell are you doing here, O'Neal?" Gene demanded, eyeing him suspiciously, as if he had caught him stowing suitcases full of cocaine in his car.

"I was invited, Wilson. How about you?"

"This is my goddamned house. I'll tell you when you're allowed in here."

"It's my place, too, Gene," Francis said belligerently, "at least for the rest of the month. I paid half the rent, remember?"

Gene glared at each of them then turned and jumped back in his car and drove off, leaving a trail of burned rubber.

"Not very happy, was he?" David said.

"Fuck him," Francis said. "Excuse my language. Let's get out of here before he comes back."

"I'll go for that," David said. "Where are we going?"

"Academy Arms, unit one twelve."

"I know where it is. I'll follow you."

"Thanks, Dave. You've really been a help. I appreciate it."

"Part of the service. Your tax dollars at work."

GENE WAS furious. That fucking sanctimonious O'Neal, already sucking up to Francis! He could hardly bear the thought of it. He thought of hanging back and following them to find out where Francis had moved but thought better of it. Besides, it would be easy to discover her new address. Police officers had their ways. And if that didn't work, he would tail her one evening when she left work. Just to prepare.

He had seen the latest edition of the Chronicle. Another bank robbery, this one an early morning job. The manager had let the robber inside when she opened an hour early and allowed the robber clean the bank out of all the night deposits plus what was in the cash drawers, then made no effort to conceal her crime. Now he did agree with O'Neal. There must be a hypnotic drug on the streets. The problem was obtaining a supply of it for his personal use without breaking any laws—or getting caught, anyway. He glanced at his watch. Maybe some more pressure on his snitch.

DAVID SAW a follow-up article in the paper the next morning. He read it avidly while having his morning coffee. There was something else, too. Another child had been abducted and let loose after being raped. Again, the young girl was reported as being confused as to why she went with the molester. That wrapped it up so far as David was concerned. Whether Bellingham had picked up any information during the night or not, he was convinced.

On the way in, fighting the morning traffic in a light rain, he wondered how many other cases there might have been which hadn't been reported? How many women had been induced to go off with strangers and have sex with them? For that matter, how many unexplained suicides had there been lately? He made mental notes as he drove, intending to write up everything he knew and take it to Captain Bradshaw, the precinct commander, before the day was out.

Jantz Bellingham was waiting to see him when he arrived. David poured another cup of coffee into a Styrofoam cup and invited him into the office. Jantz began talking immediately, waving his arms excitedly.

"You were right, Dave. Goddamn, there is something out there. I got it from three different sources. They're calling it Hypnol. There's not much of it yet, but word has already gotten around. Every slime bag that ever had a jack-off dream wants some for himself. And word is it works like the Devil made it up personally. This is horrible. We've got to do something."

David nodded. "Settle down, Bell. I've already decided to take the matter up with Bradshaw. I'm going to see him just as soon as I've got my notes all written up."

"Do it as soon as you can. This is some bad shit."

"I know. I saw the paper this morning."

"What?"

“Another kid raped. Another bank robbery, a big one this time.”

“Does that mean we have to get the feds involved?”

“Maybe. That’s going to be up to the captain. Go see what else you can dig up while I’m getting my shit together. Check with Marcus and Gene, too, and go over recent suicides with them.”

“Suicides?”

David smiled wryly. “Remember our drowned dealer? There may be others.”

“Shit. I’ll get right on it.” Jantz almost ran from the office as David began writing.

CAPTAIN MATTHEW Bradshaw looked up from the notes David had given him. He had the beginnings of jowls and creases in his forehead, making him look like an aging, oversized professor working on a tough math problem. He shook his head slowly, like a ponderous beast gearing up for a charge.

“Dave, this shit is almost unbelievable. It’s like something out of the fucking X Files.”

“Yeah. And just as dangerous,” David said.

While writing up his notes, more and more thoughts of the power the new drug might have had begun to swamp his imagination, like being the object of flaming, emotion-laden e-mail.

“Always something. Well, I guess we better get everyone together and go over it and try to figure out what we’re up against and what we’re going to do about it. Let’s figure on about three this afternoon. In the meantime, I guess I’m going to have to notify the feds, much as I hate to.” Bradshaw sighed.

David winced. “Do we have to?” He had already begun to think that the less known about Hypnol, the better. Now he began to wonder, for the first time, what federal agencies might do with the knowledge if they gained access to it.

“I know how you feel, but possible kidnapping and certain bank robbery using this fucking drug doesn’t leave me much leeway.”

“I’ve already called the lead agent on that first robbery. He wasn’t interested.”

“He will be now,” Bradshaw predicted. “I’ll call him. Go ‘way now. I have to notify the chief, too.”

David took his leave.

Alone, Captain Bradshaw talked to Tim Preston, the same FBI agent David had spoken to.

“You’re sure?” Preston asked. “I thought your detective was either bullshitting

me or had gone bonkers.”

“We’re sure enough that I’m notifying the chief. By the way, I’m having a meeting with all my detectives this afternoon about three to organize an investigation into this thing. Would you like to be there? Maybe you can fill us in on your bank robbery and what you’ve turned up.”

There was a pregnant pause for a moment before Preston responded. “Okay, Captain. I’ll see you then—or maybe a little earlier if you don’t mind, before the meeting gets started.”

Bradshaw shrugged to himself. “Sure. I’ll put you down for 2:30 this afternoon.”

“Thanks, Captain. See you then.”

Bradshaw hung up. It was duty which had compelled him to relate the department’s suspicions to the FBI, but after talking to Preston, he began wondering what federal agencies might do with the drug should they gain access to the formula. It wouldn’t be all bad. He could imagine it being used in espionage cases, for questioning enemy soldiers, for getting information from known felons, for interrogation of spies. It would be a boon to investigative services anywhere—so long as it wasn’t misused. And deep inside, below the conscious level of his thoughts, other considerations began stirring, like the first tiny bubbles of a simmering pot, a bubble of thought broke loose and rose to the surface. For an instant he experienced a flitting fantasy of himself using the drug on the chief, causing the man to make an idiot of himself in public. He would be fired, of course, leaving a slot for his own promotion to assistant chief. And then...no. He shook free of the thought and picked up the phone.

CHAPTER EIGHT



FRANCIS LOOKED around the new apartment. She brushed a hand across her forehead in order to remove flecks of dust smeared there from the boxes she had unpacked. Everything was stored now and the place was beginning to look more like home. She wished she had her own furniture but most of it had been bought together with Gene. Dividing that up would have to wait. Right now she had done all she could do and wanted a shower to wash away the sweat and dirt from the exertions of moving.

Francis went into the bedroom and undressed. Seconds later she was letting warm water sluice over her body, enjoying the luxury. She shampooed her hair then wrapped it in a towel and stepped out of the shower. She pulled out a fresh pair of jeans, almost new and a bright blue blouse of heavy cotton that she favored when

she didn't feel like wearing a bra. It hugged and molded her breasts as if she had grown a second skin over her upper body. Then she turned her attention to her unruly hair. She barely heard her cellular phone over the humming of the hair dryer and then had to search for it before answering.

It was David O'Neal, the nice detective. She liked him. He was polite and hadn't come on to her while helping her move even though she had been aware that he was more than a little interested. It was nice to meet a man who didn't act like he had just evolved from the Neanderthals when he was around her. She smiled to herself at the mental image.

"Just wanted to let you know that it's virtually certain now that you were taken advantage of," she heard.

"Thanks. And thanks again for your help. That was really nice of you."

"No problem. Look, I've got just a minute, but there's a couple other things I want to bring up."

"Go ahead," Francis said.

"First, there's probably going to be some publicity over the Hypnol—"

"Hypnol?"

"Yeah, that's what they're calling it the on the street. Just in case, I want you to keep your doors locked and I want you to keep an eye out for that character that abused you. Once he finds out that memories aren't repressed very long, he might decide to come back after you."

"Oh. Okay. What's the other thing?"

"Well, I sort of hesitate to ask so soon after you and Gene breaking up, but I don't have anyone to eat dinner with tonight. Would you be interested?"

Francis smiled to herself, picturing David's expectant, hopeful features in her mind. Well, why not? The sooner she started seeing someone else, the sooner the whole scene with Gene could be relegated to the trash bin. And David's open helpfulness and polite consideration of her problem had impressed her. Apparently, all cops were not cut from the same mold as Gene—thank goodness! She pictured the way David's sad countenance could transform itself into a brilliant smile if she assented.

"All right. Pick me up about seven. Or would you rather meet somewhere?"

"I'll pick you up. And thanks. Gotta go now. I'll see you at seven."

Francis looked at herself in the mirror and decided that she was adequately dressed for most places a detective could afford. On second thought, she went back into the bedroom and pulled off her blouse. She donned a bra and a different blouse. No sense rushing things.

DAVID ENVIED the captain's office. It was large, uncluttered and secluded from the noise and bustle of the squad rooms and the coming and goings of police officers. Folding chairs had been moved in and lined the walls. David was one of the last ones to enter the crowded room. He looked around, recognizing all but two persons, including Bobby Jenkins, his friend from the DEA. One of the remaining men must be Tim Preston, the FBI agent, but who was the other one?

Bradshaw saved him from further speculation by introducing Preston, the taller of the two who looked like an overage boy scout. The other was a complete surprise.

"...and this is Mr. Smith, from the National Security Agency. The government has expressed an interest in our proceedings."

Chief Bradshaw looked unhappy. Preston had showed up for his appointment with Smith in tow, flashing his NSC credentials like a professional gambler turning up a full set of aces and had insisted on being present at the meeting.

David's expression reflected that of the other men and the two women in the room. He stared at the small stocky man. He wore wire-rim eyeglasses and looked more like a schoolteacher than a spy. What in hell was the NSC doing here? Then he remembered that the captain was a veteran, a colonel in the active reserves who frequently expressed his disdain for men who had never served. David's first thought was that the captain's faith in the good intentions of government agencies might be very much misplaced. On the other hand, the more likely scenario was that Preston, the FBI agent, had contacted the NSC rather than the captain. At any rate he knew it was too late to protest now. Not so for Gene.

"NSC? What the fuck do spooks have to do with this shit?"

"Calm down, Wilson," Bradshaw said. "Special agent Preston decided that this case had national security concerns and thought that the NSC should at least be aware of what's happening. He's here strictly as an observer. Let's get on with it. Lieutenant O'Neal, come up here and read off your summary."

David got up and edged his way through the seated detectives to one side of the captain's desk, thinking as he went that Smith looked far too interested for a mere "observer." David had little need to refer to his notes. Most of the incidents were already firmly embedded in his memory. He went over the essentials of every case where the drug was thought to have played a part, then summarized what else they knew, including Bellingham's report of street knowledge of the drug. He looked around the room when he finished. Bellingham half-raised his hand.

"Yeah, Bell?"

"Another suicide. One of the Mole's competitors. It seems he decided to walk across the Eastex Freeway during rush hour without bothering to watch for traffic."

"Should we treat that as a homicide?" Gene asked.

David shrugged. "That's up to the captain. Certainly the body should be tested for drugs."

"That's routine in a case like this."

"What do you normally test for?" David asked, raising his brows.

"Oh. Just the common illegal drugs, coke, heroin, pot, crank, that sort of stuff."

"Test for everything," Bradshaw ordered.

Gene made a note while David spoke up.

"Captain Bradshaw, I think we need to have all our victims tested with the idea of looking for unusual substances."

Bobby Jenkins, the DEA agent added, "I think we need to get our hands on a sample of this stuff. I've already put the word out to our street contacts."

"You're right, Bob," David agreed. "I should have done that already. It just seemed so bizarre at first that I didn't think of it."

"We want a sample, too," Smith said.

David had returned to his seat. One of the other detectives stood up.

"How about putting out some publicity on this thing? It might help in catching one or more of the perps—and maybe catch them holding."

"No!"

Startled, David looked around to see who had spoken. It was Smith, though David doubted that was his real name.

Smith removed his glasses and wiped the lenses with his handkerchief then put them back on.

"The government doesn't want any publicity. Why take chances on letting a foreign power get their hands on something like this?"

"The FBI agrees," Preston said from his spot against the wall. David noted that he didn't sound nearly as supercilious as he had the last time he had heard his voice.

"I have to go along with that," Bradshaw said. "Besides, publicity would only create more demand for the stuff. Do we want that?"

David was torn. The chief and the feds had a point, yet publicity might be the best and quickest way to catch the originator of the drug, assuming there was only one. And this brought up a sticky point. Who was he? David got to his feet again.

"Maybe we don't need publicity, maybe we do, though I'm beginning to believe the less said about it the better." He noted the looks of relief on both the federal agents faces then continued. "We do have an Identikit picture of the first perp." He

fished in his briefing papers and held up the sketch Gene had made and Fran had improved.

“Hey, I think I know who that is!”

All eyes turned toward Faye Maurens, one of David’s undercover agents who had been working the street the last year.

“That looks like Ben Worthington!”

“What do you have on him?” The chief asked, beaming. Maybe this thing could be solved quickly.

Faye brushed hair from her forehead and adjusted her glasses. She was dressed in her undercover work clothes, exotic and baggy like so many of the younger druggie set wore.

“Ben is a known crank manufacturer. He’s got a sheet, though not a long one. Charged once with possession with intent to sell but got off on a technicality. He was a top grade chemist once at the U of H before getting booted out for sexual harassment of undergrads. He’s a sleazebag and just might be the one. I wouldn’t put those sexual compulsion cases past him, even the kids.”

Neelsby answered. “Faye, I hate to bust your bubble, but we’ve got a description of the perps for both the kids. Neither matches that one of Worthington, and for that matter, they don’t match each other.”

“Worthington was the first reported case, though, by several days. He could be using it and dealing the stuff at the same time,” David said. “And we don’t know that he’s stopped what he pulled on Francis Stafford. It could be that other incidents have just not have been reported.”

“That’s pretty goddamned thin reasoning,” Gene said disparagingly.

Faye stepped back in quickly. “I’ll go along with Dave. Most women wouldn’t report such a thing; they would be too astounded and ashamed. That’s where some publicity would come in handy. Some of them, if there are others, would be a hell of a lot more likely to come forward if they knew it wasn’t their fault.”

“All that would do is create a demand for the stuff,” Bobby Jenkins said. “And remember, it’s not listed yet as a controlled substance and can’t be until we know the formula.”

David had to agree, especially considering how long it took government bureaucracies to work. And he wasn’t certain he wanted the formula to be known, not to anyone, of any stripe.

Bradshaw slapped the surface of his desk gently, yet loud enough to get everyone’s attention.

“No publicity for now. I want everyone to avoid talking to the media. Not a

word. In the meantime, I'm authorizing overtime for all three departments represented here. I want any user you find pulled in and questioned, and any dealer, too."

"What can we charge them with?" Gene asked. "The drug isn't illegal yet."

"Use your good sense, Wilson. If you pick up one of the pederasts, it's a no-brainer. He'll be guilty of sex with a minor, regardless of whether it was consensual or not. As for adults, charge them with possession of a controlled substance. We can hold them while we're 'analyzing' the junk and that will give us time to lean on them until we have to cut them loose."

Some of the cops made notes, causing the chief to frown. David simply set the information in a file in his mind. He wasn't about to write down anything which might be grounds for a civil liberties lawsuit.

David looked over at Gene, who seemed to be enjoying the discussion, as if he were a student who had cribbed the answers to a quiz before the test was given. David hated to even talk to the man now, knowing what he had done to Fran—there was never an excuse for hitting a woman—but he had to ask. "Gene, how soon can you get a drug analysis back from the suicides; that's your department."

"I'll put a rush order on it," Gene said complacently.

David had to be satisfied with that. He looked over to the chief who was watching the exchange with a benevolent expression on his face.

"Captain, for now I suggest that we put as many people on the street as we can with these pictures and see if we can get an ID on any of them, and in the meantime, set someone to screen reports coming in to all departments, looking for suspicious suicides, homicides, rapes and child molestation. I'll put someone on anything that seems out of the ordinary."

"Sounds good," Bradshaw said. "Let's move on. Oh—I forgot to mention. I'm appointing Lieutenant O'Neal as lead detective for all three departments. All information will go to him and he will see that I get a daily briefing. Now, who has anything else?"

The give and take continued for another hour until David began taking surreptitious peeks at his watch, not wanting to be late for his dinner date with Francis. Finally Bradshaw dismissed all but the FBI, NSC and DEA agents; the detectives trooped out of his office.

"I wonder what in hell the captain is talking to them about?" Bellingham asked David.

"No telling, but you can bet they're all three going to be putting pressure on him to keep everything under wraps, permanently. I'll bet they're even gritching because he let the chief in on it."

"I don't like it," Bellingham said.

"I don't either, Bell, especially that Smith character. It's bad enough that the usual scumbags are getting their hands on this stuff. I can just imagine where the government would go with it."

"Me, too. Not a good thought."

"Yeah. Bell, we need to find this Ben Worthington scumbag. If he's the one making it, maybe we can squelch the formula before it gets out to the general public."

"Yeah, like if we don't, it will be on a thousand Internet sites before we know it."

That was what David feared. In the meantime...

"Bell, I've got somewhere to go. Can you and Faye start trying to run down leads? And put someone on the desk to start screening calls?"

Bellingham raised a brow but didn't comment on David's errand.

"Yeah. Me and Faye will get to work tonight. Don't worry about the desk; I'll make sure it's covered good. See you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Bell. I owe you one."

David hurried downstairs, taking the steps rather than waiting for the elevator. He was inordinately pleased that the rain had stopped and blue sky was visible in the evening sky. It seemed almost like an omen, and brightened his mood considerably. If he hurried, there would be just enough time to shower and change into fresh clothes before driving over to see Fran. It had been a long while since he had experienced such a feeling of expectancy when going to see a woman.

FRANCIS WAS enjoying the dinner with David at a quiet seafood restaurant down in the 1960 Bypass area. She found him to be even more pleasant than she remembered, a good conversationalist with a wry sense of humor. He even liked white Chablis, her favorite dinner drink.

After the meal was finished, David topped their glasses with more of the wine. He raised his glass and tilted it slightly in her direction. "This is the first time I've been here for a while," he said.

"I like it," Francis said. "The shrimp were delicious, but why haven't you been here lately?"

David shrugged, and Francis noticed that tinge of sadness in his features again. It appeared for a moment that he wasn't going to answer but then he did. "Jeanette and I used to come here a lot when we were married. Then we had an argument over dinner one time and it sort of lost its luster for me."

Francis smiled. “And now it’s back?”

“Well—yeah. Maybe. I’m enjoying the company for sure. If it weren’t for that goddamn Hypnol problem I’d be feeling even better. I’m sort of feeling guilty about not being back at the station working on it instead of here with you.”

“You can’t spend all your time at work.”

“Yeah, I know. This is something special, though. Fran—”

“Yes?”

David examined his wine glass as if deciding whether it was a piece of important evidence or not.

“—you’re the only person I know who’s been under the influence of Hypnol. Is it really that bad?” Seeing the smile disappear from her face, he continued quickly, “I don’t mean what happened to you. I can only imagine what that must have been like.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“Was there nothing you could do? You couldn’t fight it?”

Francis shook her head vigorously.

“No. It was almost like being a child again, where anything your parents say is impossible to question and impossible to even consider not obeying them.” She shivered.

David noticed. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have brought the subject up.”

“It’s all right. I just hope you catch the guy before he does the same thing to someone else—or worse.”

“I do, too Fran, but that’s not my only concern. Fran, this isn’t to be repeated, not to anyone, but the federal government is getting involved. Suppose some of the feds decide this drug might be useful? Do you think they would be able to resist using it?”

“I can’t see where that’s any worse than individuals using it on other people. Either way, it’s horrible.”

“And all too tempting,” David said.

“I would never use it on anyone. Never!”

“No?” David touched his cheek. “Suppose Gene managed to get you alone and hit you again. Suppose you had a dose of the stuff on you and managed to spray it in his face. Wouldn’t you be tempted to extract a little revenge? Or the guy that used it on you? What would you do if you had him under control?”

Fran mused a moment, sipping the last of her wine. “I guess I see your point. It

would be tempting, wouldn't it?"

David refilled their glasses with the last of the carafe.

"That's what I'm so worried about. I can imagine all kinds of scenarios where normally law-abiding persons would have a use for it. They would rationalize, of course. Just once. Just to find out if my wife or husband or boyfriend is cheating. Just once, to suggest a rich man give me enough money to get out of debt. He wouldn't miss it and I wouldn't do it again. Just once...See what I mean?"

"All too clearly. But what can you do about it?"

David sighed. "I don't know, other than to try like hell to find the source before it goes any further, which is what I should be out doing now instead of this. Oh hell, let's change the subject. I'm spoiling the evening."

"I'm willing," Francis said, "but it's nice to see that you're so concerned. I see enough trauma caused by drugs in the Emergency Room, let alone what this one can do. It's horrible, especially when I see kids come in all shot up or dying from overdoses. At least you are trying to stop it."

"Without a whole lot of success," David said.

"Don't be a pessimist. Think what it would be like if no one tried."

David grudging a smile. "You're right, although Jeanette always said I was too damned serious and put too much of myself into the job. I'm not sure she isn't right. I don't have much of a social life."

Francis concealed a small inner pleasure by finishing the last of her wine. She had wondered whether he was seeing anyone else but decided not to ask. That question was answered now. Francis went on with little things to encourage him to open up, asking him more about his job, his interests and so forth. Before she said good night, she found herself only a little surprised to be asking him over for dinner for the next week, ostensibly to check out the facilities of her new kitchen. When he dropped her back at her apartment, she started to shake hands with him, then leaned forward instead and gave him a quick kiss on the mouth before going inside.

David lingered in the parking lot before leaving. In his mind he could still feel the softness of her lips and the brush of her breasts against his chest when she had leaned forward to kiss him. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and headed back to the station to check in before calling it a night, even though he had intended to go straight home. The specter of Hypnol pervading the city was beginning to haunt his mind like a persistent, evil ghost.

RIGHT AFTER the meeting in the captain's office, Gene had received a phone call. It was brief and to the point, enigmatic to anyone except himself.

"I got some," the raspy voice said.

Gene recognized the voice as one of his contacts, Boyd Murphy, a street punk who made a living exploiting information and small time dealing.

“How much?” Gene asked.

Murphy quoted a figure.

“That much? Goddamn, is it made out of gold or what?” Gene swore.

“It’s scarce and everyone is wanting some. This shit is fantastic. Just be glad I was able to score at all.”

“All right, I can handle it from the slush fund. How soon?”

“Meet me at the Bare Bottom Club in two hours. You know where it is?”

“I know. See you there.” In fact, Gene frequented the place occasionally though Fran had never known it. He had a sudden thought. What if he induced her to get up on amateur night and strut her stuff? No, better to keep her for himself. One thing, though. He might find another woman to join them some night, once he had her back in his grasp. It was a continuous fantasy of his, but the one time he had mentioned it to Fran she had expressed unalloyed disgust and he had never brought the subject up again. It might be different now, though. He picked his jacket off the coat hanger and left the office.

Gene arrived at the Bare Bottom club early on purpose, parking under the big sign with a picture of a gyrating woman just barely short of exceeding the bounds of the public decency statutes. He went inside and over to the bar where he ordered bourbon over ice then twisted sideways in his chair so he could watch the current show. The dancer on stage was already into the last stage of her number, augmented breasts bobbing with her movements, but in an unnatural manner consistent with implants. Nevertheless, he enjoyed watching and running pictures through his mind of what he could do with her when he had access to the new drug. The images grew even grosser as she doffed her G-string, the last bit of clothing, and bared her genitals to the crowd. In his mind he put Francis on stage with the woman and was just playing with what he would have them do to each other when he felt a nudge. He turned around.

“Enjoying the show?” Murphy asked, grinning lasciviously. He had bad teeth and a scar above his left eye which caused the eyelid to droop in what always looked to Gene like a salacious wink.

“Yeah. That babe has some boobs, doesn’t she?”

“There’s a million others like her,” Murphy said.

“Yeah. You got the stuff?”

Murphy patted the side pocket of the old bomber jacket he wore winter and summer. “Right here. You got the cash.”

Gene nodded. "Let's go outside."

In the parking lot, Gene exchanged money for the drug, all the money from the slush fund he had been able to draw without arousing suspicion. As Murphy turned to go, he caught him by the hem of his jacket. "You're sure you got the right stuff?"

Murphy shrugged off his grasp. "I wouldn't stiff you."

"Who's the dealer?"

"No one I know. A new dude. Sorry."

Gene didn't believe the man but let him go. As soon as he had time, he would run down the main dealer. It would be easy with every detective in three departments sharing information. All he had to do was get there first.

Now for Francis. He had bought enough of the drug for a dozen hits, sufficient according to Murphy's information to keep anyone compliant for several days. That ought to be long enough to get Fran's attitude adjusted. He would put her through so many degrading experiences that even if she remembered later she would be too ashamed to do anything about it. And perhaps she wouldn't anyhow if he emphasized forgetting enough.

BEN PACKAGED the liquid drug among several vials, leaving it up to the Mole how he wanted to conceal it in individual hits. As for himself, he had devised several other methods. One was a miniature squeeze bulb he could conceal in his hand without it being obvious. He didn't trust the Mole, or anyone else. Not now, with his likeness in the newspapers. He had begun wearing shades and was preparing to cut his longish gray hair short and dye it blond or red, just in case. In the meantime, the Mole was due to take delivery of his order.

The Mole showed up as usual with a henchman in tow, standing back and letting his assistant check the contents of the package and exchange the money for it. Ben looked inside his package and saw the bundled bills there, what was supposed to be another \$45,000. It looked right so he didn't bother counting.

"Thanks, Mole," Ben said. "Nice to do business with you."

"Right." The Mole said. "Burley here wants to talk to you for a minute." The Mole left the room and seated himself in his Cadillac, parked outside the motel room where Ben had insisted they meet. He never let himself become involved in violence.

Ben eyed the Mole's henchman cautiously. He thought he knew what he wanted, and his suspicions proved right.

"The boss wants to buy the formula from you, Ben," he said.

"It's not for sale."

"He's offering 250K."

Ben laughed. "Make it 250 Mil and maybe I'll talk to him."

"The boss wants it, dude. Don't worry. He'll cut you in for some of the profits."

"No deal." Ben said, holding the squeeze bulb handy.

"Then I feel sorry for you," Burley said regretfully. He reached inside his coat, but before he could make another move, Ben raised the bulb and squeezed. A fine mist engulfed the area of Burley's face and he breathed in with surprise.

"Leave the gun alone and sit down," Ben ordered. Burley did so, as if it was exactly what he had been intending to do all along. Ben had already planned this scenario. He owned the formula for his fabulous drug and didn't intend to give it up to anyone. Carefully, he gave the Mole's assistant instructions and then quickly wrote out a note in block printing. He handed it to Burley and repeated what he was supposed to do, then left, again by a back way where he had another stolen car concealed. He had already been careful not to leave fingerprints or any other evidence that would show he had ever been here.

Burley walked out to where the Mole was waiting in his car, air conditioning running. He tapped on the driver's window. The Mole rolled it down, wondering what in hell he was doing there instead of simply going around and getting into the car with him.

"Ben said to give you this, Boss," Burley said, handing over the note Ben had written. While the Mole was opening it, Burley pulled out his pistol, stuck the barrel carefully into his mouth and pulled the trigger, just as the Mole was reading the contents of the note:

Lay off or this could happen to you.

The explosion of the heavy handgun startled the Mole almost out of his wits. Unbelievably, he watched Burley crumple to the ground, the top of his head blown open from the exit wound, revealing bits of skull and brain tissue. The Mole took one look and swallowed sickly in order to force the bile rising from his stomach back down. He put the Cadillac in gear and roared away.

Ben watched the departure from concealment with a sense of satisfaction. The Mole shouldn't bother him again, especially after he saw the second note, concealed with the bottles of the drug. It warned him that he had willing shooters primed with the drug, only waiting instructions to make him the next target rather than his henchman. Also, when Boyd Murphy, the new dealer he had decided on, heard about Burley eating his gun it would definitely make him more tractable.

And now for some entertainment. It took a while to think of something really suitable to celebrate his accomplishments so far, something to reflect on the power he now held in his grasp. He laughed as he drove away. Undoubtedly, the Mole, or even the cops, should they get their hands on a sample of Hypnol, would try duplicating the drug, but he had already foreseen that scenario. Beginning with the

batch he had just delivered, he had added an inert ingredient to the already complex compound which would deceive even a very competent chemist, leading any investigators down so many wrong paths that they would never discover the correct formulation, at least not for a long while. And by that time, if it ever came, he intended to be somewhere else, perhaps even out of the country, enjoying power and wealth without end.

CHAPTER NINE



IF TIMOTHY Preston had known anything about Jim Smith's background, he would have been having second thoughts over contacting the National Security Agency. Smith had been assigned to the Houston regional office simply as a cover for some very dirty dealings for his boss. Smith enjoyed that sort of thing.

He had been involved in several operations with the CIA before transferring into the NSC when the CIA began worrying about his potential for exceeding even the loose restraints imposed on him.

The NSC set him up in a small, very secret, very circumspect little department originally designed to thwart biological terrorists. Now Smith answered only to one person back in Washington, who in turn was a man with his own dark agenda, that of controlling and concealing the unsavory background of a rising young senator with aspirations for the white house.

Smith's boss had suborned his department almost totally toward helping the senator and was using Smith to do the dirty work. Smith could only imagine what his boss might do once in possession of some Hypnol, but a few scenarios were obvious. It could be shot into the air-conditioning just before a crucial senate vote. It could be used to terrorize leaders of countries inimical to the United States. Why it could even be given unknowingly to the president and—Smith stopped thinking of all the uses Hypnol could be put to, but he was sure his boss would consider all of them and then some!

As soon as Smith left the meeting called by Captain Bradshaw, he immediately returned to his office and called his superior, making utterly certain that the phone line was scrambled.

"You got good news for me, Jim?" The voice coming over the phone sounded raspy with static but even so, an undertone of dark, confident power came through.

"Yes, sir, but it's not about the present job. This is something even better."

"So tell me."

Smith did. Once convinced of the existence of Hypnol, he had understood immediately what a powerful tool it would be in the right hands—those of himself and his boss. With it, they could almost certainly get the Senator into the White House, and with that, control the country. He explained very carefully about the power of the new drug, knowing that if he could obtain the formula for his boss, and keep it confined to their own little section within the agency, there would be almost no limit to how far they could extend their influence, both personally and politically as the power behind the throne.

Smith answered a number of questions after his discourse, and through the scrambler he could almost feel the rising excitement on the other end of the line. And with the excitement, came his orders.

“Astounding! You’ve done well, Jim. Now you need to stay with it. Forget your previous assignment; it can wait. For now concentrate on finding the person manufacturing the drug. When you do, get the formula for that drug out of him. Use any means necessary. I want him held in your very safest house while you do that. Keep him there while we have the formula tested to be certain we have it right, then I want him to disappear from the face of the earth.”

“How about if there’s more than one person involved?” Smith asked.

“Follow the same procedure. And in the meantime, make every effort to obtain a sample of the drug from other sources.”

“I’m going to need some more help and money.”

“You’ll have both by this time tomorrow. Now get busy.”

“Yes, sir,” Smith said. He deposited the phone in its cradle, determined to do his best to carry out his orders. He didn’t care for terminations, but in this case he felt they were justified. Those dumb HPD cops had no conception of how dangerous the drug could be in the wrong hands, or how helpful in the right ones. Even Preston of the FBI was a dumbass, but thank God he had the sense to contact an agency which could put the drug to good use. In fact, Smith thought it would be best to continue cooperating with the FBI, but he did not intend to share any information he might glean from them.

The problem now was to find the perp before the cops or FBI did and spirit him away to a safe place where they could use his own concoction to drain him dry then dispose of him.

Making sure that he wasn’t being followed, he drove to an already pre-designated meeting point where Jerry and Brandon, his two clandestine assistants, would be waiting, a safe house in the Montrose area of Houston where they were posing as a couple of gay artists, preparatory to the termination of one of the Senator’s boyfriends who had threatened blackmail. Arriving there, he passed on all the information gathered from the meeting with Captain Bradshaw then gave his men new orders.

“Go ahead and give that faggot some money. We’ll take care of him later. Some more of our team will be arriving tomorrow. Throw a party of some sort to disguise the gathering and make sure the agents are told to dress for the part. Use the money coming in with the new agents to fan out over the city and buy any Hypnol you can locate—and to find that fucker Worthington fast. I’ll feed you any leads the Fibs or HPD turn up; the silly fuckers are cooperating with me for now. Remember, this is urgent, priority one. There’s a guaranteed promotion and a long vacation for the first man bringing in a sample of the drug, or Worthington, or both.”

“Finding a sample might be the way to go,” Jerry said. “Easier than collaring the perp, maybe.”

“We still need him. This formula has to be suppressed. Can you imagine some rag heads getting hold of it and using it on embassy personnel—or hell, on VIPS, maybe even the president?”

“What will we do if we get control of it. Destroy the formula?”

“Of course we will,” Smith said, telling a blatant lie. The power of the drug was too enticing to even think about not using it, but there was no need for very many people to know that, including these two men, or any of the others who turned up the goods. Their vacation would be a permanent one, from which they would never return.

BEN HAD HIS contacts, just as the police had theirs. And his contacts had a real incentive. Word of mouth had spread rapidly of the effects of Hypnol, of the control it gave over the actions of anyone inhaling it and the demand was almost unbelievable. He could relate to that. And he intended to put a flea in the cops’ ears to let them know how helpless they were just as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Now wouldn’t that be fun?—and what a re-payment for the times they had made him suffer humiliation?

“YOU CATCH IT,” Gene told his lead detective upon hearing the report of a drive-by shooting. It was getting on toward evening and he had things to do. “Be sure to look for evidence of Hypnol involvement.”

Gene didn’t really care any more; he was simply going through the motions. Right now, so far as he was concerned, the more of the drug on the streets, the better. It would keep the various departments so busy that there was less likelihood of an investigation after he was finished with Fran. The bitch! This was going to be fun, playing with her. He had already used a renegade computer hacker to track down her whereabouts. It hadn’t been hard. Anyone moving to a new place left a trail of evidence behind. Change of address forms, in this case, gleaned from a cooperative postal clerk who had a DWI ticket which needed taking care of.

Gene had even thought of a way to get a hit of Hypnol into Fran's system without her being aware of it. He knew it would work because he had already tried it in the drink he had bought for a stripper at the Bare Bottom club. Sure enough, it worked perfectly, though it did take longer to assimilate than a vapor would have. Anyway, he had taken the exotic dancer home with him and put her through three hours of sex like he had never imagined. And as a part-time hooker, he knew she would never complain even if she suspected she had been drugged, which he doubted she would. She would never imagine a cop doing anything like that even if she had heard of the drug.

Gene knew that Francis favored the Tex-Mex restaurant across the Freeway on Kingwood avenue. He knew one of the waiters there, a small time dealer he had the absolute goods on. He had been saving him for a special occasion and this was the perfect one. He drove over to the restaurant and parked where he could observe but not be seen or recognized easily then went quickly inside, hurrying because the lunch crowd would be arriving soon. He gave the waiter his instructions then went back outside and waited.

Two hours later, Gene decided that Fran wasn't going to show up today. No matter. It wouldn't be long before she did. She never let many days pass without stopping there for lunch.

DAVID SAT in his office with the door open, listening to the familiar and somehow comforting noises from the squad room while he read the day's summary of events which might be connected with the Hypnol drug. There were many of them and most ominous, apparently a new consignment had hit the street. Informants were reluctant to talk for fear of having their hits confiscated—not that any of them had been caught carrying yet. They had already gotten the word that cops were looking for samples. And, there wasn't enough slush fund money to buy information. It took threats of arrest to make the reluctant informers talk and even then, they gave little information other than the fact that the Mole was apparently the source of the new supply.

David read more. Two more incidents of child molestation, by two different perps, neither of them apprehended yet. One report by two women who suspected that they had been drugged. David figured that was just the tip of the iceberg. Most grown women probably wouldn't complain. Several more suspicious robberies. And another suicide. He read that one again, recognizing the name. Burley, an associate of the Mole, had shot himself in the mouth in a motel parking lot.

David picked up the phone and called Gene's number. He wasn't in but he talked to his whip, Murray Planter, a middle aged detective David thought well of.

"Murray, I noticed that the Mole's right hand man ate his gun yesterday. What do you have on it?"

"Nothing, Dave. Cut and dried, apparently. No witnesses."

“Maybe, but I’m putting out a pick up order for the Mole. He’s bound to know something.”

“Hell, Dave, he’ll just deny he was anywhere near there.”

“I know, but I still want to question him.”

“Okay, but I’ll have to check with Gene first. It falls under his jurisdiction.”

“Not if I want to talk to him. Remember, Bradshaw has me down as the lead detective in this whole mess.”

“Yeah, right. Well, if we pick him up, I’ll give you a call. Okay?”

“Fine. Thanks, Murray.”

David glanced at his watch. There wasn’t much else he could do for now and he felt the need to move around for a while. He wondered what progress was being made on the drug screens he had ordered on every suspected victim of Hypnol and decided to drive south and see the head of the drug lab where the tests were conducted. He could have simply called, but Shawn Jones was a close friend. He always enjoyed talking with the eccentric chemist even if it did mean fighting Houston traffic. Anyway, the rain had stopped so it shouldn’t be too bad.

Shawn Jones ran his department the way David wished every department head did. He was always helpful and courteous, even if he did look like something dipped out of one of his bottles. David found Jones seated in his office, feet propped on a shaky pile of professional journals stacked on another chair. He smiled at David with a set of crooked teeth set below a nose which would have done justice to Pinocchio in the worst stages of mendacity.

“Hi Dave. What brings you over this way? Phones not working?”

David shrugged good-naturedly. “Naw, just wanted to get out for awhile. I thought you might have some results from the drug screens.”

Jones frowned and wiped his hands across the front of his lab coat, already spotted with a myriad of unidentified stains.

“I do,” he admitted, “but you’re out of luck.”

“How so?”

“No joy on the standard screen. Then I went back and ran some spectrographic studies. No matches and nothing that looks like it would have an effect on the reasoning portion of the brain. I did turn up some metabolites that I’ve never seen before, but unless we know the original formula, it’s almost impossible to backtrack and get an ID.”

“Metabolites?” David said. The term was vaguely familiar from a college chemistry course.

“Break-down products. Residue excreted in the kidneys. Sometimes still present in blood samples but not this time. Apparently, whatever the stuff is oxidizes pretty rapidly. I’m going to have to have an original sample to get you any real results.”

“Damn,” David cursed, just as his cellular phone vibrated. “Excuse me,” he said, pulling it from his pocket and flipping it open. It was Bellingham, calling from the station. David grinned broadly as he listened, then answered. “Okay, Bell, you did good. Now bring it directly over to Jones’ place, hear? And don’t tell anyone else you scored...What? Because I don’t trust the feds, that’s why. Let them collect their own sample.”

David listened a moment longer and felt his heart sink. It wasn’t Bellingham who had obtained the sample but another detective and he had already begun bragging about the fact.

“Bell, drop everything else and spread the word, especially to that talkative sonofabitch, to keep quiet about it. Better still, tell everyone that you’re not sure it’s the real thing. Maybe the feds won’t hear about it.” He closed the phone and returned it to his pocket.

“Good news?” Jones asked.

“Yeah. We’ve got a sample, finally. It’s on the way over now. How long will it take you to break it down into a formula?”

“Depends on how complex it is. Anywhere from an hour or so to weeks.”

“Do your best, Shawn. This is important. And run the tests yourself if you can. Keep it tight to your vest. I don’t want word getting out that you have a sample of the stuff here.”

“Whatever you say; I’m easy. You want some coffee?”

“Thanks, but I feel like a real drink. This could be our break. Once you get a chemical formula for the stuff we’ll put in an emergency request to illegalize it.”

“That bad, huh?”

“You don’t want to know,” David said, then reconsidered. “Would it help if I told you what some of the effects are?” Previously, he had simply asked for an analysis of any “unusual” substances present in blood or urine.

“Possibly. Besides, I’m curious.”

David told Jones in a few succinct words just what the department was dealing with.

Jones blinked and scratched his nose. “Jeez, Dave. I thought you had just turned up a new designer drug. This stuff could fucking destroy society if gets to be common.”

“That’s what I think, too. I’m even worried about how we can make it illegal

without giving the formula away.”

“I doubt if you can,” Jones said. “In order to prosecute for possession, it would have to be listed as a controlled substance—along with the exact chemical formula. And even if the fucking congress passed a bill getting around that, just the process of debate would let the kitty out of the bag.”

“That’s about how I figure it,” David said gloomily.

As soon as Bellingham showed up with the sample and Jones had signed for it, David gave Bell some time off, telling him to come back that afternoon. He looked like he could use a break, maybe even a whole day or two of sleep. David himself was exuberant. He wanted to celebrate, even if it was only a small victory. On impulse, once in the parking lot, he pulled his phone out and called Fran. She answered on the second ring.

“Hey Fran, this is Dave. I’ve got an hour or so before I have to report back in for the evening. How about a drink?”

“It sounds like you have something to celebrate,” she said. “Do you?”

“A minor victory, but progress of sorts. How about it?”

“Oh, Dave, I’m sorry, I can’t. My mother is coming over to spend the evening. She’s bringing a few things I can use until I feel up to going back to the old place.”

“Oh,” David said, feeling disappointment well up inside him.

Francis heard the despondency in his voice. “Tell you what, Mr. Cop. How about lunch with me tomorrow?”

“Sure, David said,” the discomfort disappearing. “Where and when?”

“Do you know the Tex-Mex on Kingwood Avenue, on the east side of the freeway?”

“Sure. Nice place.”

“Meet me there tomorrow at noon. We’ll get indigestion together. That is, if you like salsa as much as I do.”

“I don’t, but you get it, I’ll sympathize. See you then.”

Feeling better, David stopped for a drink anyway at a little out of the way bar on the way back to Kingwood. It was almost deserted at that time of day. He ordered a draft beer and took it over to a corner booth where he wouldn’t have to talk to the idle bartender. For a long while, he stared into the semi-darkness of the pub, taking occasional sips of his drink, and thought about his conversation with Jones.

Could Hypnol really destroy society if it ever became generally available? No, it wouldn’t destroy society, he finally decided, but it could very well change it, and not for the better. Just look at the havoc crack cocaine and heroin was wracking on the

inner cities—and now the suburbs. All the majesty of the federal government, combined with state and local authorities hadn't even put much of a dent in the availability of those drugs and he couldn't see where Hypnol would be any different, once the cartels got hold of it, as they surely would if the source wasn't found, and found very soon. But would even that do it?

Suppose Worthington walked into this very bar and was handcuffed and arrested? He wouldn't stay locked up long. Hell, he wouldn't stay locked up long even if he were convicted. The jails were full and judges too lenient. And prison time wouldn't help. All the cartels had contacts inside. The formula would get out, regardless. Then—ah hell, then what? The justice system, already strained to near the breaking point, might well collapse under a new wave of crime and violence.

David ordered another beer and while drinking it, wondered what percentage of the population would be tempted to use Hypnol if it were available? Ten percent? Twenty? Forty? The prospects were both daunting and depressing. He began to wonder what, if anything, he could do personally to see that knowledge of the drug was suppressed, now and forever. He found no easy answer—and little time to do anything should he discover one. He pushed his stein away and got up, ignoring the bartender's friendly wave. He was still deep in thought as he drove back north.

David arrived back in Kingwood just in time to see Melvin "The Mole" being escorted up the steps of the precinct building. The Mole didn't look happy.

David parked and almost ran toward the entrance and hurried upstairs. He was glad to see that it was two of his own detectives, Henry Kellogg and Mary Wiggins, who had brought the Mole in. That would give his department the first shot at questioning him. He entered the interrogation room just before the door closed on the two detectives and their captive.

When David entered the room, he saw Melvin the Mole grimace. David had brought him in for questioning once before, with negative results and his lawyer had him back on the streets within hours. He didn't expect much more this time, but there was always that chance, especially after the suicide of his assistant. That was bound to have discomfited him, and David intended to play on the fact.

"I want a lawyer," were the first words Melvin uttered to him.

"Sit down, Melvin," Dave said, gesturing to one of the three chairs crowded around the small table. "You don't need a lawyer yet."

"Says you. I know my rights."

"So do we. Now just relax. How about something to drink?"

The Mole looked puzzled. This wasn't what he had expected.

"Sure, Detective. How about some bourbon?" He laughed, expecting nothing.

"Coming right up," David told him. He kept a bottle of Jim Beam handy for

special occasions. “Mary, how about bringing Mister Segram a drink. Ice or straight?”

“Uh, over ice. Hey, what’s the deal?” The Mole glanced around the room as if expecting another cop to appear with a rubber hose or blackjack in hand to go with the bourbon.

“Just a few questions, Mr. Segram,” David said, being elaborately polite. Mary brought in the two glasses of whiskey. David picked up one and handed the other to the Mole. “Cheers,” he said.

Melvin looked dubious but he drank gratefully, still eyeing David suspiciously.

“All right, Mr. Segram, just in case you’re interested, this conversation isn’t going to be recorded. All right?”

“I’ll bet. I still want a lawyer.”

“Just a few questions, Mr. Segram. I’m sure you know by now that one of your associates, Burley I believe his name was, committed suicide in the parking lot of the Red Coach Inn on Airport Drive yesterday.”

“First I’ve heard of it,” the Mole said, avoiding David’s eyes.

“Please, Melvin. We know you didn’t have anything to do with it. All we’re interested in is the reason.”

“I got nothing to say.”

David took another sip of his drink and continued, “We have reason to believe that Burley was, shall we say, induced to eat his gun. Not a nice way to go is it?”

The Mole took a big gulp of his drink then licked his lips.

“I guess not. What’s that got to do with me?”

David rubbed his chin and looked thoughtful. “Well, just as a talking point, suppose the same, um, circumstances which induced Burley to shoot himself were to apply to you? There does seem to be an epidemic of that sort of thing here lately. Now, without implicating yourself, wouldn’t you like to maybe pass along a little information on the facts surrounding Burley’s suicide? Just what you’ve heard, of course, not anything you saw. You’ve already told us you weren’t there. It might just save you from being caught the same way.”

“Off the record?” The Mole asked. He was scared and looked scared. How could you stop someone with enough Hypnol to suborn half the city from taking you out? Or maybe this cop intended to use a hit on him.

“Completely. Just what you’ve heard. Rumors, so to speak.”

“Well—I heard about this guy dealing that Hypnol, the new drug, you know?”

“We know. Go on.”

“It seems like I heard he may have given Burley a shot of that stuff and told him to off himself.”

“Fine, fine, Mr. Segram. Now, if you could give us anything else you’ve heard which might help us catch that evil man, we would really appreciate it.”

“Can I have another drink?”

“Of course. Mary?”

While the Mole enjoyed his second bourbon on the rocks, he related everything he knew about Ben Worthington, not worrying about being tagged as a snitch nor losing access to a re-supply of Hypnol. Neither the reputation nor the money was worth risking his life—or freedom—if the cops used the drug on him. The sooner the SOB was arrested, the sooner he would feel safe again. He was still having nightmares over the sight of Burley’s brains and pieces of skull flying into the air over his head before he crumpled lifelessly to the pavement. He knew that it could just as well have been him.

When David had gotten everything he thought he could from the drug kingpin, he reached out and shook his hand.

“Mr. Segram, I want to thank you for the information. And I promise you, whatever might happen in the future, I will not use any of what you’ve said today against you. You have my word on that—so long as I never hear of you dealing Hypnol—or using it. Ever. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” the Mole said hastily—and truthfully. From this point on he intended to stick to coke.

The Mole left looking considerably better than he had when arriving. After he was gone, David went searching for Bellingham. He wasn’t in the squad room nor did he answer repeated pages.

An hour later, David began to worry. He wrote up everything the Mole had told him about Worthington and put it out for dissemination. It wasn’t much but it could help. The Hypnol supplier, according to the Mole, was concealing the whereabouts of his manufacturing facilities. He was moving from motel to hotel to old rental houses to abandoned factories every few days. And he was using them in ways that made David sick. Segram’s account of two normal, happy heterosexual women being induced into a public lesbian love show told him just how wild Worthington was becoming now that he had the power to do as he wanted.

It was going to be very difficult to track him down, but he did have the manpower to try. He instructed several detectives to take the Identikit picture around to every motel and hotel in a widening circle from the Kingwood subdivision with a request to call immediately should anyone answering Worthington’s description check in. He alerted all departments to concentrate on stolen cars where the owners

had unaccountably turned them over to a thief. He put word out on the street that substantial money would be paid to any informant who spotted Worthington and could help direct the force to where he might be holed up. Last, he sent a message up to the captain requesting more media publicity to help find Worthington—without revealing the true reason for wanting him. He was sorely disappointed when the request was refused. Media publicity, in its place, could be a valuable help. David suspected that Preston and Smith were behind the refusal, but there was nothing he could do about it.

There was one more chore he took care of. He put out an all points bulletin for all officers, detectives and informants to be on the lookout for Bellingham and Faye. They were still missing.

“HEY, IS THAT him? Goddamn, I think it is!” Bellingham exclaimed quietly as he stopped abruptly in his mission toward some kidney relief. He was staring at a man with short blond hair, wearing dark glasses, nattily dressed, and loitering near the alcove leading to the men’s and women’s restrooms at Poppa’s, a seafood restaurant where he and Faye had stopped to eat. He rubbed his eyes, still bleary from the few hours of sleep he had stolen.

Faye was with him, also wanting a bathroom break. She stopped too and scrutinized the man.

“It could be. The mouth and chin look the same anyway, as well as the hair if you allow for the shorter length and different color.”

“Let’s go,” Bellingham said excitedly. “Goddamn, maybe this is our lucky day.” He started forward again, but Faye tugged on the tail of his jacket.

“Wait, Bell. He has a history of taking women, not men. Let me go first. He’ll be less likely to be suspicious.

Bellingham hesitated, then decided that Faye was right. “Okay, you go first. Wait til he’s alone, then sidle up to him. Be careful, though: don’t let him stick a cigarette in your face.”

“I won’t, you can count on that.” Faye surreptitiously felt for the butt of her short barreled pistol concealed in the curve of her left hip beneath her blazer, then advanced cautiously, but trying to appear careless and nonchalant. She stopped directly in front of the man and smiled her most charming smile.

“Excuse me sir. I need to go inside.”

“Certainly,” the man said agreeably, stepping aside. Faye lost her caution, not seeing the reported cigarette and knowing that Bell was coming up behind her. She barely caught the movement of the man’s arm as he raised it in what she thought was a friendly salute. Too late, she heard the faint hiss as Ben pressed the bulb of the small nebulizer concealed in the palm of his hand, then immediately brought it back

down to his side.

“Stand still,” he said softly. “Don’t say anything.”

Faye stopped her movement and stood quietly. She didn’t want to move at all any more.

Bellingham, from his position, couldn’t tell exactly what was going on. He hadn’t seen a cigarette in the man’s hand and still wasn’t sure this man was their quarry. But Faye had stopped so he moved forward quickly. From the corner of his eye, Ben saw the man approaching, a grim look on his face. From long experience he suddenly suspected that the couple was a pair of cops. So much the better; just what he had wanted anyway—the opportunity just hadn’t presented itself until now. Quickly, he whispered to Faye.

“Introduce me to that man coming up behind you. My name is Harry.”

Faye turned around as Bellingham arrived, alert for the slightest threatening move from the man.

“Bell, I’d like you to meet Harry, a friend of mine. Harry, this is Jantz Bellingham.”

Ben reached out as if to shake hands, causing Bellingham to think he had been mistaken with his identification. Apparently this man was someone Faye knew. He began to raise his own hand from where it had been hovering near his weapon. Too late, he heard the almost noiseless hiss just as he was breathing in to greet Faye’s friend. He felt a coldness on his face then a tightness in his chest, as if he had just sucked in a whiff of vanilla flavoring. He started to draw his weapon but the man’s voice stopped him.

“Stand still and don’t move for a minute.”

As soon as Ben saw that he now had both police officers under control he spoke again. “Both of you come with me. Don’t say anything to anyone and don’t draw your weapons. I’m a friend and you want to do everything I tell you to. Don’t you?”

Both of the detectives agreed readily. Ben led them out into the parking lot, still talking softly to them.

CHAPTER TEN



BEN WAS SAILING on a stratospheric high, feeling like a god come to earth. It was as if his imagined fantasy had come true by a preordained event, dictated by

forces so favorable toward him that right now it seemed as if anything was possible. He had intended to humiliate the cops, especially some detectives in drug enforcement and here two of them had fallen into his hand like birds from a nest. It had been almost too easy. And to make it even better, they were male and female, giving him even more room to show them that he was light years beyond them in intelligence.

They were in a motel room, sporting double beds, both king sized. He had them sitting side by side, ready to obey his every command. He noticed the wedding rings they were both wearing.

“You’re both married, is that right?” He asked.

“Yes,” they both agreed.

“But not to each other are you?”

“No.”

“Have either of you ever committed adultery?”

“No,” both of them answered.

“But you’d like to, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, we sure would.” Bellingham and Faye answered in unison.

“Good. Why don’t you stand up and undress each other?”

The two detectives got to their feet and began removing each other’s clothing while Ben watched, enjoying every minute of it. He leered as Bellingham unbuttoned Faye’s blouse and peeled it from her shoulders. Faye took off Bell’s shirt then he reached behind her and unhooked her bra. He drew it forward, releasing her breasts from the cups and let the garment fall to the floor. Faye worked with Bell’s belt buckle, got it unfastened and pulled his zipper down. His pants fell to the floor and he stepped out of them. He fumbled for the fastening of Faye’s skirt, showing the usual male clumsiness, but finally found the combination. It fell to the floor and joined his trousers.

“You’re having fun, aren’t you?” Ben asked.

“Oh, yes,” Faye answered, fingers exploring the bulge in Bell’s shorts.

“You know it,” Bell said. He fondled Faye’s breasts then put his hands on her hips and snaked her panties down until they were loose enough to fall of their own accord.

Ben felt his own erection growing. He stepped closer to the two detectives. “Why don’t you two get on the bed?” He kneaded Faye’s bare breasts until her nipples became erect.

“Now you can give him a blow job. Be sure to swallow it all.”

“I will,” Faye said, as if she had been asked to sample delicious appearing canapes at a party.

Ben watched the proceedings, then unable to wait, took Faye from behind. It was only the start of a long afternoon. He put them through every degrading experience he could think of until he was so thoroughly satiated that he began to lose interest. Then he started to ponder on what to do with them. He considered just disposing of them now that he knew that even when ordered to forget their experiences, the memories would shortly return—along with the knowledge of his new appearance. That could be changed, though, and he wasn’t intending to appear in public much from now on, not until he was ready to leave the area. Besides, Godlike as he felt, he was still a little fearful of causing the death of a police officer. Even if a lawyer might get him out of it, he didn’t want to be arrested. The cops might just arrange for an “accident” to happen to him while in custody.

Finally Ben thought of a really exemplary way to end the day. He was adept now at judging when the Hypnol was beginning to lose its effectiveness. He waited until he judged the time was right, then gave them another small hit, just enough to keep them in a state of willing compliance until shortly after he dropped them off. He had Bellingham and Faye go with him in another commandeered car and drove them to within a block of the Kingwood precinct station. There he gave them final instructions, told them to get out, and drove away.

He was as ecstatic as the new owner of a winning lottery ticket. He chortled gleefully to himself over thoughts of the scene which must be taking place back where he had dropped the detectives off. That would show them. But it would raise their hackles like stirring up a hive of bees. Every cop in Kingwood would be after him now. He decided that it was about time to move on, out of this area, perhaps even out of the country. First, though, he wanted to pull off a couple more jobs. The way he intended spending money, it would be provident to accumulate a little more of it. Just in case he decided to skip the country. One more big batch ought to take care of all his needs.

A few minutes later he stopped at a mall, waited for someone, man or woman, to approach their car. A quick spray and he appropriated the man’s car keys and drove away, back to the latest rental house where he intended on cooking up one more batch of Hypnol, this time almost exclusively for his own use.

JIM SMITH WAS having less luck than the police in obtaining a sample of Hypnol. He had no real contacts with the criminal element in Houston, nor had any of the agents he had brought into the area for that purpose. It was frustrating in the extreme, but when he dropped back by the station late that evening to check in with Captain Bradshaw, he felt a sudden flush of optimism. Despite David’s injunction to Bellingham to silence talk about obtaining a possible sample of Hypnol; Smith sensed the new aura of optimism among the cops as he stopped in the squad room to catch up on events. Questioning the desk sergeant proved fruitless but he knew

from surreptitious glances thrown his way that something had gone down and was being kept from him. Angrily, he turned on his heel and walked back to the elevators and punched the fifth floor for Captain Bradshaw's office suite.

The captain had already decided that both Smith and Preston were entitled to the information—eventually. They were, after all, working with the police. He just hadn't seen any need to hurry. And privately, he had called Shawn Jones and told him not to use up the complete sample with his tests. In the back of his mind was a vague yearning to obtain a supply of the drug, to be used only by the police, only in exceptional circumstances—with the use authorized at the rank of Captain or above.

When his secretary let Smith into his office, he saw by the angry scowl on Smith's face that he must have gained information about the drug sample somehow. He fidgeted with a paperweight as Smith leaned over his desk, both hands spread flat on the polished surface.

"Why didn't you let me know immediately?" Smith snapped, as if he knew exactly what the cops were concealing from him.

Bradshaw was completely taken in. "I was going to, after I was certain that we really had a sample and not just a plant or a fake. You know there's lots of small time fly-by-night dealers who sell what the buyer thinks is real stuff, then it turns out to be just lactose and rock salt or such."

"Well, when are you doing to find out? And why didn't you let us handle it? I told you this is a national security matter."

Bradshaw was scared of the feds. The government provided funding for police departments and could withdraw it as easily as it was given. He knew that if he was held responsible for such an occurrence, he could forget about further advancement—and perhaps his job. Nevertheless he didn't want to turn loose of the sample. He glared at Smith then dropped his glance back to the paperweight he was turning over and over in his hands.

"Our drug lab is analyzing it right now. I'll let you know as soon as we get the results back."

As soon as Smith heard this, he left quickly without bothering to chastise Captain Bradshaw for not letting him know. In the long run it really wouldn't matter.

SHAWN JONES WAS busy and puzzled. The results he was getting from spectrographic analysis of the sample David had given him were making no sense. He couldn't find any part of the compound with a projecting molecule suitable for attaching to that part of the brain which controlled volition and emotion. It was as if a spaghetti maze of irrelevant radicals and complex conglomerations of nonsense molecules were concealing the true nature of the compound. He knew that it would take a long time to solve the puzzle, but he felt confident that if he kept at it, he could

crack the secret, though he was already beginning to admire the ingenuity of the chemist responsible for producing, then disguising the formula of the drug—if that was what he really had. He was making notes in his lab journal, mapping out the next steps he intended to take when Smith gave a cursory knock, then came through the door to his office without invitation.

Smith looked over the untidy office, books and papers and computer printouts scattered everywhere, then eyed the equally untidy and unimpressive scientist. His immediate reaction was that this would be a laydown.

“Mr. Jones?” Smith asked, even though he knew what the man’s name was by now.

“That’s Doctor Jones, if you please. And I don’t appreciate persons unknown bursting into my office without invitation while I’m busy.”

“This is an emergency, Doctor Jones. A national emergency.” Smith pulled out his NSC identification and presented it like an American Express card with unlimited credit.

Jones laughed. “There’s nothing here that’s such an emergency. I don’t know a single spy, not even a little one. And I doubt if your name is Smith, either.”

“This may be more important than a case of spying, Doctor Jones, or what my name is,” Smith said somberly, as if the fate of the free world was resting on his shoulders.

Jones was singularly unimpressed. He leaned back in his old leather office chair, being careful not to tilt to one side where the springs were weak. “All right, Mr. Smith, if that’s what your name is. Convince me.”

Smith put the ID back into his breast pocket, being careful to let the shabbily dressed scientist catch sight of his weapon. “Mr.—ah—Dr. Jones, it has come to my attention that you are in possession of a sample of a new drug which may have profound implications on national security. On behalf of the government, I must confiscate it so that when analyzed, it can be properly used.” There. That should impress him.

Jones raised his brows in disdain.

“Confiscate, you said? Under what statute, Mr. Smith? Under whose authority? Go get a court order if you want it that bad. That’s the only way you will remove it from here.”

Smith was nonplused. This unimpressive hick scientist wasn’t such an easy touch after all. What now? He thought of what his superior would think if he got this close and failed to take possession of a sample of the fabulous new drug. Suppose this hick raised hell with the police—or the media? Well, there were means of dealing with those problems. He couldn’t just walk away from here, not when the sample was so close.

“Doctor Jones, I’m sorry, but you must give up that sample before it gets into the wrong hands. I will have a federal attorney come by later to explain the legal aspects to you, but right now you must hand it over.” He pulled back the lapel of his jacket and placed his hand on the butt of his handgun.

Jones appeared to think for a moment then came to an apparent decision.

“All right, Mr. Smith, you’ve made your point. I’ll expect your attorney to be back no later than tomorrow, though. Is that understood?”

“Certainly, Doctor. Now, the sample please.”

“Come with me,” Jones said. He led the NSC agent back into the lab area. He opened the door of one of several refrigerators, hunted inside, then pulled out a small vial of clear liquid.

“This is it,” he said, handing over the tiny sealed bottle.

Smith took the vial from Jones. He looked at the label. It read “Hypnol” with a series of numbers and letters below.

“What are the numbers for?” He asked.

“Identification. That’s how we log in samples.”

“Show me,” Smith said. He didn’t trust the scientist, not after he had been so reluctant to cooperate.

“Certainly,” Jones said. He opened his logbook and showed the agent where the sample had been logged in. The numbers there matched those on the vial. Satisfied, Smith dropped the vial into his pocket.

“Doctor, as I said before, this is a national security matter. You are not to disclose any conversation which went on here, nor are you to even mention the fact that I was here. Is that clear?”

“Certainly, officer. But what am I going to tell the police when I can’t run the analysis they asked me for?”

“Tell them it got lost. You do lose samples sometimes, don’t you.”

“Occasionally, yes.”

“Good. That’s what you just did. Remember, no word of our meeting.”

“I’ll remember,” Jones said.

As soon as the agent was out the door, Jones went back to the same refrigerator. He took another vial of clear liquid from a row of similar appearing bottles from an inside shelf. It was labeled “Blood Typing Serum, Anti-A.” He withdrew a small aliquot of the liquid and began setting up his test apparatus. David had told him to be careful and he had. The mislabeled sample he had given the NSC agent was a

mixture of several drugs which he knew would combine in solution to produce a nonsense compound, one which would keep anyone attempting to analyze it in the dark for a long, long time.

“National Security matter, my ass,” he said to himself as he introduced a tiny drop of the fluid into a test chamber.

SMITH DIDN'T entirely trust Jones, nor did he trust the cops now. He didn't entirely trust anyone, that being the type of personality which had drawn him into espionage work in the first place. And if that wasn't enough, he had orders from his superior in Washington. After driving back to his office and conferring with several of his agents by phone, he drove back to the drug lab and parked his old Celeste in an unobtrusive spot. It was a long wait before Jones finally left, turning out the lights behind him. As soon as the taillights of Jones's pickup faded from sight, he hurried around to a back entrance and placed an electronic device against the door. He watched the dial. It indicated an interior alarm system. He replaced that device with another and set it on a frequency which would nullify the alarm system. After that, he quickly picked the lock and stepped inside, using a penlight to make his way to Jones's office. He used his picks again to enter it and working quickly, dismantled the phone and inserted a tiny bugging device, already programmed to route conversations back to his office. He checked to be certain that he had left no trace of his presence, then recovered the gadget at the back entrance and walked away, satisfied.

During the night, several belligerent drunks, more than the usual quota, were brought into the Kingwood precinct all at once, accused of causing public disturbances. They seemed to become even more agitated once inside the squad room, cursing and fighting with the officers as if they cared not a whit that additional charges might be lodged against them. During the process the drunks, all agents working for Smith, managed to plant several bugs. There was no chance of getting them into the phones, but they were so tiny and innocuous that it was easy to scatter them around in obtrusive places where, even if found, they would be taken for stray bits of rice dropped from the Chinese take-out many of the cops favored. The next morning at their arraignment, the assistant DA unaccountably dropped the charges against them. Smith got a report of their activities that same morning after using his NSC authority on the District Attorney. They had all lost sleep but he was well pleased with the night's work. He allowed the agents to rest a bit before sending them back out on the streets, still searching for someone, anyone, who might possess a supply of the drug or know where Worthington was hanging out.

THE NOISY sound of unintelligible voices, raised higher than normal and sounding as if a whole gang of miscreants had been apprehended and were being booked interrupted David while he was trying to get the latest data from his detectives into the computer. When the sounds didn't die down but only grew

louder, he got up from his chair and opened the door of his office, intending to tell the detectives to hold it down. He was just in time to see Bellingham and Faye being hustled into an unused room. He stopped in his tracks, astounded at the sight. Both of them appeared to be naked, except for jackets tied hastily around their waists, and in Faye's case also covering her upper body. Faye appeared to be crying. What in hell?

"What the hell was that all about?" David demanded, grabbing the arm of Gary Wainwright, a young detective just up from the ranks that had been brought in from another precinct to supplement his own force.

"Damnedest thing you ever saw. They caught Bell and Faye fucking on the sidewalk not a block from the station, right in front of a bus stop with a dozen people watching. Shit, they must have gone out of their fucking minds." Wainwright grinned like an idiot watching cartoons.

David knew almost immediately what must have happened. Somehow, somehow, someone with a hit of Hypnol had caught the two detectives. There was no other explanation possible. He ran quickly toward the closed door and pushed it open. The young detective followed him inside, not wanting to miss anything.

Faye sat huddled in a chair with her head in her hands. Her body was shaking and she was sobbing like a little lost child. Bellingham stood upright. He appeared befuddled, as if he were staring at a movie which didn't make sense. Other detectives were standing around, doing nothing constructive that David could see. He took command immediately.

"Everyone out, now! Wainwright, go get the master key and open both their lockers. Bring them some clothes. And send Mary in here to stay with Faye."

"Lou, there's a whole gang of reporters downstairs. They're climbing the walls," Wainwright said, as he left.

"Let them wait. Tell them I'll be out in a while with a statement. In the meantime, on your way to the locker room, tell everyone to spread the word: no comment on this. No comment whatsoever. I'll have the balls of anyone who says a damn thing!" David was furious.

"Got it," Wainwright said. He left, almost running.

David turned back to his two detectives, trying to calm his raging emotions. Faye was still crying, but Bellingham appeared to be coming out of it.

"Bell, what happened?"

Bellingham shook his head, trying to gather his thoughts. The residual effects of the drug, not yet completely out of his system, made it easy to answer, especially since Ben hadn't bothered telling him to forget anything.

"That fucker Worthington. I'm gonna kill him. I swear, I'll kill him and make like

he was resisting arrest.”

“Not if I get to him first,” Faye said through her sobs. “Dave, he made us—he made us—” She couldn’t go on. The memories were too awful, too degrading.

“You don’t have to tell me the details,” David said gently.

Bellingham abruptly sat down. He suddenly looked haggard.

“My God, what can I tell June? She’ll divorce me over this.”

David thought rapidly. “Were either of you recognized by anyone not on the force?”

Both detectives shook their heads. “I don’t know,” each said.

David considered his options.

“Never mind. Even if you were, I’ll deny that it was you. If the reporters ask who it was I’ll tell them that it was just a couple of kids high on drugs and that we can’t give out their names because they’re underage. That ought to stop most speculation. You know the sharks—if they can’t get personal details, the story will die out in a day or so, just as soon as they find another scandal to write about.”

Wainright knocked on the door, then slid through with an armful of clothing, followed by Mary Wiggins. Mary took Faye into the minuscule bathroom to get dressed while Bellingham began pulling on his clothes in front of David. As soon as they were dressed, David led them back to his office, ignoring the inquisitive, and in some cases, prurient glances thrown their way.

Over the next hour, he drew all the details from them that he could, then sent them both off for medical exams and blood testing. No telling what that scumbag Worthington might be carrying.

He felt especially sorry for Faye. He knew that if her husband ever found out that she had participated in the public display of runting he would never feel the same about her. And as for the other, private acts the chemist had put them through—well, he didn’t even want to know. The only good thing he could think of coming out of the detectives’ capture and degradation was that they now had a new description of Worthington, quite different from the picture they had been using. That would mean more work, getting it out on the streets and to hotels and motels. However, David now thought there might be a better chance of running him down. He was becoming bolder, more of a megalomaniac, as he continued to use his drug on unsuspecting men and women. Like most criminals he thought he was invulnerable, smarter than the cops. And, David knew, some criminals, including the chemist, really were brilliant individuals. What they always forgot, though, was that however smart they might be, the sheer number of investigators which could be concentrated on an individual manhunt was enough in most cases to overcome their intelligence. He was sure that it was just a matter of time until they caught the man. What he would do then, he was not yet certain.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



MELVIN THE Mole was flying. Ever since being released by the detective, he had been holed up at home snorting lines of coke as if there was no tomorrow, ignoring his business and forgetting to pay his subordinates. Through the euphoria, grandiose plans formed and dissipated, like tendrils of fog and just as fragile. Fuck Hypnol. He didn't need it. And the detective wasn't going to hold him responsible for his previous involvement. Stick to cocaine, that was the ticket. He gave orders to that effect to his subordinates, unaware that one of his new lieutenants, seeing the Mole almost visibly deteriorating, was passing information on to Juan "Silky" Sanchez, a new drug lord on the scene, connected to one of the biggest of the Mexican cartels.

The Mole never noticed when one by one his lieutenants drifted away, leaving him alone in his spacious home, located in one of the forested cul-de-sacs of the upscale Woodlands area. He was irritated when repeated rings of the doorbell interrupted him as he was laying out a new line of coke. Cursing, he dropped the razor blade into the powdery dust and went to the door, vowing that if it was a salesman or someone looking for a new supply of drugs he would send them on their way, by force if necessary. Right now he didn't want to be bothered.

The Mole jerked open the front door and the curse he had intended to voice died in his throat. Two suited men stood in front of him, both of them with pistols in their hands. He was pushed backwards and the men stepped inside, closing the door behind them. Even through the fog of cocaine, the Mole knew immediately why they were there. Before either of them said a word, he began pleading for his life.

DAVID WAS VERY late getting away from the station that evening. After dealing with the reporters, he had conferred with Captain Bradshaw, detailing what had happened and again asking for permission to go public with the search for Worthington. Again, the captain had refused his request—and in a way, he had to agree. Splashing Worthington's picture in newspapers and on TV again would alert not only reporters but more sinister forces—which might then find him first. So far, it appeared that Worthington was the only one manufacturing Hypnol, which in turn limited the amount of the drug hitting the streets. Sooner or later, though, someone would use a purchased hit for analysis rather than pleasure. The Mole was neutralized, but there were plenty of other big men with the cartels, almost all of them untouchable for lack of evidence. One or more of them would almost inevitably see the potential, both for profit and for their own use and try to get the information to manufacture it themselves. And that didn't even take into account the foreign cartels, some so huge that they supported their own research labs. He knew that the time

frame for containing the spread of Hypnol was running out as rapidly as a Gulf wind dying in the summer heat.

The next morning he was even later getting in to the station. He had hit the snooze button one time too many and overslept. He rubbed his bleary eyes and quickly showered and shaved then fought the height of the rush hour traffic on the way in. Sometimes he wished he had never taken the promotion to lieutenant. The money was nice, but he really preferred his previous job of whip that Bellingham now held—if he was still capable of working after yesterday's experience. To his surprise, he found both Bellingham and Faye in the squad room, writing out reports on what had happened to them.

Bellingham looked up as David passed his alcove on the way to his office. David motioned for Bellingham and Faye to come with him. When they were both seated he scrutinized their expressions, looking for residual effects of either the drug or of their horrible experience. To his satisfaction, he could see no evidence of either, other than a tendency for them to avoid each other's gaze.

"I didn't expect to see you two here this morning," he said.

Bellingham shrugged. "The doc gave us a clean bill of health, other than insisting on an appointment with the police psychologist."

"I told him to do that," David admitted, "although he probably would have anyway. I had to give him a few details of the drug's effects to get him to release you, though."

"Thanks," Bellingham said. "But I wish you hadn't had to do that. Now there's one more person who knows about it."

"There are plenty of others," David said.

Faye gazed directly at him. "David, one more is one too many. You would have to have that shit blown in your face to really understand. It was like—like I was acting perfectly normal. Everything that bastard told me to do, I did, without the least question." She shuddered. "Just think of those poor little girls. I'm a grown woman; I think I can handle what happened but they haven't the experience. They'll be scarred for life."

"She's right, boss," Bellingham agreed. "We're going to have a crime wave like you wouldn't believe if we don't stop this shit. And not just from your normal scumbags, either. There are all kinds of usually law-abiding citizens who will be tempted to try this stuff. It's uncanny how easily it works."

"Well, we're doing all we can. The new description of Worthington should help, and the captain gave me some more men. He was really pissed when he heard how you two got caught."

"That's another thing," Bellingham said. "We need to disseminate that information. Let everyone out hunting him know what he can do to you if he gets the

slightest chance. Don't ever let his hands get near your face."

"I'll get the word out. Are you two ready to go back to work?"

Faye hesitated. "Could we maybe work with different partners? This whole thing is—" She couldn't go on.

David understood what she meant, but he saw deeper than Faye did. "Sure, I can separate you if you like, but is that what you really want? Anyone else I put you with is bound to ask questions, or if they don't, they'll be thinking of them and remembering what you went through."

Bellingham said, "He's right, Faye. Better we stay together until it's blown over. I can stand it if you can."

Faye thought for a moment, then nodded. "All right. Just don't talk about it. Okay?"

"No problem. I don't even want to think about it."

David dismissed the detectives, grateful that no photographer had caught them on film, otherwise there would have been no way he could still use them in the investigation. After that, he called Bobby Jenkins in; he was there for a morning briefing strictly for the DEA.

Jenkins looked worried—and tired. He seated himself across from David and spoke of his fears. "Dave, I've got two items for you this morning."

"Let me get us some coffee first. I'm not really awake yet and you look like you could use some, too."

"I'm about coffeed out, but what the hell. Bring me another."

David poured for them both from his own pot. He didn't care for the overly strong stuff made in the squad room. "Okay, shoot," he said when he was seated again.

Jenkins sipped at the hot brew, then took a longer swallow, appreciating the fact that David had added a half jigger of bourbon to it. From the look of Jenkins' haggard face, David figured he needed it.

"Okay, first no one has been able to make a buy. All the hits from the last batch that went out have apparently already been used up."

David glanced at one of his baskets, the one containing reports of crimes with a possible Hypnol connection.

"You don't have to tell me." He pointed to the stack of reports. "We've got a couple more suspicious suicides, several child molestations, one of them resulting in a homicide. We've got an increase in family violence, probably from wives or husbands using it on each other where one of them suspected the other of extra-marital affairs. We've got robberies where money was handed over for no

good reason. We've got—"

Jenkins held up both hand. "Spare me. I can imagine. That was the good news."

"Shit. If that's the good news I don't know if I want to hear the bad part."

"You'll hear it anyway before the day is out. News is out on the street that another big supply of Hypnol will be available in about three or four days, a week at the most. A big supply. If we don't catch it before it gets out, there's going to be very little chance of preventing the cartels getting a share of it and duplicating the formula. Once that happens, there's no going back."

David's heart sank. This was far worse than the still festering cocaine epidemic which began in the eighties, or the burgeoning use of heroin now. Once the cartels began supplying Hypnol there would be no way to stop it, even after it was declared an illegal drug. And its use would throw the justice system into a turmoil. How could prosecutors ever prove a crime against persons when they would appear to have done their deeds willingly? Even if they remembered being shot in the face with a hit, it would only be one person's word against another. And there were other possibilities. So far the delivery system had been confined to a spray. Suppose it also worked when added to a drink? There would be no evidence at all in that case. He made a note to ask Jones what the stuff tasted like—if he could get a volunteer to sample it.

"I notice you're not saying much," Jenkins commented.

David's brow had been wrinkled in a frown. He was going over what Jenkins had just told him. He glanced at the full basket of crime reports and made a silent, personal decision. It wouldn't do to let anyone else know about it, though. Not even Bobby, a good friend and one of the few feds he really respected. David forced a shrug.

"Not much to say is there? All we can do is keep trying to track that bastard down and hope to hell we catch him before he has another batch ready."

"I'll request some more help," Bobby said.

"Thanks. We need every man we can hitting the streets."

David's phone rang. He picked it up and listened for a moment then hung up. Seeing the look on David's face, Jenkins raised his brows in question.

"That was homicide," David said. "The Mole didn't last long after we let him go."

"Dead?"

"Yeah. His body was found in the San Jacinto river this morning. Shot once in the back of the head."

Jenkins shrugged. "I've been expecting that for some time. Word was, he

couldn't leave his own product alone."

"I won't miss him," David said, returning the shrug. "But suppose he talked about Worthington before he was killed?"

"Ah, shit. Yeah, that's probably what happened. Now we'll have another gang after Worthington—and we won't even know who."

David glanced at his watch. Almost time to meet Fran for lunch at the Tex-Mex. He talked with the DEA agent for a few more minutes, then Jenkins left and David shuffled papers for another hour. After that he started back out to the squad room to notify the desk he was leaving for lunch. His phone rang before he got to the door. He hesitated, then went back to answer it.

"Narcotics. This is Detective O'Neal."

"Dave, this is Shawn, over at the lab. I need to see you. Now!"

David looked at his watch again. Damn. "Can it wait an hour or two?"

"I think you better come on over."

David knew Jones wouldn't make such a request unless there was real urgency to it. He would have to go. He shrugged into his jacket, picked up his mobile phone and dropped it into a pocket and headed towards downtown Houston. Fortunately, the drug lab wasn't all the way in. If he hurried maybe he wouldn't be too late for the lunch with Fran. And if he was, he could always call. She was bound to be carrying her mobile phone.

JONES CLOSED THE office door behind himself and David so that none of the technicians or scientists passing by could overhear the conversation.

"I had a strange visit yesterday," Jones said without preliminary.

"From whom?"

"Would you believe the NSC?"

"Shit. I'll bet his name was Smith, wasn't it?"

Jones smiled. "Right. I wonder how many of those characters are named Smith?"

David laughed. "About ninety percent probably. Unless they go by Jones."

"Please. Don't disparage my good name. Anyway, he confiscated the sample of Hypnol you gave me."

"What!" David felt a furious anger boiling up inside him.

Jones didn't look concerned at all. "Yup. Said it was a national emergency. What could I do?"

“You could have called me!”

“Maybe I should have. Anyway, he’s got the sample now. C’mere and I’ll show you where he signed for it.” Jones got up and nonchalantly led the way to the lab area, followed by David, who was seriously contemplating chemicide.

Jones pointed to the signature on the logbook. “See? Smith, plain as you please.”

“You shouldn’t have given it to him, Shawn. Whatever possessed you?”

“A dislike of federal agents throwing their weight around. It’s a good thing I’m a sneaky sonofabitch. It just so happens that I gave him a compound that is guaranteed to drive them out of their fucking minds when they try to analyze it. The real sample is still here. It’s labeled as blood typing serum.”

David felt a weight lifting from him, “Shawn, remind me to buy you a new microscope when this is all over with. You did good.”

“I heard that. It just so happens that my request for a new one was turned down in the budget I just submitted.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get you one if I have to steal it. In the meantime, do me a favor.”

“If I can.”

“Just hold on to your sample. Better yet, let me have it back.”

Jones looked at David curiously. “What’s the problem? I thought you wanted a formula for this stuff.”

“The problem is the formula itself. I know you could keep it a secret, but what good would that do? And if some of the higher ups, like the chief or the DEA, for example, decide to submit it for listing as an illegal substance, the secret will get out, regardless. There’s one more thing: I don’t trust Smith not to come calling again. I want to get it out of your possession for the time being. What you don’t have, you can’t hand over.”

Reluctantly, Jones agreed. “All right, you’ve made your point, but what am I supposed to say when the captain calls and asks how the analysis is coming along?”

“All I can tell you to do for now is to stall. If anyone asks, just say it’s a very complex problem and you’re still working on it.”

Jones raised a cynical eyebrow. “And what are you going to be doing in the meantime?”

David eyed his friend. He started to say something then decided to keep his vaguely forming plan to himself.

“The same thing I’ve been doing. We know the name of the perp we think is manufacturing the stuff now. All we need to do is catch him and that might be the

end of it.”

Jones rubbed his prodigious nose. “From what you’ve told me about the drug, I can see where your reasoning comes from. But what if you’ve got it wrong? Or there’s more than one of the bastards making it? Or suppose he sells the formula? Won’t you just be delaying the listing of it as a controlled substance?”

“Yeah, there’s that. If it goes down that way, I’ll have a hell of a lot to answer for—all the scumbags who use it on other people that we won’t be able to prosecute.”

Jones shrugged. “Just wanted to be sure you knew what you were doing.” He got up and went over to a small refrigerator and took out a half-full vial, mislabeled Anti-A typing serum. He handed it to David.

“Thanks Shawn. I’ll take good care of it. And if that Smith character comes back, insist on calling me. If I’m not handy, try your attorney. Don’t let him lean on you.”

“I won’t,” Jones said.

ONE OF SMITH’S agents monitoring the bugged conversation from the drug lab played it back for him. “What do you think that guy called O’Neal for?” He asked.

“I don’t know, but I think we better go talk to that Jones character again. I’ll send Brandon tonight and catch him after he leaves work.”

The other agent gave an unmirthful chuckle. “Brandon, huh? I feel sorry for that dude.”

“He should have been up front with me,” Smith said. “I warned him.”

GENE SAT IN his unmarked patrol car at the edge of the Tex-Mex, just as he had done before, waiting at the far end of the parking lot behind tinted windows but with a clear view of the entrance to the restaurant. His heart thudded with excitement when he saw Fran’s jeep pull into the parking lot. He looked at his watch to make certain of the time. He wanted to be sure that the Hypnol the waiter would place in her drink had time to work before he approached her.

He waited impatiently while the time passed then finally got out of his car and walked toward the entrance. Inside, he scanned the dining room until he spotted Fran. Good. She was in a corner booth and a rousing Mexican song was playing loud enough that they shouldn’t be overheard. He noticed that she was talking to someone on her mobile phone but as he approached, she closed it up and put it back in her purse.

Before Francis was hardly aware of Gene’s presence, he was sliding into the

booth opposite her.

Francis felt an anger well up inside at the sight of him, along with apprehension over his sudden appearance. Gene looked too well pleased with himself for anything good to come from his presence.

“Go away,” she said. “I don’t want to see you.”

“Yes, you do,” Gene said, smiling pleasantly. “Don’t you?”

Francis’ mood changed abruptly. Suddenly it seemed as if Gene was the very person she had been waiting for rather than David.

“Yes, I guess I do want to see you, Gene. What do you want?”

“I want you to come with me, Fran. Right now.”

“All right,” Francis said.

“Good. We’re going back home and talk for a while. You’d like that wouldn’t you?”

“Sure,” Francis agreed. Talking with Gene was a good idea. She wanted to do it.

Gene dropped some money beside the margarita Francis had been drinking, pleased to note that the glass was almost empty. She must have gotten a full hit by now. He led her outside and over to her Jeep. “Be sure and follow me, Fran. Remember, we’re going back home to talk, just like you want to do.”

“I’ll be right behind you,” Francis said, getting into her vehicle then waiting until Gene pulled out of his parking place. She put the Jeep into gear and followed him.

DAVID WAS feeling fine as he pulled into the Tex-Mex parking lot, even though he was late. Fran hadn’t seemed to mind when he called and told her he was going to be delayed. Now there was a woman who understood that police business often played havoc with timetables. He felt his heartbeat quickening at the thought of seeing her again. With a youthful stride, he entered the restaurant.

A few minutes later he was aggravated to find that Fran was nowhere in sight. He took a table and waited fifteen minutes while toying with a beer before his impatience got the better of him. He approached one of the waitresses he knew and asked if she had been there, giving as exact a description as possible.

“Oh, you must mean Fran Wilson. She comes here real often. In fact she was here earlier but she’s gone now.” The waitress got a puzzled look on her face. “Do you know she left without even ordering? I guess that guy who came to pick her up was in a hurry to get somewhere.”

“A man picked her up?” David asked, a tinge of apprehension beginning to appear in his voice.

“Oh, it wasn’t like that. She acted like she knew the guy. He must have some bucks. He left a twenty dollar bill for just one drink.”

“What did he look like?”

The waitress smiled. “A hunk. Big, blond and good looking. What’s the matter? Is someone beating your time, Dave?”

“Uh, no, that sounds like a friend of mine,” David said. He turned and left abruptly. Now he was worried. This didn’t sound like Fran at all. As soon as he got back to his car, he dialed her mobile phone number. He let it ring for a long time without an answer while he sat and waited. Finally giving up, he drove off, wondering what to do next. As he took the ramp back onto the freeway, David suddenly decided that it wouldn’t hurt to do some checking. But where to go first? If she were in trouble, he might not have time to go to both her old home and her new apartment. He solved that problem by picking up the receiver of the radiophone and directing the nearest patrol car to check Fran’s apartment while he drove back toward where Francis and Gene had lived.

A patrol car was fortunately near the Academy Arms apartments. Within a few minutes David got a report back from there. No one was home, or if there was, they weren’t answering the doorbell. David drove faster, really worried now, but hoping it had been some personal emergency that Fran would explain when he found her. She would understand his concern, he hoped. But who was the man? Big, blond? A hollow feeling suddenly burgeoned in the pit of his stomach. Gene? The description sounded like him, but he couldn’t imagine any circumstances which would induce Fran to go off with him. Unless...a fearful certainty gripped him like a vise closing over his body. He stepped on the accelerator and speeded up.

CHAPTER TWELVE

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GENE LED Francis inside and closed the door. He didn’t bother locking it; she wasn’t going anywhere for a while, not so long as he still had a supply of Hypnol. He told Fran to wait in the den while he went to the bar and made himself a drink. Cupping it in his hand, he returned to the den and sat down in his favorite chair. When Fran started to sit down too, he stopped her.

“No, Fran. You just stand there where you are. I want to look at you.”

Fran complied, standing easily with one hip slightly higher than the other, showing no concern at all over the mean, eager stare of anticipation on Gene’s face.

Gene took a slow sip from his drink, feeling the bite of the liquor enhance the tingling sense of power and knowledge that he was in utter control over the woman

standing in front of him. Time to show her what a real man was like. Time to make her do things he had fantasized about but never dared mention, not after that one refusal when he suggested a threesome. He wished now that he had brought another woman home with him, but that could come later. He had plenty more hits available. Right now he didn't want to wait.

"Take your clothes off, Fran," he ordered, smiling.

Gene watched as Francis disrobed. There was no denying that she had a fine body. Too bad he had been scared to ask her to use it the way he wanted to. Until now. He leered avidly as she unhooked her bra and let it fall to the floor, leaving her firm round breasts bare. Her pink nipples were partially erect, enticing as sweet icing on a cupcake, ready to be licked and savored and bitten.

She began sliding out of her jeans. Gene licked his lips and touched his erection as she stepped out of first one leg then the other of her jeans. He got to his feet, intending to lead her to the bedroom.

DAVID WAS startled to see Fran's jeep parked in the driveway of the house, even though he had been half-expecting to find it there. He couldn't understand why she had come back here where she might run across Gene after she had been so emphatic about not wanting to see him again. Then he noticed the car parked beside her vehicle, obviously an unmarked patrol car. Gene must be here with her. Was it some business between the two of them that they had agreed to discuss? He didn't think so. Fran wasn't the type to break an engagement without calling, and she had been most emphatic about never wanting to see Gene again, even to the point of requesting protection when she packed and moved. Was Gene the man she had left the restaurant with? It seemed likely. He didn't like this, not at all. He got out of his car and rang the doorbell.

"Stay right where you are. Don't say anything," Gene told Fran, who was standing with her hands inside the elastic of her panties, preparing to remove them as Gene had suggested. The new order presented a quandary. She hesitated then decided to leave her briefs on until Gene told her what to do next.

Gene held himself quiet while the doorbell rang again and yet again. Cautiously, he brought out one of the hits he had bought, which was concealed inside a cigarette as most of them were.

David rang for the fourth time. No answer. What could be happening inside? If Gene hurt her again—he didn't like to think what he might do. He touched the doorknob, knowing that Gene could make trouble for him if he entered his home without invitation but he decided that it didn't matter. He had to see what was happening, one way or another. He twisted the doorknob and was surprised to feel the door move; he had expected it to be locked. Slowly, he pushed it open.

Gene saw the door begin to open and hurried toward it, leaving Fran standing,

almost naked but still waiting. The door swung open just as he arrived in front of it. David O'Neal, looking grim, stood in front of him.

"Get the hell out of here O'Neal. I didn't ask you to come here and you're not welcome."

"Where's Fran?" David asked, not moving.

"None of your damn business, O'Neal," Gene said, moving to try to block David's view of the inside.

David made a quick half step to the side and spotted Fran, standing as if posing for a nude photographer. He gasped. What in hell could she be thinking of?

"Get out of here O'Neal, or your ass is grass. You're trespassing!"

David ignored him. He couldn't understand why Fran hadn't said anything nor reacted at all to his presence. And her nudity was even more disconcerting. Then he saw the blank look in her eyes, as if she were staring into some foggy dimension not visible to normal senses. A chill ran over body, raising goose bumps. He called out, "Fran! What are you doing here? Is anything wrong?"

Francis, under the influence of the drug, tried to answer both questions. "Yes. Gene told me to come with him."

Gene reacted quickly. "Fran! You came here willingly, didn't you?"

"Yes, Gene," Francis said. Her mind was clear but she was slightly confused by being given orders from two different persons.

David knew something was wrong and he was almost certain what it was. He avoided Gene's hands which were trying to thrust him outside and called, "Fran! Did he drug you to get you here?"

"I think so," Fran said. Now it made sense to her. She wouldn't have been here with Gene otherwise.

"Goddamn you," David said vehemently, shoving Gene away. "You gave her a hit of Hypnol, didn't you, you bastard!"

The only thing which saved David was the memory of Bellingham telling of how he and Faye had been caught and his subsequent memo to all his detectives to watch out for objects concealed in a suspect's hand.

Gene fully intended to shoot a dose of Hypnol into David's face and worry about the consequences later, but David was too quick for him, closing both his hands around Gene's hand which he was bringing up toward his face. He squeezed desperately to keep Gene from working his thumb and fingers, knowing from the glimpse of a cigarette in his hand that it must contain a hit of Hypnol. It was a hard struggle. Gene was a far bigger man than he was and he had one hand free. He used it to punch David in the belly while he tried to twist his other hand loose enough to

give David a dose of the drug.

David was slammed back against door, hitting his head painfully. He felt his grip on Gene's hand begin to loosen and knew he couldn't hold on much longer. He barely avoided a knee to the groin then took another punch to the ribs. It hurt and left him half breathless. He knew he was losing the struggle. In desperation he yelled, "Fran! Help me!" Then he held his breath as Gene finally wrested his hand loose and pressed the concealed plunger inside the now battered cigarette.

David managed to bat Gene's hand away just in time to avoid getting a dose of the drug in his face. He held his breath with the desperation of a drowning man. Gene, paying no attention to David's yell for help, swung his other hand, now balled into a fist. It connected to David's chin, knocking him backwards and again slamming the back of his head against the door. Gene raised the cigarette and this time David didn't have the strength to resist. He was dizzy from the battering and lack of oxygen and felt his legs beginning to weaken.

Gene never saw the vase which came crashing down on his head, shattering thick glass shards over the carpet. David leaned against the wall and watched him crumple to the floor. Fran hadn't been gentle with the blow. She had taken David's cry for help literally and done the first thing that came to mind. David stared at her, amazed that all the excitement didn't even have her breathing hard. She held the neck of the vase in her hand loosely at her side and waited for David to tell her what to do next.

David had trouble concentrating. Even through his fuzziness, he couldn't help but admire Fran's body. She was beautiful, standing there serene and seemingly unconcerned. So that was the way the drug affected a person. She must simply be in a hyper-suggestive mode, waiting to be told what to do next. It would be amazing if it weren't so horrible. He took a step or two in her direction, away from the Hypnol fumes and finally dared to breathe again.

"Fran—"

Fran waited.

"Fran, he did drug you, didn't he?"

"Yes, I think so." She seemed to puzzle over her answer then continued. "I don't think I would have come here with him otherwise. Nor gotten undressed." She looked down at her breasts, as if just noticing that she was wearing nothing to cover them.

"Go get some clothes on, then come back out here," David told her. "I'm going to call for some help."

As soon as Francis was out of sight in the bedroom, he bent and picked up the partially depleted hit of Hypnol. If Gene had one hit on him it was likely that he had others around. David didn't intend to give him another chance to use them. He stuck the syringe with the tatters of cigarette still attached to it under Gene's nose and

pressed the plunger. Grimly, he watched as Gene breathed in the vapor. It seemed to have a recuperative effect on him. He began moving, then sat up.

“Don’t move and don’t fight anymore,” David said to him. “Understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” Gene said.

“Where’s the rest of your Hypnol?”

“In the bedroom in the jewelry box.”

“Good. I’m going to destroy the damn stuff. Now stretch out on the floor and don’t move until I tell you to.” Only half-trusting the effects of the drug, David kept watching over his shoulder as he went and knocked on the bedroom door.

“Fran?”

“Yes?” Fran’s voice came from inside.

“Are you dressed?”

“Almost. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“I can’t wait,” David said. “Can I come in?”

“Of course.”

David opened the door to find Francis just tucking her blouse into her jeans. He went over to her and took her by the shoulders. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Francis said, as unconcerned as if she had been asked what day of the week it was. David realized that she was still under the influence of the drug and would follow any suggestion she was given. He decided that the help he had requested didn’t need to talk to her. She might reveal more than he wanted her to.

“Get your purse and go out to your car. Wait there for me and don’t talk to anyone, no matter what. Understand?”

“Yes David. I understand.”

David felt his heart go out to her. Right now she wasn’t thinking normally, but later he knew that she would be outraged. He had arrived just in time to prevent her body from being violated, a woman’s worst nightmare. He intended to stay with her until the drug wore off, however long that might be. In the meantime, he quickly rummaged in the jewelry box and confiscated more than a dozen hits of Hypnol, most of them concealed in cigarettes, a few in loose syringes, and a vial of clear liquid which he assumed was also a supply of the drug. He tucked them all into various pockets and went back to where Gene was still stretched out on the carpet.

“Just stay where you are,” he said, reinforcing his previous order. Gene had gotten only a partial hit of the drug and he wasn’t certain how long it would last nor how effective it was, though it seemed to be working fine so far. No wonder there

was such a demand for the stuff. It gave an ordinary person the power of a masterful hypnotist with no effort at all.

A patrol car pulled up and parked at the curb. David waved at them through the open door to catch their attention before they had a chance to see why a woman was sitting in the Jeep in the driveway.

David produced his identification as soon as the two officers walked up to him. He pointed to Gene.

“This guy is a police lieutenant. I’m charging him with battery, attempted rape and assault. Take his piece and handcuff him. I’ll call the precinct and press charges and come in later to sign the papers.” He looked down. “Gene, you go quietly, but don’t say anything to anyone until you have a lawyer. Understand?”

“Sure, Dave,” Gene said.

David wasn’t sure he could make the charges stick without producing the Hypnol as evidence but he was less worried about Gene than he was of letting a supply of the drug float around the station, even after being logged in as evidence. Seeing the efficacy of Hypnol in action affected him more powerfully than reading or hearing about it ever could have and he didn’t intend letting anyone else, not even his own compatriots, have it in their possession. The drug was just too tempting, as Gene had just proven in a way that still had him boiling inside so badly that he had trouble concealing his emotional turmoil from the uniformed officers.

The suggestion that he had given Gene not to speak until he saw a lawyer might hamper his case, but it would keep Gene silent about the drug until the effects wore off, and then he certainly wouldn’t talk. That would take care of this situation and keep his plans intact, now no longer in the back of his mind like a shaded image but taking on color and form and beginning to harden into a determined resolve.

After the officers had led Gene away, David went over to where Fran was waiting in her Jeep. “Fran?”

“David, I—I—”

Good. She was coming out of it. “Fran, can you drive?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Fine. Follow me.”

David kept her jeep in sight through the rear view mirror as he drove slowly toward his own apartment. He knew that Gene would probably be turned loose before too long and he didn’t want to leave Fran vulnerable to another attack. He hoped he could convince her to stay with him until the danger was over.

Francis parked two spaces over from him, the nearest one open. She was out of the Jeep before he could get his seat belt unbuckled and was running toward him. Quickly he got out of the car, just in time to catch her in a fierce embrace. She threw

her arms around him and hugged him so tightly that it hurt his ribs where he had taken Gene's punches.

"Oh, God, David, please don't let that man near me again. He was going to—to—"

"Shh. It's all right now." David patted her shoulders and let her cry a moment before leading her inside.

Francis looked around through tear-stained eyes. "Where are we?"

"At my place. Is that all right with you?"

"Oh God, yes. I don't want to be alone, not ever while Gene is alive. David you just don't know. If you hadn't come when you did—"

"He won't bother you again. I've got all his supply of the drug."

"Throw it away! No one should have access to that stuff, not even you! It's horrible what it can make you do!"

David grinned wryly. "I almost found out myself. Thanks to you, I didn't."

"Oh. I remember. I hit him with a vase, didn't I?"

"You sure did."

"I wish I had killed him!"

"Well, he would have deserved it if you had. Why don't you sit down and I'll get you something to drink. Any preferences?"

"Anything strong. God, I feel shaky now. What if—"

"Stop it, Fran. It didn't happen. And it never will again if I have anything to do with it."

David poured brandy for each of them and brought it back into the living. He sat beside her on the couch and lit cigarettes for both of them. Francis sipped the brandy gratefully while he called the precinct and talked to Captain Bradshaw, explaining what had happened.

"Did you confiscate any more of the drug from him?"

"Sorry," David lied without even thinking about it. "There wasn't any that I could find. Whatever he used on Fran must have been all he had."

He listened while Bradshaw told him he was sending a team to search Gene's place anyway, just as soon as he could get a warrant, and before Gene's lawyer could stop him. David was thankful he had taken Gene's supply. He was beginning to get somewhat paranoid over the possibility of anyone in authority gaining access to samples of the drug. He promised to come in to the station within a couple of hours and see what charges they could make stick against Gene then hung up the

phone and turned to Francis.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“About not finding any more of the drug? Yes. What—”

“I’m not going to trust anyone with that stuff. In fact, I don’t even trust myself. If anyone ever asks, you didn’t see me take it.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“Watch,” David said. He emptied his pockets of the drug then wrapped them all in bundles of newspapers. Fran followed him out the back door to the patio and watched as he placed the confiscated Hypnol into the barbecue grill and set fire to the bundle. She then waited with him while it burned. Unconsciously he put his arm around her and drew her back a ways from the fire, just as a precaution against breathing the vapors. When only ashes remained, he stirred them into oblivion and led Francis back inside. As he walked, he felt the vial of Hypnol, which he had not included in the fire, rub against his thigh through his pocket. He didn’t intend to tell even Fran that he was still holding a portion of the drug. He might need it when the time came.

“Now you know what I think of that stuff,” he said, though he felt guilty telling her that while concealing the vial of Hypnol in his pocket.

Francis picked up the snifter of brandy she had left on the table. She finished it off and sighed. “I feel better now.”

“Me, too,” David said. “And you didn’t see me do that, okay? By the way, how did Gene manage to get close enough to you to spray a hit in your face?”

“He didn’t,” Francis said.

“What!”

“He didn’t. He must have gotten it into my drink somehow while I was waiting for you, otherwise I would never have gone with him when he told me to.”

“Shit. Now I feel worse than ever. If it can be concealed in a drink, it’s more dangerous than we thought. You didn’t notice anything? A different taste to your drink or anything like that?”

Francis shook her head. “Nothing. All I had was a margarita and it tasted perfectly normal.”

David despaired. Now he really did have to crack the case, and soon, or there would be a crime wave of the likes not seen since the blackout in New York City years ago, though this time he knew it would be more insidious and personalized rather than gross rioting and theft. He decided that it was time to get moving, just as soon as he finished his brandy, but before he had taken more than a couple more sips, his phone rang.

It was Wainright, whom he had left holding the desk. “Lieutenant, the captain wants you back here. Forthwith.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



I HAVE TO go,” David said.

“Can I come with you?” Francis asked, looking at him like a little girl requesting permission to accompany her mother on a shopping trip, fearful of being left alone in an empty house with less than desirable neighbors on each side. Her eyes were haunted.

“I want you to,” David said. “You may have to make a statement. In fact, you probably will, at least verbally.”

“No forms to fill out in triplicate?” Fran asked, a hint of a smile appearing on her face for the first time since David had brought her home.

“We’re trying to keep knowledge of this fucking drug under wraps if we can,” David said. “Excuse my language, but that’s how I feel about it.”

“You’re not by yourself,” Francis said. “Give me a minute.” She disappeared into the bathroom.

Francis noticed while she was freshening up that there were few signs in the bathroom that David was keeping company with any other woman. It made her feel better, and she found herself hoping that it was true. Every time she looked at his sad, concerned face she felt a new tug of attraction toward him. He reminded her of some of the oncology specialists she had worked with, still conscientious and patient-concerned and intensely dedicated even after years of the emotional grind of treating patients with little hope of recovery.

David drove back to the station, talking to Fran on the way. “You realize, don’t you, that I’m suborning false testimony if anyone asks you about Gene’s supply of Hypnol?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell. I won’t ever tell. I want that junk off the street as much as you do.”

“Great. Let’s just hope we can manage it.”

David escorted Francis into the squad room under curious stares from the detectives present. He spotted Mary Wiggins and called her over.

“Mary, this lady has had a bad experience. Take her to a room that’s not being

used and stay with her until I get back. Okay?"

"Sure. Come along, dear. My name is Mary. What's yours?"

David headed for the elevator and the captain's office. There he found another captain keeping Bradshaw company, one he recognized as an internal affairs officer. He raised his brows but didn't speak until Bradshaw did.

"Lieutenant O'Neal, you had Lieutenant Wilson booked and charged with assault and attempted rape. He's denying the charges and has filed counter charges against you of trespassing and battery. What in hell is going on?"

David realized that the captain was speaking to him like that for the benefit of both himself and the IA officer listening.

"Sir, I need to talk to you privately," David said to Bradshaw. The internal affairs officer's face clouded up at that.

"You need to talk to me first," the IA captain said.

"Not until I talk to my own captain," David insisted.

Bradshaw leaned toward the internal affairs officer and whispered something to him. Abruptly, he got up and walked out.

"All right, quickly now," Bradshaw said, relaxing once that they were alone.

David went over the circumstances again, stressing the fact that internal affairs had no reason to be included in the widening circle of those with knowledge of Hypnol.

"That's well and good, David, but you may be in serious trouble without that fact being made known. Gene has already been released—and I couldn't get a warrant in time to toss his place."

"I'll worry about that later," David said. "Besides, I have the lady he assaulted with me. She'll give us a statement. That ought to count for something."

"Hmm. All right, we'll get a recorded statement from her, nothing on paper, and hold it for the time being. But the only way to keep IA out of this mess is for you to drop your charges. You do that and I'll get Gene to drop his."

"You mean you're going to let that SOB get away with using Hypnol for an attempted rape? Not to mention that he did his damndest to shoot me with a dose too."

"Let's get this case solved, then I'll take care of Mr. Wilson. His efficiency rating is going to be pretty sad looking the next quarter and I do believe he's due for a transfer to the Montrose precinct. I hear there's an opening there in the auto theft division. There are a few other things I can do, like recommending that he see the police psychologist, but for now, leave it be and concentrate on finding Worthington before that scumbag hits the street with another load of shit."

David relented, knowing that what the captain suggested was the best to be made of a bad situation, though he did think Bradshaw was treating the whole episode rather cavalierly. He just hoped that Gene wouldn't come gunning for either himself or Fran—or both. The man was definitely unstable and getting worse.

Back downstairs, he and Mary got Francis' statement on tape. He locked it in his wall safe where he had previously stored the vial of Hypnol taken from Jones, then had Francis stay with him until he was ready to leave. There was nothing else he really had to do here. Every person he could spare was out on the streets, running down tips on Worthington's whereabouts. So far, none of them had panned out.

"Where would you like to go?" David asked as they stepped outside into the sultry gulf humidity and heat, back in force now after the rain.

"I don't know," Francis said, clutching his arm. "I'm afraid."

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Of course."

"I have a spare bedroom and a security system that's guaranteed by Mr. Yale personally. King Kong himself couldn't get into my place without permission. You can stay there when I can't be with you and I'll guarantee you'll be safe, so long as you don't open the door to anyone but me."

"That sounds good," Francis said, feeling an enormous sense of release. "Except—well, what if someone gets to you with a dose of Hypnol, like Gene did with me? How would I know?"

David thought for a moment.

"We'll dream up a code. If I don't say a certain phrase when I come home, say like 'Bunny Rabbits Hate Easter' or something like that, keep the chain on the door and don't let me in."

Francis laughed. "I like that. Bunny rabbits! Can we go by my apartment first and let me pick up a few things? Your bathroom is sadly lacking in amenities for females, strange as it seems for a single young detective."

"I keep my women locked up in jail until I need them," David said. Francis stuck out her tongue at him and they both laughed. Francis began to wonder what it would be like staying with David for the time being. She decided that she liked the idea. She wanted to get to know him better, though she was beginning to wonder how much more police business she was going to get mixed up in. She would have felt even better had she known that David was thinking the same thing. He definitely wanted more of her company.

BRANDON WAS one of Smith's special operatives. He was of a size big enough to intimidate a sumo wrestler and looked on wet work, or anything close to

it, somewhat like Willie Sutton eyeing an unguarded bank. He waited outside the drug lab until he spotted Jones leaving. There was no mistaking him; Smith's description was right on. There couldn't possibly be two individuals who looked that weird.

He followed Jones's old pickup north on the Eastex freeway beyond the city limits of Houston. They traveled all the way to the little town of Porter before Jones turned off. He then allowed the distance between their vehicles to widen while he trailed Jones into a run-down neighborhood consisting mostly of mobile homes, ten or twenty years old by the look at them.

Brandon waited until Jones had parked and gone inside one of the old mobile homes, then sauntered up to the steps. Perfect. It was sitting off by itself, away from any others, as if the weird-looking scientist liked to be alone. He walked up the steps, reached inside his coat and drew his PK Walther, then stepped back slightly, raised one massive leg and kicked the door in.

Jones jerked upright in startled surprise from where he had just settled back into his recliner as the monstrous man with a handgun burst inside and kicked the door closed behind him. It wobbled back on broken hinges but held, just barely.

"What in hell do you want," Jones said bravely though he already knew he was in deep trouble. He got up from his chair, feeling his body beginning to tremble.

Brandon didn't believe in subtlety. He stepped forward and slapped Jones with the barrel of the Walther, knocking him to the floor and opening a gash on his cheek which began to bleed copiously. "I want your hick ass to shut up until I ask you a question, and then I want an answer with no bullshit. You got it, Jack?"

Jones stumbled back upright, holding his hand to his numbed cheek, feeling blood flow between his fingers and begin dripping to the floor.

"Goddamn you, you didn't have to do that!" He yelled.

Brandon grinned and hit him again. "Shut up until I ask you a question," he said.

Jones held his other cheek and remained silent. Pain began throbbing in his head like the first onslaught of a monstrous hangover. His guts wrenched with nausea from the pain.

"That's better. Now you little prick, tell me what you called that detective, O'Neal, about yesterday."

"I didn't—"

That was as far as Jones got. Brandon lashed out with a size thirteen shoe and cracked one of Jones' ribs, knocking him to the floor.

"You fucking hick. Don't you think we haven't had a bug on your phone for days? What did you talk about?"

Jones hesitated, trying to think of some way to avoid answering honestly without being hit or kicked again.

“Come on, or I’ll rip your fingernails off and stuff them up that goddamn radish you call a nose,” Brandon said. He kicked Jones again, cracking another rib.

It went on for several hours. Brandon was forced to stuff a towel in Jones’ mouth to prevent him from screaming except when he removed it long enough to let him gasp out answers. Jones tried hard but every man has a breaking point and Brandon was an expert. Before Brandon was finished he knew that the scientist had given them a false specimen in place of the real one, which he had labeled as Anti-A typing serum. Had Brandon been just a little smarter and a little more patient he might have found out that Jones had turned the real sample over to David. Brandon didn’t ask, though, and Jones died with the knowledge.

When he was sure that his victim was dead, Brandon rummaged through his belongings, taking everything of possible value in order to make the killing look like a robbery. There wasn’t much. Jones had been a frugal man with few needs other than an absorption in his work. Shortly after midnight he eased himself outside and departed, leaving a bloody mess behind. He headed back to the drug lab to search for the drug sample. It would be easy. All he had to do was simply gather up every vial or bottle labeled Anti-A and let the agency chemists sort out which was the real sample.

“WHAT ARE you bringing those for?” David asked as Francis stuffed the patchwork armchair covers into a bag.

“Because your place looks as sterile as a hospital room, that’s why. If I didn’t know better I’d think a woman had never set foot in the place.”

“I make them walk on their hands,” David said, then added, “No one else has ever complained—not that there have been many.”

“Then you haven’t shown it to anyone in daylight, smarty. All right, I guess this will do it for now. Damn, I hate moving and that’s all I’ve been doing for the last week.”

“Yeah, I feel the same way,” David agreed. “When my wife left, I gave her all the furniture, just to keep from having to move it. This is all rented stuff.”

“If her taste was anything like yours, you were well rid of it. Can you think of anything I’ve missed that I might need?”

David rubbed his chin, thinking of a possible scenario, though he didn’t know exactly how it might play, whether it would eventually be necessary, or even if it was the right thing to do. He had no business mixing Fran up in police business even if the idea proved expedient. On the other hand, she already was involved, to a certain extent. Just in case, he decided. Besides, Fran probably wouldn’t mind dressing up

a little and it might help take her mind off of the terrible encounters with Worthington and Gene.

“How about bringing along a real sexy outfit or two?” He said, feeling a red color crawling up his face and neck.

Francis raised her body upright from where she had been in the act of closing a suitcase. The request from the mild-mannered detective seemed out of character. She eyed him with just a hint of wariness.

“You don’t think I’m sexy enough the way I’m dressed now?”

David avoided her gaze and blushed even more. “I just thought we might want to go out somewhere if we get the time.”

He must be thinking of taking me out and helping me forget Gene and Ben, Francis thought, misinterpreting at least part of the request. He wants me to dress up and go somewhere with him and make me laugh again and think of something else. She smiled at David, appreciating his concern—and desire. “What did you have in mind?”

“Oh—just something, uh—”

“Something besides jeans, huh?”

“Oh, I like you in jeans!” David exclaimed hastily. “I like the way you look in anything.”

Or out of anything, Francis thought, just now remembering the way he had struggled to keep his eyes away from her nearly naked body only a short time before. At least he had tried to be a gentleman under the trying—to say the least—situation.

Francis laughed. “Never mind. I’ll see what I can dig up.”

“Thanks,” David said, somewhat inadequately. He waited while Francis returned to the bedroom, almost sorry he had brought the subject up. He knew he would regret it if his suggestion caused Francis to think he was coming on to her simply for her looks—though she was certainly well endowed in that department. He was attracted to her just as much for her resilience and composure under circumstances where most women would have still been hysterical.

Francis reappeared in a couple of moments with a slim carryall slung over her shoulder. “All right, that’s taken care of. Anything else before we go?”

“No, nothing else I can think of and it shouldn’t matter if you’ve forgotten anything. If we don’t crack this case soon, you’re going to have to live behind locked doors until we do. Or go out only with an escort.”

Francis looked aggrieved. “I’ll have to go back to work in a week or so. What will I do then?”

“Don’t worry. So long as Worthington is still at large—and Gene—I’m going to see that you’re protected. I can’t afford to lose my new decorator.”

Francis chuckled. The memory of Gene forcing her to disrobe was beginning to fade. A momentary image resurfaced but in this visage it was David asking her to take her clothes off. She found that the idea didn’t bother her a bit. If he asked her nicely, she thought, she might even do it. After all, he had already seen her about as naked as a woman could get.

“I’m ready if you are,” Francis said.

“Let’s go then. If you like Chinese, we’ll stop for some take-out at that place near my apartment.”

“Suits me. You don’t have much to cook with anyway.”

David did have a good selection of wine and beer. He opened two bottles of Heinekens to go with the meal, pouring the beer into frosted glasses from a stock he kept in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator.

As they were eating, David turned to the news channel to see if there had been any new, unexplained outbreak of crime. Since nothing unusual was being reported he turned the set off and yawned.

“I’m for a shower and bed,” he said. “Feel free to stay up if you want to.”

“I’ll be heading that way pretty soon myself,” Francis said.

“Okay, let me move some of my things to the other bathroom and we’ll say goodnight. You can have my room. The bed there is more comfortable.”

“No you don’t. I’m not going to take your bedroom. You let me move some things then you can shower in peace.”

David was too tired to argue. He helped Fran move some of her possessions which he had dumped on his bed into the other room then showered quickly and slid beneath the covers. A few minutes later he was sound asleep.

Sometime during the night David woke to a sensation that he had experienced all too seldom lately, the presence of a warm female body snuggling against his back.

“What—” He murmured, still only half-awake.

“Shh,” Francis murmured. “Go back to sleep.” She slipped an arm around his waist.

David felt the warm pressure of Francis’ breasts flattening against his back and the snugness of her slim legs nestling against his. Moisture from her breath caressed his neck. He tensed at first then slowly relaxed. Presently he noticed that Francis was breathing more slowly as she slipped into a relaxed slumber. He sighed softly at her trust in him and couldn’t have been more pleased than he would have been had an angel climbed into bed with him.

BEN WORTHINGTON cursed violently and turned a stopcock on his apparatus. He had been so busy with the two women he was playing with that he had forgotten to set the timer for the reaction he had going. Now the whole fucking batch was ruined. He would have to start over again from scratch. He gave each of the women another dose of Hypnol and told them to quit what they were doing while he cleaned up. He didn't want to be distracted again. This would mean another move, too. He knew he couldn't stay in the same place long, not with the cops conducting a citywide search for him. They probably had fucking flatfeet out checking supply sources, too, and that would create another problem. Luckily, he had some contacts where he thought he could obtain the precursor chemicals in exchange for a supply of the finished product. He had done that once before when he was short of funds.

There was no avoiding contact with the dealer he had contracted with, either. Murphy would have to be told that the shipment would be delayed. Damn it all, why hadn't he been paying attention to business instead of playing? He vowed to control himself from now on until he got the next batch ready and could move out of the city. The cops were certain to be pounding the streets after what he had done to the two detectives. He had been disappointed that there was only a short back-page article on their public display of runting but he knew how the cops worked. They had suppressed knowledge of the scene, just as they were doing their best not to let knowledge of his drug become public. He didn't mind that. It was already common knowledge on the street and the news was already filtering up into mainstream society, mainly among the well to do. Eventually it was bound to become media news. Not that he cared one way or another. This was going to be his last score in Houston anyway.

Ben packed his apparatus in an old van one of the women had been driving. It would do for transport, and then he could change vehicles again, as easily as he changed clothes in the morning.

FRAN WOKE UP to the sound of the alarm clock. She was confused as to where she was for a moment then remembered that after waking up during the night she had lain alone in David's spare bedroom for a long time, unable to go back to sleep. Little night noises began to bother her, the sound of the refrigerator's soft hum, the air conditioning going on and off, the chirp of a cricket which had somehow found its way into his apartment. From somewhere outside near the pool the faint sound of voices were discernible, tipsy swimmers taking a late dip before going to bed. She twisted and turned and became increasingly disturbed, fearful that Gene or Ben might be somewhere out there in the night, still stalking her.

Eventually Francis threw back the covers and felt her way to the door of David's bedroom. The door was ajar and she could see his bed and the faint mound of his body under the sheets by the light of the bedside clock. Silently, she crept over and stood beside his bed. After a moment, she eased herself onto the bed and under the

covers. David moved in his sleep and murmured something from what she thought was a dream. She shushed him, then inched closer until she felt his body next to her and snuggled up against his back. His warmth comforted her and soon she was asleep.

Francis felt David's movement as he punched the snooze button, then felt him go rigid as he became aware that he was not alone in bed.

David was startled for a moment then remembered that Francis had come into his bedroom during the night. He rolled over and saw her pale face in the red light from the clock's digits. A dark halo surrounded her face, a tumbled shadow of her wavy auburn hair. Gently he reached over and touched the springy locks of hair then ran his fingers over her cheek, hardly daring to speak.

"I got scared last night," Fran said. "I hope you don't mind."

David chuckled. "Any time I mind having a beautiful woman in bed with me, send for my psychiatrist. I'll be certifiably insane."

Fran debated with herself over what to do next. After touching her face, David had withdrawn his hand, apparently fearful that he might make a wrong move and bring back memories of her horrible experiences with Ben and Gene. Fran thought the better of him for it. He was a gentleman, a man who surely was considering her feelings before his own. Without making a real decision, she snuggled close, stretching her body against the whole length of his.

David curled an arm around Fran's waist and ran his hand over the curve of her hip then up her back beneath her short nightgown, feeling the softness of her skin, like smooth satin. He was acutely aware of his morning erection pressing against her body.

Francis was aware of it too and decided she didn't mind. She sought his mouth and felt his lips on hers, gentle at first, then gradually becoming demanding. A minute later, her nightgown had somehow disappeared, leaving her body unencumbered. She shivered when she felt his hand curve under and cup one breast as he leaned forward, nuzzling at the hollow of her neck. His lips drifted down and gently settled over her nipple, bringing it to instant erectness. She let out a soft sigh of pleasure, feeling all the tension of the last several days drain from her body. She drew another breath and felt a surge of desire. She ran her hands through his hair then over his back, pulling his body over her and wrapping her arms and legs around him. A moment later their bodies merged, becoming one, their cries mingling together and ignoring the alarm which David had forgotten to punch off.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FRANCIS HAD left David's bed with an affectionate kiss for him and gone to the other bathroom. David was trying to make himself get out of bed or even better, finding some sort of excuse for not going to work. He would much prefer to stay here with Fran and explore their new relationship. Before his thoughts got much further, the phone rang. He groaned, knowing it must be an official call. He picked up the receiver.

"Yeah, who is it?" he asked gruffly.

"This is Wainright, Lieutenant. Don't stop for breakfast this morning. Just grab some donuts and come on in."

David felt an exuberance that had been missing for the last week.

"Did they catch Worthington?"

"Hell, no. The drug lab was burgled last night. One of the techs came in early and discovered it."

David cursed. "What's missing?"

"Well, drug samples for sure. We don't know what else, it's too soon. But there's more."

"What?"

"The night janitor was found dead. His throat was cut."

"Oh hell. Has anyone notified Jones?"

"We've been trying. He's not answering his phone."

David felt a shiver of dread suffuse his body, like the slow creep of cold mist through thin clothing. "Is Bell there yet?"

"Yeah, he just came in. You want to talk to him?"

"No, just give me Jones' address and tell him to meet me there. I think we had better check on him before doing anything else."

"Okay. By the way, the captain left a message that he wants to see you when you get in."

David didn't worry about that. Bradshaw seldom arrived at the station before nine. He threw back the covers and headed for the bathroom for a quick shower and shave. He was back in his bedroom and just pulling on his shorts when Fran knocked, then pushed the door open.

"Red underwear? And you were asking me to bring some sexy clothes." Francis said, a mock frown making a crease between her eyebrows.

"They came in a package, assorted colors," David told her, rather embarrassed,

even though it was true.

Francis noticed that his cheerfulness had departed and saw the grim set of his features, like a soldier getting ready for combat.

“Is something wrong?”

“No more than usual,” David said. He pulled on his pants and began buttoning his shirt. “Look, Fran, I’ve got to go. Something has come up that might be pretty dirty. Can you find your way around until I can stop back by?”

Francis came over and kissed him. “I’ll manage. When will you be back?”

“I can’t be sure. Just lock the door behind me and remember: Bunny Rabbits Hate Easter.”

Francis smiled. “I’ll remember. Be careful, David.”

“I will.” David finished tucking his shirt in then shrugged into his holster. He pulled out his pistol, checked the loads and returned it and pulled on his jacket.

“I almost wish I had one of those,” Francis said, pointing to the bulge beneath David’s jacket.

David considered for a moment. Ordinarily, he thought civilians with handguns were about as dangerous to themselves as to criminals but in this case he thought it might be expedient if Fran were armed.

“Can you shoot?” He asked.

“Well, Gene took me to the range one day and I fired a couple of rounds. It hurt my ears, even through the earmuffs.”

“Sound suppressing device, bionic, type II.” David said.

“Earmuffs.”

“Whatever. Here’s something I can leave with you.” David went to the closet and removed a shoebox from the top shelf. Inside was a pistol, wrapped in oilcloth. He took it out. “This is a .32 revolver. It’s fully loaded, so be careful. There’s no safety; all you have to do is point it and pull the trigger. Okay?” He handed the pistol to Francis.

She took it gingerly and held the weapon awkwardly.

“Careful!” David said, a little louder than he had intended. “Don’t ever point a gun near a person unless you intend to shoot.”

“Oh. Sorry, I’ll remember.” Francis lowered the muzzle of the revolver.

“And one more thing: If you have to shoot, shoot to kill.”

David left Francis feeling not quite so vulnerable but as tense as a politician giving

his first speech. The euphoria of the lovemaking had vanished. She eyed the pistol, wondering if she could actually shoot a human being. All her adult life her prime concern had been saving lives, not taking them. Then she thought of what Ben had done to her, and what Gene had intended to do. Having the pistol handy suddenly made her feel much better.

DAVID HAD trouble finding Jones' place in the erratic, untended streets of the sprawling trailer park, even though he had been there before. Some street signs were missing; untrimmed trees and bushes obscured others. He finally found the right address just as Bellingham, in his unmarked patrol car drove up.

David parked and got out of his car. He waved to Bell, who had parked further down the driveway, leaving room for David to get out first if he needed to. David started for the mobile home then stopped abruptly when he saw the door barely hanging together, its lock splintered from the frame. A series of chill bumps ran over his arms and up his neck, the same as they always did when he arrived at the scene of a homicide. He thought that was what this would turn out to be though he fervently hoped that it wouldn't. He reached inside his jacket for his pistol.

Bellingham stopped beside him gun already out. "Looks bad," he said.

"Yeah. Be careful, Bell."

"You be careful."

The two detectives cautiously climbed the steps and arrayed themselves on the narrow deck, one on each side of the door.

"Jones!" David called out. "Jones, are you in there?"

Only silence answered him. He and Bellingham locked eyes. David clicked the safety off his pistol and made a motion toward the door, communicating silently. Bellingham held his weapon at waist level. He raised his foot and kicked, then moved swiftly out of the line of fire. The whole door crashed down inside then there was silence again. David dropped into a squat and peered cautiously around the doorjamb. He could see far enough inside to make out a head and one arm, both covered with blood.

Cautiously, David and Bellingham advanced into the mobile home, weapons ready. It took only a couple of minutes to discover that there was no need to hurry. Jones was as dead as a man ever could be.

David stood looking down at the body of his friend. It was a horrible sight. The signs of torture were evident. Jones must have suffered the agonies of the damned before he died. David swore an oath that if he ever found the person who had committed the carnage he would never live to stand trial. In fact, he vowed to himself that he wouldn't live long enough even to be charged with the crime. Justice was fine in its place but this was a setting where revenge and swift, deadly punishment was

more than justified.

“I’d better call this in,” Bellingham said. His face was a sickly greenish white. He was having to make a visible effort to keep the gorge rising from his belly from spewing forth.

“Go ahead,” David said. “Then come on outside. We’ll have to let homicide do the investigating.”

“That means Gene,” Bellingham mentioned.

David knew that but there was nothing to do about it. However, the local authorities would also have to be notified since Porter was outside the city limits. He went outside, breathing deeply of the fresh morning air, untainted by the coppery odor of blood or the fetid odor of feces inside the mobile home. His chief concern now was whether Jones had told his torturer that the samples had been switched—and whether he had been fingered as the person now holding the sample. And as an ancillary concern, why had Jones become the object of this foul work? He didn’t even consider that the crime might have been committed by some dope head looking for drug money. It was almost certainly the work of a professional. And if so, could the feds be responsible? Why, when Smith already thought he had taken the Hypnol from Jones? He hated to think that anyone working for his own government would condone anything like this but he knew he had to consider the possibility. The ramifications of the new drug was stretching beyond anything he would ever have imagined a week ago. He felt in his pocket and fingered the vial he had withheld from Gene’s stash. He had that, plus the sample Jones had given him for safekeeping. That one was safely locked up at the station in his personal safe, with the combination sealed and guarded in the Captain’s own safe.

While waiting on Bellingham, David thought of how the local authorities, probably the county sheriff, would react to the vicious homicide. They would be asking all kinds of questions which he didn’t want answered. The fewer persons involved in this mess the better. He considered for a moment then opened his mobile phone and paged Timothy Preston, the FBI agent. Maybe the locals could be impressed into silence by the aura of a special agent entering the case. David didn’t care that much for Preston but he might be useful here.

Preston answered almost immediately. David gave him the details and Preston agreed to head that way and assume authority—so far as the locals were concerned.

Bellingham came outside, shaking his head in disgust. He had been a homicide detective before transferring to David’s drug enforcement section in order to work for his friend. He had thought to get away from the never-ending sight of dead bodies but it hadn’t happened that way. Drug users and dealers were always offing each other. He thought he was seeing more bodies now than he ever had.

While they were waiting for the homicide and forensic teams and the FBI agent to arrive, David had the sudden dread thought again. Suppose Jones had revealed that he was now holding the only known sample of Hypnol? Would whoever had done in

Jones come searching for him next? Suppose they broke into his place, despite all the security protections he had vaunted to Fran? He knew it could be done by professionals, especially the spook agencies. He could rig up an alarm of some sort in case the system was breached, but what about Fran? Suppose they came during the day and subjected her to the same type of torture Jones had gone through? There was nothing she could tell them but that wouldn't matter; they would persist, thinking she was withholding information.

David ran for his car, pulling his phone out again as he went.

"Hey, where you going?" Bellingham yelled.

"I have to make a call," David called over his shoulder as he slid into his car. With shaking fingers he dialed his home number and held his breath while it rang, two three four times. He was reaching for the key to the ignition when Fran answered.

"Hello? This is the O'Neal residence."

"Fran! Thank God! I was getting worried."

"Why? I was just nosing around your kitchen. What's happening?"

"Never mind, I'll tell you later. Look, I'm going to send a patrol car over to my place. I don't know what their names will be, but when they get there, tell them to call Detective O'Neal on the police frequency so I can identify them. Then I'm going to have one of them stay in the apartment with you and keep the patrol car parked outside with the other while I'm not there. Got it?"

"Well—yes, but what—?"

"Fran, just do it. Believe me, it's necessary. I don't want to lose you now."

"You couldn't run me off with a submachine gun," Francis said. "Your kitchen needs more work than a New Orleans Chef could take care of in a year"

"Fran, please don't joke. This is serious."

"All right, Dave. You've made your point. When will you be back, do you know yet?"

"No. Listen, let me make that call. Remember, Bunny rabbits."

"Got it. No one gets in unless you say the magic words. Be careful, Dave. I care for you."

"Me too. 'Bye," David said and hung up. He called the station on the radio and got a black and white dispatched just about the time Gene came screeching to a halt behind his vehicle, raising a cloud of dust.

David eyed Gene warily, waiting for a reaction. Gene stared blackly at him, then passed without a word, trailing two of his detectives behind him. There was going to

be more trouble with him, David knew. He felt of the vial in his pocket again. There was going to be trouble everywhere until Worthington was found and the source of the drug stopped. A sudden thought hit him like an explosion going off in his brain. He cursed himself for a fool for not thinking of it before now. Where had Gene obtained his supply of Hypnol? If he could get that information, it would be the best lead yet. Why, Gene's contact might even lead to Worthington himself!

David knew better than to ask Gene. He was denying all knowledge of having possessed any of the powerful hypnotic. In fact, he had made a statement that Fran had come to his place voluntarily and that David had broken in and assaulted him and his "girlfriend." If he could catch him alone, though...

The forensics van arrived, a tan vehicle with the HPD stencil wearing off, followed by the county Sheriff's tan and white cruiser, siren blasting.

"I guess we can go now," Bellingham said, "just as soon as we tell the local yokels the feds are on the way."

"Yeah. Go inside and tell Gene to move his car. I don't want to talk to the sonofabitch."

"Don't blame you." Bellingham said.

Gene came out a few moments later and re-parked his car with ill grace, not even looking at David. That suited David fine. He hoped he would keep on not looking. On the way to the station, he stopped at an Eckerd's and made a purchase, then pulled over on the side of the road to examine it. Satisfied, he drove on, knowing the captain would be waiting for him.

GENE WENT through the standard motions of a homicide investigation, drawing disgusted glares from the Montgomery county sheriff but his efforts were cursory and held little interest for him. He knew that his career with HPD was effectively over. What could he have been thinking of? He had allowed thoughts of getting even with Francis to govern his emotions to such an extent that he had thrown caution to the wind. Even so, he might have gotten away with it if that bastard O'Neal hadn't shown up. How in hell had he known? He realized now that he should have questioned Fran about her activities the first thing rather than start his fun. Probably she had been meeting someone at the Tex-Mex. O'Neal? Most likely. The bastard was sucking up to her like a junkie to a friend with a pocketful of dope. And then, like a fool, he hadn't realized that a person under the influence of Hypnol would take orders from anyone, not just the person who had given the drug. He should never have turned his back on her. Shit. And now this.

Gene glanced down abstractedly at Jones' body, feeling nothing except concern for his own safety. This killing had all the earmarks of a professional wet job. And now someone else had at least one sample of Hypnol. He had already heard that it was missing from the drug lab. That wouldn't satisfy the spooks, though. He

wondered if O'Neal had told anyone about the samples he had stolen from him. He doubted it. The bastard probably intended to use them on Fran himself. Maybe he already had found a source of the drug and the whole episode of Fran and Ben had been prefabricated as a cover. He wanted to believe that, but he didn't, not down deep inside.

What to do? If the feds had committed this carnage they could do the same thing to him. Unless he could come up with some more samples. That way, he could turn some of them over to that Smith spook and maybe the Fibs. It would make him look good. Maybe they would even give him a job after he left the force. After all, he had lots of experience with the Hypnol now. That ought to count for something. But of course he would hold out some for himself—and parcel a few samples out to the big boys running the cartels. That would bring him riches and continuous access to further supplies.

Once having seen how effective Hypnol was and how hard to prove a crime in using it, Gene was hooked, just like so many of the street scum, and like the relatively small numbers of rich civilians who had heard of it and were even now crying frantically for more Hypnol. It was not a physical addiction, but a darker, more evil yearning. A desire to assert total control over whomever they wanted to. Once it became commonly available there would be no stopping it, no matter how hard anyone tried. The temptation was just too great. All these thoughts went through Gene's mind, and twisted among them was the dawning knowledge of what a void the loss of his supply of the drug had left in his life. He knew that he wanted more of it. And soon.

CAPTAIN BRADSHAW was shaken. He had called Smith and talked around the Jones case as well as the break-in at the drug lab. Like David, he suspected NSC involvement. When Preston brought them into the case, he had no inkling of the lengths they might go to to get their hands on a supply of Hypnol. Smith had denied everything, of course, then turned around and accused HPD of lax security. Smith was acting like a dictator telling his people that war was peace or blaming food shortages on foreign powers after confiscating their supplies for his army. Bradshaw began to feel the first inklings of fear, not of Hypnol becoming common knowledge, but for his own safety.

David knocked on Bradshaw's door and was admitted immediately.

"Hello, Dave. Have a seat. I guess you've heard about Jones?"

"I was just there, Captain. It was bad."

"So I heard. What's your take on it?"

"I haven't read the report yet, but I heard that a sample of Hypnol was missing from the drug lab."

“It is. Whoever did it tried to make it look like a simple robbery, but Neelsby doesn’t think so. It doesn’t have the earmarks. Not to mention Jones being taken out the same night.”

“That’s too much of a coincidence, Captain. Have you asked Smith about it?”

“He denies the agency is involved. In fact, he’s blaming us for lax security and not sharing information with them. Why didn’t you tell anyone you had gotten a sample of that shit—me, for instance?”

“Captain, I simply didn’t trust the spooks, or the fibs either. I’ll admit I was holding out, but I thought it was a good idea at the time. I was intending to tell you, just as soon as Jones had the sample analyzed and was certain it was a valid sample.”

Bradshaw looked pained. “Maybe it was a good idea to keep quiet, in retrospect, but it sure as hell didn’t work out that way. I never imagined anything like this happening when the feds got involved. For that matter, I had no idea how far some people would go just to get their hands on the stuff. Or how they would use it. Gene, for instance.” Bradshaw forbore to mention his own fantasies.

“Yeah, Gene. Captain, I don’t care what he said, he used the stuff on Francis and almost got a dose into me.” David mentioned this again in order to draw Bradshaw’s attention away from the subject of the missing sample.

“We can’t prove it.”

“Can’t we force him to take a lie detector test? Something like that?”

“He’s already gotten himself a PBA lawyer. We can’t do a damn thing with him. Look, you’ve just got to track down that Worthington character and put a stop to this. And damn it, if you turn up another sample, I want to know about it, immediately. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” David said, then thought of the obvious. “Captain, Jones called me the same day he was killed and asked me to come see him. He told me that it was possible that the sample was a fake. He was having a hard time analyzing it.”

“Well, even if it wasn’t a fake and the spooks have it, at least it won’t be out on the street. That’s one consolation.”

David shook his head. To him, Bradshaw still didn’t seem to realize the implications.

“Be realistic, Captain. The stuff is too tempting to too many people. You saw what happened on the streets when the first shipment went out. Everything from child rape to bank robbery to induced suicide. Sooner or later someone will let loose of the secret, especially if a big shipment hits the streets and civilians start using it. More than they already are, that is.”

“Well, hell. I wish—”

David waited, but Bradshaw didn't finish his sentence. David knew what he was wishing—that he had kept the knowledge of Hypnol right here in the department. It might have saved Jones' life. On the other hand, perhaps not. Bradshaw probably wouldn't have done anything about it and he still didn't know why Smith, or whoever it had been, had not only returned to the lab but followed Jones home and tortured him to death. Unless—

David took a deep breath, knowing he was going to have to come clean. "Captain Bradshaw, I've got a confession to make. Yesterday, Smith showed up at the drug lab and ordered Jones to turn over the sample I had given him. Jones was smart, though. He mislabeled the sample and switched it with some typing serum. Jones didn't give Smith anything of value, so how did he know to go back there? And why did he kill Jones? That's assuming Smith is responsible, of course." David had no doubt that he was but he didn't know whether the captain was convinced yet or not.

Bradshaw's face tightened as if he had just knocked back a double shot of whiskey. "Are you suggesting a leak?"

"Worse than that," David said. "How about a bug?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



DAVID LEFT the captain as he was calling for an electronics specialist to sweep all three squad rooms. David felt morally certain that they would find a bug—or bugs. That was the only way he could think of that anyone could have gotten the information to go back to the drug lab and then after Jones. He went back into his office, intending to call Fran from there to check on her, then decided against it. The thought of a probable bug at the drug lab or in the squad room was making him leery. Instead he took the elevator downstairs and called Fran on his cellular while he smoked one of the few cigarettes he managed at work each day. At first he had cursed the busybodies who had outlawed smoking in public buildings but lately he was having second thoughts. It had certainly cut down on his own smoking, so much that it was getting to be hardly worth the bother anymore. Nevertheless, he took the smoke deep into his lungs, savoring the satisfaction of the quick rush of nicotine into his body after almost three hours without a smoke.

"Hi Fran," David said when she answered. "How are you coming along with my kitchen?"

"I'm making scrambled eggs for the nice policeman who's keeping me company. I would have made toast but you don't have any bread."

"How he rates. Is the door locked?"

“No. He said I’m safe so long as he’s here.”

David cursed to himself. “Put your nice policeman on the phone for me.”

“Officer Screeton here,” a languid voice answered.

“Lieutenant O’Neal here,” David said, in a deadly calm voice. “Screeton, how long have you been on the force?”

“Four years now.”

“Have you ever met the chief?”

“No, sir. Why do you ask?”

“Because if you don’t get that goddamned door locked and secured in about three seconds, you’re going to be seeing him. He’ll collect your shield and gun. You can use your old uniforms to garden in. Get me?”

“Yes, sir!” David heard the sounds of locks being turned and the security chain being fastened. Francis came back on the line.

“What on earth did you say to that poor man, Dave? He’s shaking like a leaf.”

“Good. Fran, I said I would tell you later why I had to leave so early this morning, but I want to impress you right now with how serious security is to you. Last night our drug lab was broken into and the chief chemist was tortured and murdered in his own home. Keep that door locked! Understand?”

“I do now,” Fran said in a small voice.

“Good. I’ll be home soon as I can.”

THE POLICEMAN had suggested that Francis put away the .32 pistol David had left with her and she had done so. Now she got it out again and laid it on the kitchen counter where the eggs were streaming, overcooked. She ignored the policeman, who started to say something then decided that he might be better off by remaining silent.

David went back to his office, feeling somewhat better. He scanned the overnight reports and saw nothing unusual. That was perturbing in a way. The street informers had told Bellingham and his other detectives that Hypnol was supposed to have been available again last night. Apparently it hadn’t gotten down to the users yet, but he felt as if he were waiting for the second shoe to drop. Once out again, he knew there would be no containing it. After finishing with the reports, he tried to concentrate on catching up with his paperwork but his mind wandered. He was still trying to think of a way to get Gene off by himself and question him about his source of Hypnol. Time was running out. Eventually, he shoved the papers back into the basket they had come from and went out into the squad room for coffee, having forgotten to start his own pot brewing. He almost ran over a stranger carrying some sort of

electronic gizmo which he didn't recognize.

"Sorry," the man apologized. "I was just getting ready to knock."

"What for?"

"I'm doing a sweep for bugs. Didn't you know?"

"Oh. yeah, I just forgot. Found anything?"

"Yup. None in the phones, but I've found three of the little devils buried in the carpet. Want to see?"

"Sure."

The tech reached into a pocket pouch and spread his palm, revealing three tiny beads, hardly bigger than a match head. They looked exactly like grains of cooked rice.

"Look," the tech said. "These things are some of the oddest, most sophisticated bugs I've ever seen. They aren't on the market anywhere that I know of. In fact, they look like something one of the spook agencies might be using."

"I wouldn't be surprised," David said, tongue in cheek. "Hey, when you finish here, could you check the drug lab?"

"The captain has already asked me to do that. I'll get to it soon as I finish up here. Want me to call you?"

"I would appreciate it," David said. Now he knew for certain that the feds were playing dirty. He suspected the spooks more than the feds—this was more their style.

David returned to his office, thinking of how empty the squad room was. Every detective who could be spared was out on the streets, pounding leather, trying to run down Worthington, still with no luck. It reminded him again of the problem of getting to Gene. He knew that Gene wouldn't let him get close while they were alone, knowing that he had confiscated his supply of Hypnol. And Gene, being the type of person he was, would suspect that David was keeping it for his own use rather than destroying it as he had blurted out that he was going to.

David twitched his mouth in a wry grin. Gene wasn't so far wrong at that, though how he wanted to use his supply and how Gene would have used it was far removed from each other. David had made up his mind that the quickest, and possibly the only way to run down Gene's supplier was to give him a dose of his own medicine. It didn't make him feel good. He had never believed that the end justified the means, but in this case he just couldn't see any other way, not with time almost surely running out. But how to make Gene hold still while he dosed him? Could he trust anyone else to give Gene the hit? No! It would be just too risky letting anyone else know he had a supply of Hypnol. He mused some more, trying to bend his thoughts away from the direction they were inevitably taking. He was not notably successful.

Fran. She was the one person he thought he might trust with the knowledge. She knew, right to her very bones, what an insidious, deadly drug Hypnol was and would probably do almost anything to prevent other women from going through what she had. But Fran thought he had destroyed all of Gene's supply. What would she think of him if he revealed that he was still holding some? Would it make her think less of him? What if she got the idea in her mind that he had given her a dose in order to induce her to come to bed with him? No, surely she wouldn't suspect him of that, but he had to admit the possibility. Was it worth the chance of rupturing their relationship by letting her know he still had a supply of the drug and wanted to use it on Gene to find out who his supplier was, which in turn might lead him to Worthington? He was still debating the question with himself when there came a knock on the door.

"Come on in," David called.

Timothy Preston pushed the door open and came inside. David was rather surprised to see him, considering that they had not been overly friendly toward each other. The FBI agent sat down in the chair in front of David's desk and crossed his legs. His face was grim, the Boy Scout countenance subdued into little more than a relic of his previous fresh-scrubbed, boyish appearance.

"Hello, Preston," David said. "Did you get the local yokels in Porter all straightened out?"

Preston waved his hand as if the county sheriff was of little more concern than how many boxes of Girl Scout cookies had been sold that year. He leaned forward and spoke, his voice low and apologetic.

"O'Neal, I've been a special agent for ten years and I've never seen anything even approaching what went down in that trailer park. I've heard of wet work before but this is the first time I've seen the results of it. What in hell is going on here?"

David eyed the special agent, wondering what and how much he suspected. What must be going through his mind right now? Could the agent be brought over to his way of thinking maybe? He decided to open up a bit. Rubbing his chin, he said, "Preston, what you saw is just an example of the lengths some people will go to in order to get control of this fucking Hypnol drug."

"Are you telling me Jones had a sample of it?"

"I'm afraid he did, and—"

David's phone rang. He listened for a moment then hung up and slammed a fist on his desk.

"Who was that, if you don't mind me asking," Preston said.

David could hardly contain his anger. "That was a tech from the drug lab. He just found a bug in the phone in Jones' office, not to mention the ones he turned up right here in the squad room."

Preston's big body seemed to shrink inside the confines of his finely pressed suit.

"You don't have to say a fucking word. I'll bet it was Smith and his crew."

David saw the stricken expression on Preston's face and decided to tell him more.

"That's what we think, too. I haven't told anyone but Captain Bradshaw, but Smith paid a visit to Jones two days ago and demanded that he turn over the sample to the NSC. Jones gave him a spurious sample, then called me over to tell me about it. Smith or one of his agents must have been listening. You can take it from there."

"Ah, shit. I should have never brought him into this."

"You can't feel any worse than I do," David said. "That conversation lead directly to Jones' death." He rubbed his eyes, remembering some of the times they had gotten together to drink beer and discuss everything from the president's peccadilloes to the chances of living long enough to see the IRS abolished. "Shawn Jones was one of the best friends I've ever had."

"I'm sorry," Preston said. "Look, I'm sure you realize that I haven't been cooperating with you like I should have—and you've been holding out, too, most notably not telling me when you located some Hypnol." The special agent paused to gather his thoughts then continued. "That's over with now, so let's put it aside and move on. You know, even before this came up, I was having second thoughts about how to handle this thing, especially after reading the reports of how some scum—and some ordinary citizens—have been using Hypnol. If you ask me, I don't think anyone can be trusted with it."

David grinned. "Tim, I'm glad to hear you say that. It's exactly the way I feel. If I get any chance at all, I'm going to make certain that the knowledge never goes further than it already has."

Preston forbore to ask how David intended to manage that. He stood up and held out his hand. "That goes for me, too. From now on, you can count on me. Anything I can do to help, you let me know. All right?"

"Thanks, Tim," David said. He shook the agent's hand, discovering that perhaps he could grow to like this particular agent after all.

Preston started toward the door and was almost bowled over by Bellingham bursting into the office.

"Dave! Man, have you seen the papers today?" Bellingham asked excitedly.

"No. What's going on?"

"Here. Have a look." Bell handed David the latest edition of the Houston Chronicle.

The lead story was by one of the Chronicle's crack investigative reporters, Cynthia Tamm. Somehow, she had connected Jones' murder and some of the other recent crimes with Hypnol, probably through a leak from right there in the precinct. Some of her facts were inaccurate, but the essence of the story was all too true. She was reporting that a new, powerful drug had hit the streets of Houston and was being used for every kind of sickening crime imaginable. Her reporting on the way it worked was more or less accurate. Not only that, she promised that this article would be followed by others, making up a series.

"Crap," David said. It was one of the most inadequate expressions of disgust he thought he had ever uttered. Now the news was out. Everybody and his brother with an agenda, a score to settle, anyone who needed money or sex or the goods for a divorce or elimination of an adversary or to induce suicide in order to collect insurance money or god knew what else would be clamoring for the drug. They would rationalize their actions, of course, but that wouldn't help. They would do it anyway.

"Yeah," Bellingham said disgustedly. "Ain't the press being responsible? I'd like to shoot that broad. There'll be no stopping it now."

"Don't give up yet, Bell. No more of it has come out yet and according to our sources, it should have by now."

"I've got some news on that front, too. Word is, there's been a delay of some kind. It's still being promised."

"How long?"

"Three days they're saying now."

"So that gives us three days to put the genie back in the bottle."

"Yeah. I'm going to get back to work. I just came in to catch up on the reports from my boys."

"Anything?"

"Nada."

"Keep trying, Bell. We've got to stop this."

"Yeah. I'm gone. Oh, by the way, Faye and I are still teamed up. We'll be working together. I'll drop back by this evening and catch you up again. Will you be here?"

David made his decision. "Maybe, maybe not. I've got something I may want to try."

"What?"

"You don't want to know," David said, then reconsidered. "Well, maybe. If I decide the idea is worthwhile, and go ahead with it, I may call you for backup. If I

do, I'll tell you what's going down then." David suddenly thought he might have said too much with Preston still present, but when he looked around, he found that the special agent had quietly taken his leave. He's probably rushing off to find a copy of the Chronicle himself, David thought.

GENE WAS all the way down in the Montrose area of Houston, way beyond his area of authority, but that was where Boyd Murphy, the dealer who had supplied him once before, had moved to while waiting until the new shipment of Hypnol came out, whenever that was. Gene figured that Murphy intended to make a bundle peddling Hypnol to the gay community once they realized what it could do for them. Given a hit of the drug, no one could resist a sexual overture, straight or gay, and he knew many potential users of the drugs who would pay handsomely for a chance to use Hypnol on anyone they chose for their attentions. Those people were the minority of the gay community, but Gene thought that Boyd would figure that out of such a large population he would have no problem getting his asking price, no matter how high, from some of them. And, gays, especially the upscale ones he would be dealing with, were much less likely to complain of being suborned for fear of their proclivity being made public. So much the better. Meeting up with Worthington was the best thing that had happened to him in a long, long time.

Gene caught up with Boyd outside of a leather bar he knew the dealer sometimes frequented. He felt uncomfortable in his sports jacket but right now he didn't care. He knew he was being made as a cop but he couldn't wait. When he saw Boyd coming out of the bar, he motioned him over to where he was waiting in a no-parking zone.

"Fuck, man, are you crazy?" Boyd complained. "I don't need to be seen rapping with a cop. This ain't like a fucking strip club where you guys hang out."

"Shut up and get in the car," Gene said.

Boyd looked around furtively. "Hell, man, at least look like you're arresting me!"

Gene complied, thinking that was probably a good idea. If word got around that the dealer was consorting with a cop, he might find his supply cut off. He got out and spread-eagled Boyd against his car and went through the motions of frisking and handcuffing him. Boyd wasn't carrying so there was no need to pretend to confiscate a weapon. He drove the dealer to a secluded area near Buffalo Bayou and took the cuffs off.

Boyd rubbed his wrists. "Fuck, man, you didn't have to put them on so tight."

"I could have left them on," Gene said.

"What the fuck you mean, man?"

"I need Worthington. Where is he holing up?"

Boyd was astounded that Gene had tracked down the identity of the dealer. “Man, you know I ain’t got that news. He’ll get in touch when he’s got the load.”

“When?”

“Day after tomorrow, he says.”

“Where do you meet?”

“I don’t know. What’s going on man?”

“Did you see in the papers about what happened to that dude from the police drug lab? How he was tortured?”

“Yeah, man. Bad fucking news. What’s that got to do with me?”

“Have you ever heard of the NSC?”

“Fuck, you mean the spooks are after this shit?”

“You got it. And they’re going to be after you just like they went for Jones.”

“Ah, shit, man. I got no quarrel with them fuckers.”

“You do now. That is, unless I get to Worthington first. Understand?”

Boyd didn’t, not exactly, but the thought of torture scared him silly. He had once seen the remains of a snitch after the big boys got through with him. He still had nightmares over the sight.

“What you want me to do?”

Gene wrote his cellular number on the back of one of his business cards. “Soon as you hear, you call me at this number, night or day.”

“I ain’t calling no spooks down on me, man. Forget it. The deal is off.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Gene said. “You’re going to buy, I’m going to buy from you, then we split and I’ll give the spooks Worthington’s location. Then we’re both holding and with Worthington in custody, they won’t give a shit about us.”

“So what, man. You’ll be cutting off my supply.”

“No I won’t,” Gene lied. “I’ve got a chemist lined up to duplicate it soon as we get some samples for him. After that you deal with me.”

“Deal with a cop?”

“I’m leaving the force soon as we get our hands on a good bag of the stuff.”

Comprehension dawned.

“Ah. You got caught holding, my man. Welcome to the world.” Boyd Murphy grinned as if a church-going younger brother had suddenly seen the light of day and decided to start running with the gangs. There was nothing he liked better than

dealing with crooked cops.

“I’m coming in all the way. You know what, Boyd? We’re both going to be rich. And man, we can do any goddamned thing we want to once we’re holding a bundle of that shit. You know?”

Boyd knew. He had used a couple of hits on a female he had been pursuing and on a loan shark he was indebted to who had just recently decided to take a plunge from the sixth floor of an office building.

“Yeah, man, I know,” he said, grinning with his drooping eyelid closed in an involuntary wink.

“Good,” Gene said. “By the way, here’s your front money.” He pulled a stuffed manila envelope from beneath the drivers seat.

“Yeah, man.” Boyd stuck the business card and money into one of the voluminous pockets of his baggy jacket. Gene started the car and drove him back to where he could catch a cab and let him out. Two days. Boyd didn’t know it yet but the handcuffs might be going back on his wrists again. If Smith let him live that long.

“BUNNY RABBITS Hate Easter,” David said, trying to keep a straight face.

Francis unlocked the door, fumbling with all the unfamiliar keys and catches. “David. I didn’t expect you back so soon.”

“Something came up. We need to talk.” He turned to the uniformed cop, who had gotten to his feet when David walked in. “You and your partner can go now. Thanks for the help.”

“Yes, sir.” The cop hurried out. He didn’t want to linger for another possible chewing out for dozing in front of the television set.

David opened the refrigerator and pulled out a Heineken. “Do you want one?” He asked Francis.

“I guess, so long as you are.” She noticed his grim expression. “Can I hug you first?”

“That might be a good idea. You may not want to again after you hear what I have to say.” David had finally decided that using Francis, as much as he disliked the idea and the possible risk to her, was the best way to get close enough to Gene to get a dose of Hypnol into him.

Francis acted as if her favorite TV program had suddenly been canceled in the middle of the series. She had no idea what David was talking about but from the look on his face it didn’t sound like anything she was going to like. Nevertheless, she went to him and put her arms around him and kissed him firmly before accepting the beer.

“Let’s sit down,” David said. He took Fran’s hand and led her to the couch. He took a sip of beer first then allowed Francis to tuck her legs beneath her and lean against his shoulder. He reached around and touched her cheek affectionately.

Francis kissed his hand before allowing him to withdraw it. “Go ahead, David. It can’t be that bad.”

David felt in his pocket and pulled out the vial of Hypnol he had been carrying. “Do you know what this is?”

Francis read the label. “Oh, good God, Dave. Where did that come from?”

“I saved it out of Gene’s supply.”

Francis backed away from him a bit. “What on earth for? I thought you wanted to destroy every bit of that vile substance.”

“I do, but I held this out, thinking I might have to use it to get rid of it, so to speak.”

Francis stared into the distance, thinking about a quotation she had come across in a history text.

“You know, that reminds me of an expression I once read in a history book from college. It was in a section on the Vietnam War. If I remember right, a military man was talking about an action his company was involved in during the Tet offensive. He said, ‘We had to destroy the village in order to save it.’ ”

David had no ready answer, but he tried. “Fran, it’s not quite like that. You, of all people, know what Hypnol can do in the wrong hands—or any hands, for that matter. According to our information, there’s a big shipment due out on the streets very soon. My only chance to stop it is to use this vial of Hypnol—” He held it up as if it were a live grenade, prevented from exploding only by the pressure of his hands on the handle. “—to force an informant to tell me where he’s making a buy from Ben Worthington. I don’t think we have the time or the manpower to run him down any other way.”

Francis explored her reaction to David’s intentions while she studied his face. She had never seen him look so tortured.

“Do you really have to do this thing, David?”

“Yes, I think so. If we have any chance of keeping the drug under wraps, I’m going to have to use it to question someone. And it goes against everything I believe in about the sanctity of the human mind and personality and the conduct of a police officers. We’re supposed to be the good guys.”

Francis shuddered. “Isn’t there any other way?”

“Not that I’ve been able to come up with. Not in this case. I used it on Gene but that was a matter of life and death as you well know. My only consolation in thinking

of using it again is knowing that this is a deliberate, reasoned decision and that I'm accepting full responsibility, knowing that I'm doing something fundamentally wrong." David turned to face Francis, not attempting to avoid her gaze. "How will you feel, knowing that I'm no better than the other scum who have used it?"

Francis scrutinized David's agonized expression. "You have a good reason, David. I'll trust you."

David put his arm around her, dreading the next subject. "Thank you, Fran. That means a lot to me. More than you can probably guess." He paused, then continued. "The thing is, I think I'm going to need your help."

"You want me to help give this to someone, knowing what I've been through? Dave, I don't know if I can. I hate the very thought of that stuff."

David tightened his arm around her shoulders. "I wouldn't ask if there were any other way."

Francis took a deep breath, causing David to lose his train of thought momentarily as he watched her breasts fill her blouse to the stretching point. He looked away as she answered, "All right, tell me about it. And hold me while you're doing it." She moved closer and caught David's hand and drew it down to her breast.

David had to laugh, though he wasn't feeling particularly humorous. "You're sidetracking me."

"Never mind. Talk, before I lose whatever courage I have."

"All right. Have you been watching the news?"

"Oh! So that's what it's about. You're talking about that female reporter who broke the story."

"That and some other developments. Our informants tell us the next big shipment is coming down in two days. I just told you how I might manage to catch Worthington before he's shipped too much more of the drug to matter. I hope."

"David, I can understand your motives. But why me? Can't you do it yourself?"

"Ordinarily, yes, otherwise I would never have mentioned it to you. The thing is, it involves Gene," David said carefully. "After we robbed him of his last supply, he's bound to be setting up another buy. He's got to be hooked on the power it gives him, judging from what he tried to pull on you—not to mention the fact that every known user we've brought in for questioning can't wait to get back on the streets and look for some more of the junk. The thing is, there's no way Gene would ever let me get close enough to him to shoot him with a dose—nor anyone else I can trust. You're the only person I can think of who might manage it."

"Oh hell, I would be." Francis pressed David's hand harder against her breast. He felt it yield under his hand, resilient yet firm.

“Fran, if I could think of any other way—or if there was more time—”

“Oh, Lord. Do I have to, David? Do I really have to?” She buried her face against his chest, shivering like a patient in the thralls of a malaria attack.

David caressed her shoulder and the side of her neck, hating himself but glad that so far she hadn’t refused. “I don’t see any other way, Fran. I’m almost positive Gene knows a dealer with a direct contact to Ben Worthington, the chemist who’s been manufacturing this junk. He’s also the pervert who dosed you the first time.”

Francis huddled against David’s shoulder. “Oh, God, I don’t think I could face that man again. I’d kill him. I know I would.”

“You won’t have to see him,” David explained gently. “Once I know how to find him, I’ll take care of the rest. It’s Gene you’re going to have to see.”

“Oh, God, David. The thought of seeing Gene again is like the time in training when I had to go into a maniac’s cell to give him his meds. I was so scared I almost dropped out of Nursing School.” Francis took a deep breath and gathered her courage, the same steely reserve she hadn’t realized she possessed until that time in the past when she forced herself to medicate the insane patient again and again against all the urging of her subconscious fears which kept telling her to run and never come back. “Well, I guess I can stand it if I have to, but you damn well better be right there close in case something goes wrong.”

David hugged Francis tighter. “I won’t try to kid you, Fran. It might be dangerous. He’s an unstable character as I guess you’ve gathered by now. And you’ll have to catch him alone so that no one else knows what we’re doing. I’ll be as close as I can without taking a chance on him making me, if that will help.”

“Making you?”

“Recognizing me. Once you give him the dose, I’ll handle everything else. There’s no way he can mislead me with a hit of Hypnol in his system.”

Francis sighed again. “I’ll be scared, but I guess it has to be done. It’s the least I can do after you saved me from whatever Gene was up to the other day. But—why should he want to see me again?”

“I can’t guarantee that he will. We’ll have to cook up a good excuse and just hope he falls for it.”

Francis shook her head, mouth pursed. “How in hell did I ever get mixed up with policemen? I feel like a cross between Mata-Hari and one of James Bond’s girl friends.” She stood up and held out her hands for David to grasp. “All right, we’ll think of something. But we can do it in the bedroom as well as in here can’t we?”

David took her hands and got to his feet. “Absolutely. See? You’re thinking already!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



ON THE WAY back to Kingwood, Gene pulled into a bar and grill for a hamburger and beer. He was feeling good. Just two more days and he would have everything under control again. And he'd have everything he had ever wanted. He eyed the young waitress who was serving him, probably a Kingwood Junior College student. He imagined what she would look like without her uniform, without any clothes on at all. Perhaps he would stop back here after renewing his supply of Hypnol and find out. Gene munched his burger and thought of other possibilities. Money. How about setting up a public investigator's office as a front? Hell, he could dose some old lady with Hypnol and get her to empty her bank account, or catch some rich bastard at the right moment and have him sign over stocks and bonds or—well, the possibilities were endless and prosecution would be almost impossible. All he would have to do would be to claim the stolen assets had been freely given to him for “services rendered.” It was a rich, satisfying fantasy and he saw no reason at all why it shouldn't work. Unfortunately, Gene hadn't counted on Smith, who had slightly different ideas about his future.

It hadn't been hard for Smith to learn of David and Gene's contretemps, nor much harder to ferret out the details of what had allegedly happened. Following the same path of reasoning that David had taken, Smith came to the conclusion that Gene held vitally needed information. He had almost certainly obtained and used a supply of Hypnol and he would be looking for some more as soon as it was available, only a little less than two days from now, according to his information. He knew that Gene Wilson was the type of person who would quickly become a prime user of the drug, cop or no cop.

Smith had just gotten word back from Washington that the sample obtained from Brandon's burglary of the drug lab was probably a spurious sample. Even if not, it apparently was going to take a long time to figure out the formula. Smith decided not to wait, nor take any chances. He picked up two agents and spent the next couple of hours tracking down Gene's whereabouts, finally locating him by monitoring the police frequencies and listening when Gene called in to give his location.

Gene was placidly picking his teeth as he walked back toward his car. He didn't even notice that he was being trailed until he felt the touch of a hard metal object pressing against his spine. His heart leaped, thinking that Boyd had betrayed him. He made a motion for his weapon but a hand grabbed his wrist and jerked him around to face his assailant. He found himself staring at Smith, the diminutive NSC agent.

“We need to talk, Mr. Wilson,” Smith said, letting Gene see the small pistol almost completely concealed in the palm of his hand.

Gene immediately thought of Jones and how mangled his body had been when it

had been discovered. He felt his sphincter muscles begin to loosen and kept them closed only by an effort of will. He thought that it was going to be his turn now and felt his body begin shaking like a convicted killer being strapped onto the death gurney

Smith smiled, knowing what was going through the detective's mind. "Relax, Mr. Wilson. You're not going to be hurt. Get in the car here." He motioned with his little handgun toward a nondescript little gray Toyota Celica parked beside Gene's Taurus.

Not believing a word Smith said, Gene slid into the rear seat. An agent boxed him in from both sides. Smith got into the front seat and drove away. A half hour later he pulled into the driveway of a decrepit house on a side street south of Kingwood, temporarily rented for just such an occasion.

Gene was led inside and instructed to sit on a battered couch. He thought wildly that he was living his last moments because there had been no attempt to keep him from seeing where they had gone or looking at street signs and numbers. Smith smiled at him again, a humorless widening of his lips which went perfectly with pale brown eyes holding not a hint of mercy, making Gene even more certain that he was going to be killed. One of the other agents produced a small compact device with a display screen opened up to a right angle from its tiny keyboard. Thin green lines wavered across the display in a meaningless pattern. The agent hooked a number of wires leading from the device to Gene's body, forefinger, temples and waist.

Smith waited until the agent had finished his preparations and nodded that he was ready. Smith gave Gene another one of his cold reptilian smiles, enjoying the sight of beads of sweat forming on Gene's pale forehead and upper lip.

"Relax, Mr. Wilson. As I said, you're not going to be hurt. We simply need some information which we believe you possess."

"W-What?" Gene stammered, almost incoherent with fear.

"Let me tell you what we know, first," Smith said. "To begin with, you found a source of the Hypnol drug, something we haven't managed yet. You purchased a certain amount of the drug. You used some of it on Miss Francis Stafford, your ex-girlfriend. Detective O'Neal intervened and stopped whatever you intended to do to her. Am I correct so far?"

Gene didn't even attempt to lie. "Yes, that's right."

"Now then, two questions. Who was your supplier and how much of the stuff do you have left?"

"I don't have any. That bastard O'Neal took it all! He said he was going to destroy it!" Even having been under the influence of the drug after Fran hit him with the vase, Gene still remembered how dispirited he had felt when O'Neal told him he was going to dispose of all of his Hypnol. He was already desperate for some more.

Smith examined the display screen and decided that Gene was telling the truth. “That is really too bad. It might have saved us a lot of trouble if we had been able to confiscate your supply. Now please answer the rest of my question. Who was your supplier?”

Gene told him without hesitation, speaking with almost hysterical haste, hoping what he said might save his life. “I got it from a man named Boyd Murphy. And hey, I was going to call you as soon as I had my next meeting set up, Mr. Smith. Believe me. I’m leaving the force here; I swear I am. I was hoping you might be able to use me in some sort of related work. I know how the stuff works. I can help you; I swear I can! Just tell me what you want me to do!”

Smith examined the lie detector screen again and appeared to be mildly astonished. “Well, well. That makes things much more interesting—and truth be told, much easier for you, Mr. Wilson. Perhaps we can work together. That is, if your dealer comes through. Boyd Murphy, you said?”

“Yes, I told you that. Hey, I’ve already given him the front money for the next deal, but you can have half of the buy. Just leave me the rest of it. Okay?” Gene tried desperately to sound sincere. “Okay, Mr. Smith?”

“Hmm. We’ll see. Now let’s go over everything again.”

Smith questioned Gene for another hour before he was satisfied. After that he and his agents made arrangements to have Gene tailed, just in case he changed his mind about coming in with them, then drove him back to the same restaurant where they had picked him up.

As soon as Smith’s car turned the corner, he and his compatriots burst into malignant laughter.

“What a fucked-up scumbag,” one of the agents said.

“But useful, for the time being,” Smith remarked. “Of course he’s like a bad meal. The sooner digested and shit out, the better off we’ll be.”

DAVID CALLED Bellingham into his office the first thing next morning. He poured coffee for both of them then sat down and asked for a report.

Bellingham took the chair in front of David’s desk and crossed his legs. He took a big swallow of coffee then shrugged. “Nothing new, Dave. That Worthington character has gone to ground somewhere and we can’t turn him up. He’s a canny sonofabitch, I’ll have to give him that.”

“Yeah. According to his sheet, he was an absolutely brilliant chemist at U of H before they kicked him out and his wife divorced him. It seems as if he couldn’t keep his slimy paws off his coed students—or his stepdaughter.”

David’s lips made a grimace of disgust. “Okay, how about the fibs? Have you

gotten anything from them? I forgot to tell you, but Preston had a change of heart and came to see me yesterday. He more or less apologized for not sharing fully with us. He said they would from now on.” David glanced up at the ceiling then back at Bellingham. He smiled wryly. “It seems as if the sight of Jones shook him up a bit.”

Bellingham locked his fingers together and clinched them until his knuckles turned white. “It damn well should have, but regardless of how he feels now, don’t expect much. They haven’t got enough sense to do a good canvas.” He unlocked his fingers and reached for more coffee. “And now for the latest: Have you heard that the spooks have pulled out of the case?”

“What!”

“Yup. That’s what the squad room is saying this morning. Word is, the captain will confirm it momentarily.”

“Maybe they’re ashamed of those bugs they planted,” David said.

“That’ll be the day. More likely they’re trying to distance themselves from the Jones homicide—if they’re the ones responsible.”

“They probably are,” David said, but his mind was wandering. He didn’t believe for a minute that the feds had gone back to Washington, not empty handed. They wouldn’t have been content with the spurious sample obtained from the drug lab, nor did he think it would fool them for long. More likely, they had decided that the HPD had nothing more to offer them, not since Captain Bradshaw had quit cooperating with them. Or more ominously, pulling out of the case might mean they had found a source of Hypnotol—or even worse, managed to locate Ben Worthington and take him into custody.

“Probably my ass,” Bellingham exclaimed. “Smith did the job, or ordered it done. I’d like to catch that slime ball in a dark alley one night.”

“I’d like to be there when you did. Be that as it may, I’ve got a possible line on the source, like I told you yesterday. The thing is, I’m going to need some help.”

“By God. Just tell me what you want done.”

“For now, just stick close by me. I’ll pair Faye up with someone else. Later this morning, I’ll probably be leaving. Tail me but don’t get too close.”

“Where will you be going?”

“I don’t know yet. It depends on where Gene decides to meet Francis.”

“Francis? You mean his girlfriend?”

“She’s not his girl anymore. She’s mine.”

Bellingham’s eyelids crinkled at the edges as he gave David a pleased smile. He had been wondering when his friend would finally put his divorce behind him and begin relating to women with an attitude more serious than the few casual affairs he

had experienced over the last couple of years.

“Oh.” Bellingham said. “Well, congratulations and all that stuff, but what’s the deal?”

“You’ve probably heard some gossip from the day I had Gene arrested. I know for a fact that Gene bought and used some Hypnol. I also know that he’s out of it now, and if I know him, he’ll be out looking for some more. If we’re lucky, his source will lead us to Worthington.”

Bellingham could not have looked more disgusted than if he had found a live cockroach in his coffee.

“Gene using that crap? Yeah, I heard the gossip in the squad room, but I didn’t believe even he was that much of a slime bag. Shit, I always did think there was something funny about that guy. So, how do you plan on getting the information from him?”

“Francis is going to lure him back to his own home where they were living together. I can get him alone there, then I intend to lean on him hard.”

“And you want me for backup, in case he flips his wig. Is that it?”

“You got it.”

“So what’s your plan?”

“Simple enough. Francis still has a key to his place. She’ll be waiting on him when he goes home.”

Bellingham gave David a puzzled glance.

“I don’t get it. Why not just take the key from her, let me drop you off, then have me wait around the corner or down the street? As soon as he goes in, I’ll follow and we’ll both lean on him.”

“No.” David thought rapidly. He hadn’t considered all the aspects of asking Bell to be his backup.

“Why not?”

“Gene could charge me with breaking and entering, and you, too. I don’t want you getting in trouble if it comes to that. And Fran has to be there. She can get close enough to him to divert his attention, then I’ll do the rest.”

“You’re taking a big chance, Dave. That motherfucker isn’t playing for marbles anymore. He’s gone completely bonkers if you ask me.”

“Yeah, but someone has to take him out. We have less than two days now to intercept Worthington’s next shipment.”

Bellingham still wasn’t convinced. “Dave, I don’t mind helping, but that Gene is a

big motherfucker. You won't be able to handle him if it comes to a fight. Besides this is some nasty stuff. Anything I can do to keep it off the street won't bother me at all."

"I know, Bell, and I appreciate how you feel, but suppose I do get in trouble, say with IA? Even arrested? Someone has to be free to follow up on anything I learn. That's you, Bell."

Bellingham didn't look very happy. There were too many holes in David's story, but he figured David would tell him more about it when the time was right. He just hoped that his friend didn't plan on tangling with Gene on a man-to-man basis. He would be completely out-classed.

"Okay, if that's the way you want to work it, but goddamnit, you be careful."

"I will. Thanks Bell. Why don't you stick around and work the desk while I talk to Bradshaw, then we'll go? I want to find out what Smith told him." David felt in his breast pocket. He threw Bellingham a guilty smile. "First thing, though, don't let anyone in here for a minute or two. I need a cigarette."

"Come on in," Bradshaw yelled when David knocked on his door.

David opened the door and stepped inside. Bradshaw looked haggard but David had little sympathy for him. He was the one who had called in the FBI, and as a result, had gotten Smith of the NSC involved with the case, leaving Bradshaw indirectly responsible for Jones' death.

"Good morning, Captain," David said, seating himself without being asked.

"What's good about it? I just got off the phone with the chief. The mayor is raising hell with him and he's raising hell with me."

"Shit flows downhill," David said.

"Yeah, and now it's going to pile up on you. Lieutenant, I need results and I need them fast. I saw your memo. Less than two days now. Where are you at?"

"Getting ready to maybe break a lead if everything goes right. I'm going to be talking to Gene Wilson today. I think I've got the means to find out where he made his buy."

"Wilson? He's still denying he ever saw any of the stuff."

"I know, but the sorry bastard is lying. I'm going to waylay him at his own home and lean on him."

"He won't talk."

"He will to me."

Bradshaw started to ask what method David was going to use to obtain the information then decided he would be better off not knowing. "All right. Take it

easy, though. Don't get yourself into anything I can't get you out of. I can't afford to lose you now—and I don't want the chief coming down on me, either."

"I'll be careful."

"Anything else? I have a meeting with the chief and the other captains in the mayor's office. We have to decide how we're going to handle that Cynthia Tamm bitch's story."

"Lots of luck," David said. "Oh, there's one more thing. I heard Smith pulled out. Is that right?"

"Yeah. Smith said he had orders from Washington to drop the whole thing." Bradshaw looked pained. He avoided David's eyes as he spoke.

"Do you believe him?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore. I keep thinking of that poor chemist at the drug lab, not to mention the bugs we found here. It's hard for me to believe that our own government would authorize anything like that. He must have been acting on his own—if he's the perp, that is."

"If he is, we'll never prove it. Captain, I don't think that he has really pulled out. I'll bet him and his whole scummy crew are still in town, trying to beat us to Worthington."

"Well, it's your job to see that they don't, so get with it." Bradshaw rose to his feet and began shrugging into his uniform jacket which he habitually left off in his office.

David took the hint and left. Back down on his own floor, he found Bellingham still working the phone, having given the desk sergeant a break to go for donuts.

"Let me know just as soon as Gene calls in," David told him. "Be sure to get his location and ask him where he's going next. I'll need enough time to pick up Fran and get inside before he arrives."

"Will do," Bellingham said past the phone receiver, still taking notes.

An hour later Gene called. Bellingham wrote rapidly on his pad then abandoned the desk to the sergeant. He ran into David's office without knocking.

"Okay, here we go, Dave. Gene says he's been following up some leads on the Jones case and now he's heading to Sammy's for breakfast."

"Good. I know where that is and this time of the day, it's always busy. He'll be there for a while. Let's go." David checked the clip of his .45, grabbed his jacket from the coat hanger and was out of the door in an instant, leaving Bellingham hurrying along in his wake.

Bellingham drove both of them directly to David's apartment and waited while David went to the door.

“Bunny Rabbits Hate Easter,” David said after ringing the doorbell.

Francis opened up. “You always sound so silly when you say that.”

“Better silly than dead, or worse.”

“What could be worse?” Francis asked after kissing him, ignoring the patrol officer watching them from the corner of his eye.

“Being under the influence. You know what I mean.” David leaned close to whisper the rest of his message so that the uniformed officer there couldn’t hear. “Grab your purse and let’s go. We’ve got just enough time to get to Gene’s house before he can make it there—if that’s where he’s going now.”

Francis had already made all her preparations and was ready to go. She was glad to see David; the waiting had been getting on her nerves and her imagination had been working overtime. She had paced the floor, stopping occasionally to sit down but almost immediately, she would get back up and pace some more. She was as nervous as a prospective new father waiting for his child to be born. All the time, she was retracing the events in her mind which had lead her to become involved in a highly convoluted police operation—and it appeared now that she was one of the star players. The whole thing was so far removed from her previous life that she was beginning to wonder if she could ever go back to nursing and feel the same sort of calm satisfaction with her work that she had in the past. She was aware of David’s intense conviction that getting the Hypnol drug off the street was the most important operation he had ever attempted. That and the remembrance of his loving embraces was the only thing that kept her from simply moving to another city and starting all over. She knew she wouldn’t, though. Not now, with the increasing attraction she felt for David. He was more of a man than Gene was, or ever had been.

Downstairs, David released the uniforms back to their regular duties and held the door open for Francis to get into Bellingham’s car. She smiled to herself. A gentleman.

“Bell, have you met Francis?” David asked.

Bellingham twisted around in the front seat. “Hi. I’ve seen you before with—uh, at the station. Call me Bell. That’s short for Bellingham.”

Francis took his hand then quickly released it. She was ready to go—and frightened at the prospect.

Bellingham drove off, going just over the speed limit while David held Francis’ hand in the back seat, squeezing it occasionally to reassure her. Ten minutes later, Bellingham cruised slowly past Gene’s home. The driveway was vacant. He made the block then let Fran and David out in front of Gene’s place. After that, he drove further down the street and pulled into an empty driveway of a home whose occupants he hoped would be gone for the day. There was no telling how long the wait would be.

Inside, David handed over the miniature nebulizer he had bought at Eckerd's. He carefully loaded it with a hit of Hypnol and handed it to Fran. "Whatever you do, don't let him see it before you get close to him," he told her.

"Don't worry, I won't," Francis said. "That SOB is never going to hurt me again, I'll guarantee you that." Francis hadn't mentioned to David that she had brought along the .32 revolver in her handbag. It gave her an added bit of comfort though she was not at all certain she would be able to use it if the necessity arose.

After that, David and Francis settled down to wait, knowing that eventually Gene would return home. David hoped it wouldn't be too long. There was only a day and a half left now before the new consignment of Hypnol was expected to appear.

BEN WORTHINGTON was watching the chemical reaction much more carefully this time. It was a huge batch that he was brewing, enough to give him anything in the world he wanted. Lately, he was finding that his desires and expectations were expanding at a rate rivaling that of a rapidly burgeoning gulf hurricane in the midst of August—and potentially just as destructive. The power that Hypnol gave him over his victims was addicting. He was discovering things about himself that he hadn't known were lurking in the depths of his mind, just waiting for expression.

The woman sprawled at his feet was a good example. Or maybe she was a girl; she looked awfully young. Ben didn't care anymore about the possibility of being charged with child molestation or assault—or anything else. The girl's thighs were bloody and her breasts bruised with teeth marks from where he had abused her, telling her all the while how much she liked it. It was wonderful. Not a single complaint had he heard. He thought how it would feel to go all the way, to abuse her right unto death while he made her scream with pleasure. Maybe he would. He could always suborn someone else into confessing and have them punished for the crime. In the meantime, he needed to check the progress of the reaction. It would be nice if he only had to make enough for himself rather than selling part of it. He could always get money from individuals or stores by using Hypnol, but so far he hadn't dared try. There was never any way to be certain that something unexpected wouldn't happen. Murphy's law was always present, just waiting to prod its gremlins into mischief. Besides, the sums available were minuscule and the risks higher compared to what he could make from selling a load of this batch. And once it was on the street, the cops would be too busy with the next crime wave to bother trying to find him. Already, he had word of many, many different individuals, some affiliated with the underworld and others free citizens—but those men and women were rich and powerful, willing to pay almost anything for his concoction. It's a good life, he thought, turning to the girl again. A really good life.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



GENE WAS hardly bothering to go through the motions of investigating Jones' murder by now. He knew who had done it. He also knew that he would be resigning from HPD shortly, ready to go to work for Smith and the NSC. He was excited over the prospect, making himself believe that Smith was really sincere. He had to be, didn't he? Otherwise he would have been much rougher on him. It was nice to know that he had a future, even without having access to Hypnol just now. But he would again, very soon. Smith had promised. He would be able to use it himself as well as help question enemies of America. He hoped some of them would be good looking female agents like those portrayed in movies. It would be nice to be able to get back at Fran and her new lover, too. That was going to be the first thing on his agenda, regardless of what Smith might have in mind. After that he would do whatever Smith asked him to—and whatever else he thought of on his own. He was continuously adding to the list.

Gene finished a leisurely breakfast, taking enough time to allow for covering the errand he had told the desk he was on, but which he had no intention of completing. Why question a suspect that he knew was innocent? Why question anyone at all? Two more days and he could forget about all that shit, paperwork and reports included.

Gene paid his tab and decided that he might as well go home and take a nap before calling in again. Maybe the squad would miss him but who the hell cared? Once he had a supply of Hypnol again, he planned on being very busy. Some sleep now would do him no harm and leave him all the fresher for the impending excesses. He drove slowly, running elaborate fantasies through his mind, not noticing the gray, two year old Sable Oldsmobile tailing him, occupied by a lone driver. Smith was running short of agents.

DAVID HEARD the lock being turned and jumped to his feet, trying not to make any noise.

"That must be Gene," he whispered to Fran. "Get ready."

Francis felt her heart begin pounding. She palmed the nebulizer as David retreated into the bedroom, leaving the door cracked just the same amount as Gene had left it that morning. Francis was sitting on the chair nearest to the bedroom door, as close to David's comforting presence as possible. She had kept her purse, with the flap loose, slung over her shoulder the whole time they had been waiting, wanting to keep the pistol as handy as possible even though David had told her he didn't anticipate any problems. Gene wouldn't be expecting to find anyone home and the drug worked so quickly that there shouldn't be any reason that she couldn't hit him with a dose before he knew what was happening.

Gene closed the door behind him then stared in utter surprise at Francis, just getting up from where she had been sitting, apparently waiting for him. Seeing Francis back home was the last thing he had expected.

“What in hell are you doing here?” He frowned, looking around to see if she were alone, alert as a pro quarterback anticipating the snap of a football.

“Waiting for you,” Francis said, feeling the pulse of her carotid arteries pounding so hard that she thought Gene surely must notice.

“I’ve got nothing to say to you, bitch. Not yet, anyway. What do you want?” Gene’s suspicion began fading as he decided that Francis was there by herself. He wished that he could simply beat hell out of her, rip off her clothes and mark up that pretty body. In fact, he intended to do just that, but he didn’t dare just yet. She would be certain to report it to O’Neal and he might find himself arrested again and unable to meet Boyd when he got the word that the buy was ready.

“I came to get your signature on these papers,” Francis said. “My attorney told me I had to have them before we split the rest of the furnishings.” She waved the sheets of paper she and David had prepared beforehand. Cupped in the palm of her hand, the papers concealed the nebulizer she had ready to use.

“I’m not signing a goddamned thing,” Gene said. “Now get out of here before I slap you silly.”

“That’s your way of doing things, isn’t it?” Francis said. Now she was truly angry, so tense that she didn’t care whether Gene noticed or not. And regardless, her attitude would seem natural to him. But he wasn’t coming any closer to her.

“Shut up and get out of here,” Gene ordered, barely able to hold himself in check.

“I’m not going anywhere until you sign these papers,” Francis said.

Gene stared at her, her slim body and high firm breasts, nipples limned against the fabric of her blouse. He licked his lips, aroused despite himself.

“What will you give me if I sign?” He leered at her.

Francis saw an opening. She posed provocatively, one arm akimbo, that hand holding the papers and nebulizer against her hip. She raised her other hand, smoothing the material of her blouse just beneath her left breast, the tips of her fingers playing with the buttons. She swayed her hips just enough to remind Gene of what lay concealed beneath her clothes.

“I’ll give you whatever you’re man enough to take, big boy,” she said, taunting him like a sibling with a handful of candy held just out of reach.

That was all Gene needed. He strode forward, intending to take her, right there on the carpet and consequences be damned. It would only be her word against his. As he got close and reached for her, Francis raised her hand containing the papers and

David's nebulizer, acting as if she intended giving him the documents.

Somehow, Gene caught a hint of her intentions. He grabbed her wrist before she could spray the Hypnol into his face and twisted savagely. The nebulizer and papers dropped to the floor.

"David! Help!" Francis screamed, struggling to break Gene's grasp and attempting to knee him in the groin at the same time. Neither maneuver was successful.

Alerted, Gene flung her away. Francis' legs hit a coffee table and she fell backwards over it just as David sprang from concealment. Gene kicked out at him instantly, moving as swiftly as a striking rattler. David was barely able to avoid getting a foot to the groin but Gene's blow thudded brutally against his thigh, knocking him down. Gene reached inside his jacket and drew his gun.

"Just hold it right there, O'Neal. Now it's your turn to be arrested, goddamnit." He grinned gleefully. "Breaking and entering. Assault against a police officer. Man, you're going to a fucking cell! In fact, you're going to confess to every fucking charge I can dream up!"

Francis shook her head and struggled back to a sitting position. Seeing Gene pointing his gun at David frightened her more than anything she had ever experienced. Gene's sneering threats weren't comprehensible to her as discrete words; they sounded to her more like the roar of an agitated circus lion. Time seemed to move like the slow beat of a cardiac monitor attached to a dying patient. She fumbled in her purse and drew the revolver David had given her, confused thoughts jittering like a commuter trying to decide whether or not to try beating an oncoming train across the tracks of an intersection. She pointed the revolver with shaking hands and pulled the trigger. Francis fully intended to kill Gene, despite an aversion to violence and years spent in a profession dedicated to saving lives rather than taking them. All she could think of was stopping Gene before he took David's life. Unfortunately, nursing had given her little preparation or training with firearms and the few times she had fired a pistol at the police range was far removed from this situation. She missed completely.

The roar of Francis' .32 and the disconcerting zing of a bullet whipping past his head caused Gene to duck and whip his body around at the same time.

Desperately, David lunged from his position on the floor and managed to grab Gene's gun hand before he could turn his weapon on Fran. He twisted the barrel away from his body, causing the weapon to discharge. The bullet punctured the ceiling, making a small, smoking hole in the sheetrock. Then both men were on the floor, each of them struggling for control of Gene's weapon. Again, David felt Gene's superior strength coming to bear. Gradually, despite exerting all his power, the pistol barrel was slowly being forced toward his chest. He had no doubt that Gene intended to kill him now if he got the chance and he struggled desperately to hold the weapon away from him, feeling his clenched teeth grind against each other

with the Herculean effort.

Francis had been so startled at the sound of her pistol firing that she had dropped it in surprise, never having heard a handgun being discharged at close range without ear protectors. Still on her knees, ears ringing, she searched frantically for the gun. Instead, she spotted the nebulizer amongst the papers she had dropped when Gene shoved her away from him. She scrambled forward on her hands and knees toward the innocuous little dispenser. Grabbing it up, she crawled the few feet separating her from the combatants and plunged her hand between their heads, separated by bare inches.

David saw the nebulizer come into view from his peripheral vision. He drew a deep breath and held it in while he made one last effort to hold Gene's weapon away from him. Gene didn't think quickly enough. Francis squeezed the bulb and before he could stop himself, he had breathed in a full hit of the drug.

"Drop your gun!" David gasped, turning his head to avoid the Hypnol fumes, even though he had still not inhaled. "Drop it, I said!"

His second shout expelled most of the air he had sucked into his lungs, leaving him weak from lack of oxygen. A vivid image popped into his mind of all the cigarettes he had smoked over the years, Gene struggled for a second more then slowly opened his fingers and let David pull the gun from his hand.

"Now stay there and be still," David commanded after he had scrambled a few feet away. He had averted his head to avoid inhaling the residual Hypnol mist and at last drew in a huge breath of fresh air. He exhaled and looked over at Francis. She was hugging her knees and shivering as if an arctic front had suddenly barged into the room.

"Are you all right Fran?"

"I think," Francis said, voice quavering in concert with her chattering teeth. Her face was as white as a sheet of typing paper.

"God, I'm scared."

David got to his feet, then pulled her upright and hugged her close. "Sweetheart, I'm scared, too. If you hadn't distracted Gene, I think he might have killed us both." His body was still shaking from an overload of adrenaline.

"I know he would have," Francis said, not letting David go. She doubted if she could stand upright if it were not for his support.

"Whatever, we need to get out of here, Fran. Someone is bound to have heard those shots and called 911. We're going to have to take Gene somewhere else to question him."

David produced a pair of handcuffs he had brought just as a contingency and manacled Gene's hands behind him while he said to Fran, "If anyone stops us and

asks, he assaulted you and I happened to be in the area and arrested him. Okay? That's what happened, wasn't it, Gene?"

"It sure was," Gene agreed, with the Hypnol dictating his answer. "I was going to rape her."

David and Francis exchanged glances. "You sorry bastard," Francis said to Gene. She wished mightily that her shot had blown his head off.

"A sorry bastard, that's what I am," Gene said. Tears began to leak from his eyes.

"Get up," David ordered, then told Francis, "Grab your purse and let's get out of here. Don't forget your gun."

"I won't. I don't think I'll ever go without it again, not after this."

Francis picked up the weapon with shaky hands and slid the revolver back into her purse while David helped Gene to his feet and prodded him toward the door, telling him to quit crying over feeling like a sorry bastard and to just be quiet and say nothing until told to do so.

David peeked cautiously outside before proceeding. Amazingly, it seemed as if no one had heard the shots, or if they had, simply ignored them. However, David was worried that someone might have called the 911 emergency number and that a patrol car answering the summons might be on the way. He wanted to get moving before that happened. He herded Gene toward where Bellingham was parked, only a half block away.

THE SINGLE NSC agent, who had been tailing Gene was parked two driveways down, heard the shots. Forgetting to call back to base at Smith's safe house, he advanced cautiously toward Gene's house from the opposite direction from where Bellingham had parked, hand inside his coat with the grip of his pistol nestled in his palm. He was young and new to the agency and forgot the one cardinal rule of law enforcement agencies: never go into a precarious, unknown situation without backup. When he saw the door begin to open, he quickly dropped down on his knees behind a row of hedges delineating the boundary of Gene's lot. He watched as Gene was led outside, hands cuffed behind him.

The young agent wished then that he had called before investigating, but the situation didn't look that dangerous—and if nothing else, he knew that he did not dare let Gene be led away, apparently being arrested for some reason or other. He wondered where the man and woman had come from but figured that he could just damn well ask as soon as he got the drop on them. He glanced around as they approached his hiding place, thankful, as David was, that it was late morning and almost all the inhabitants of the suburb were at work or away from home on various errands. He crouched lower and waited for the party to pass. Shit, this was going to

be easy. Neither the man nor woman had a weapon in sight; Gene appeared calm and as serene as if he were simply taking a mid-morning stroll.

The agent popped up from behind the hedges as soon as the group had passed. He crouched in the standard firing position, gripping his weapon with both hands.

“Freeze, motherfuckers!” He shouted.

Ah, shit. David’s first thought was that Gene had somehow obtained a partner who had been laying in wait for just such a contingency. Damn, can’t I do anything right? He thought. Then he began worrying about Fran. He had gotten her into this mess and now there was no telling how it was going to end. Badly, he thought, despair gnawing at his vitals.

BELLINGHAM HAD also heard the shots, though faintly. He had waited after the first one, thinking that perhaps he had been mistaken; then the sound of the second reached his ears. He was familiar enough with handguns to know that the second shot had come from a different weapon. What in hell was going on? He didn’t know, but one thing was certain: his friend must be in trouble. He got out of his car and ran toward the entrance to Gene’s house, crouching low, gun already drawn and cocked.

Bellingham halted suddenly, seeing the tableau in front of him, four people, three of whom he recognized. Gene appeared to be handcuffed. David and Francis had their hands raised. From his view, almost behind the four figures, Bellingham could see that the unknown man was holding a weapon pointed at David’s back. Quickly, silently, he moved closer, using some decorative bushes and a small budding apple tree as cover.

Now the man had David spread-eagled against the side of a square brick edifice topped by a mailbox while his hand reached around, searching for David’s weapon. Bellingham sprang forward, one arm outstretched to knock the man’s gun away from David, the other curled into his chest and shoulder, pistol ready. He hit the man with brutal force, knocking the weapon from his hand and him to the ground. Bellingham rolled to his feet as quickly as a running back darting for the goal line and pointed his weapon at the dazed young agent.

“Freeze!” He shouted. His finger tightened on the trigger of his gun, ready to fire.

The agent, who had been attempting to get to his feet stopped in mid-movement. David bent and retrieved his heavy old .45 automatic and pointed it at the scared young man. He grinned sickly at Bellingham.

“Goddamn, Bell, your ugly face is the best sight I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Bellingham kept his own weapon trained on the agent, who was alert now, looking for an opening, knowing he was in trouble, both here and with his boss.

“What in hell is going on?” He asked, hoping that talk might give him an opportunity to reverse the situation. “You’re interfering with a federal officer!” His voice sounded like that of an adolescent boy arguing with his parents over a bad report card.

“We’ll find out from you what’s going on, and pretty damn quick, little man,” David said, “but I strongly suspect you answer to a boss by the name of Smith. Come on, Bell, Fran. We need to get out of here, quickly.” He kicked the downed agent to his feet. “Move it buster. You’ve got some questions to answer.”

Half-trotting, urging the young NSC agent before them, the group headed for Bellingham’s car. Arriving there, David looked around. There were still no witnesses that he could see, nor any sound of approaching sirens. He turned to Francis, whose face appeared to need another coat of make-up; it was still that white.

“Have you still got that nebulizer?” He asked her.

Francis produced it with a shaky hand, almost dropping it. David took it and sprayed a hit directly into the agent’s face and stomped on his foot at the same time, causing him to gasp and breath in the fumes.

“Get in the back seat,” he said. The agent complied meekly, as did Gene. Bellingham eyed the procedure with an expression little short of amazement.

“Did you do what I think you just did?” He asked David. His mouth hung partially open with surprise, like a shopper just discovering he had left his wallet at home.

“Yeah. I’ll explain later. Come on, let’s go. You drive and I’ll watch for a tail. This guy might have had company.”

“Where are we going?” Bellingham asked.

“To the first motel on the freeway.”

“Why not go back to your place, David?” Francis asked plaintively. “I’m so shaky I can hardly talk.” She felt dizzy and faint, like she had her first time in surgery, seeing a belly opened up.

David considered. He had been afraid that the captured agent was only one of many who might be watching him, not knowing that it was only Gene they were tailing.

“No, let’s take the motel, just in case someone else is following us. We can question Gene and this little punk at the same time there and find out what we need to know.”

Bellingham drove without asking any more questions. David appreciated that. He knew now that he would have to include Bell in his plans from now on and berated himself for not doing so sooner. If anyone could be trusted, it was Bell. He had just been so apprehensive about the drug that it had clouded his judgment.

Bellingham pulled into the parking lot of a Best Western. There he removed Gene's handcuffs and David spoke to him. "Gene, you're going to go inside and take a room here. You want to do that, don't you?"

"Yeah," Gene said.

"All right, go ahead. Don't say anything to the clerk. Just check in using your own name and license plate number then come back here. Understand?"

"I got it," Gene said. He got out of the car and headed towards the entrance to the office, only a few yards away.

"David what in hell? Are you letting that—" Bellingham's voice trailed off in mid-sentence as he realized that David also had Gene under the influence of Hypnot. He shook his head in confusion and began to worry. What did his friend think he was doing? He was breaking laws and confidences and police procedures as if he had ceased caring about anything other than tracking Ben Worthington to his lair.

"Relax, Bell," David said, noticing Bellingham fidgeting in the driver's seat. "I'll get straight with you soon. I forgot something, though, damnit." He turned to the agent sitting beside him. "You. What's your name?"

"George Freeholder."

"Where's your partner? What kind of car is he driving?"

"I don't have a partner. I was working alone."

"Don't believe him," Bellingham said.

"He can't lie, Bell. Not with what he's got in him."

"Dave—"

"Here comes Gene. Let's all get to the room and out of sight then I'll tell you what's going on." David led the way, half-supporting Francis, who looked as if she had just completed the Houston marathon and was ready to collapse from exhaustion.

It was a standard motel room, containing one king sized bed, two chairs and a dresser. David had Gene and the agent named Freeholder sit side by side on the floor, against the wall. He touched Francis' shoulder. She was still trembling. He smoothed both hands over her pale cheeks.

"Fran, why don't you lie down on the bed and try getting your heart back down into your chest? We'll take the chairs."

"All right." Francis drew in a deep breath and stared at David and Bellingham as if they were well trained soldiers who just happened to be out of uniform. "How do you guys stand this sort of thing all the time? I'm a nervous wreck."

She dropped onto the bed but twisted around to the side so that she could watch

the proceedings. David and Bellingham exchanged glances. It was a common civilian misconception, thinking that detectives lived always on the edge, excitement suffusing every working moment. In reality, most detective work was boring, a slow process questioning suspects and accumulating facts.

“Bell,” David said to his friend. “I guess I should have brought you into this sooner, but I thought the fewer people knowing about it the better. Knowing about my methods, anyway.” He grinned wryly.

“Well, without going into details, I came into possession of some Hypnol. I didn’t want to turn it over to anyone, knowing how tempting this stuff is. I’m sorry I held out on you, but when Gene, Fran and I had our little dust-up it turned out that Gene here, had gotten hold of some Hypnol. I destroyed most of it but decided to hold out a bit in case I needed it to pull information from someone, like that little bastard there belonging to Smith—and now Gene.” David paused a moment to let that sink in then continued.

“I should have thought of it sooner, but after a while I began to wonder who Gene’s source of Hypnol was. I knew I couldn’t get the answer out of him any way but this, and I knew he wouldn’t let me get close to him since he thought I might still have some of the Hypnol he had bought. That’s where Fran came in, as I told you.” He looked over and smiled fondly at her.

“You damn near got her killed, and yourself as well.” Bellingham said. “You should have trusted me.”

“Sorry Bell, you’re right. If you hadn’t been nearby—well, never mind, let’s move on. Why don’t you question that little slime bag of a fed there while I talk to Gene? Find out what he thought he was up to.”

David pulled his chair over in front of Gene and began asking questions while Bellingham conversed with Freeholder. From the bed, Fran eyed Gene with a venomous stare which should have caused him to shrivel up and turn into a toad while she watched and listened. Soon, though, the adrenaline reaction which had carried her through the fight at Gene’s house began to dampen, then faded away entirely. Her eyes blinked sleepily a few times then amazingly, she dozed off, like a young child finally succumbing to a nap after a long, exhausting day of trailing her mother around the mall.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



THIS IS REALLY hard to believe,” Bellingham said, after a solid hour of back and forth grilling of Gene and Freeholder. “Our own government. Goddamnit, whoever

authorized this shit ought to be shot!”

“Calm down, Bell,” David admonished. “I doubt that this operation was authorized at the highest level, at least not the way it’s being conducted. Especially considering the way they treated Jones and bugged the station. More likely it’s someone like Smith working from their own little power base.”

“You’re an idealist, Dave.”

“Maybe so. Let’s worry about that later. Right now we have to locate Boyd Murphy and put a tail on him. He probably deals directly with Worthington. Once he takes delivery, we’ll be right at the source. We can corral Worthington and get this damned stuff off the market once and for all” David didn’t tell Bellingham what else he had in mind.

“What about Gene? The NSC will just put another tail on him, you know—not to mention us. They’re after Boyd, too, you know.”

“I think I know how to take care of that,” David said, a grin splitting his face. “We’ll just have them arrested.”

“What will that accomplish? It will just tie us up in paperwork and not leave any time to run down Boyd. Besides, some shyster of a lawyer will have them back on the street in a couple of hours.”

“I doubt that,” David said. “We’re not in the Kingwood precinct. This motel is in Humble’s jurisdiction. How about if we take all their identification away from them, then have them start tearing up the office here, smashing things up and cuffing up the manager and anyone who gets in their way? It might be tomorrow before they get out of jail, maybe longer than that if we’re lucky and no one recognizes Gene.”

“I like it,” Bellingham said, a beatific grin brightening his face.

“Like what?” Francis said, coming awake with a yawn. She was astounded that she had drifted off to sleep.

David sat down on the bed beside her and took her hand in his. “Listen and you’ll find out,” he said. He pulled out the nebulizer and sprayed each man with another hit, then began giving them their instructions. A few minutes later, he, Bellingham and Fran were driving off. Gene and Freeholder, intent on what they had been told to do, were already entering the motel office, looking around for the manager and anything breakable.

SMITH BARGED into the Humble precinct station, attorney in tow and a document faxed from Washington in hand, asserting that Gene and Freeholder were involved in “vitally important” national security operations. He was furious with Freeholder for getting caught without calling for a backup, with Gene for discounting the idea that O’Neal had any Hypnol in his possession—which he must have had—and at himself for not putting a tail on the lead detective obstructing his

mission. He knew he had been very lucky that a cop at the Humble precinct had recognized Gene and called the Kingwood station to report that he had been arrested, and lucky again that word had gotten back to him quickly. Bradshaw's expert had missed one bug in his sweep and he had overheard the conversation.

"You want us to drop all the charges? That's going to cause trouble for us," the captain of the Humble precinct said, eyeing Smith with a disgusted expression he normally used for internal affairs officers investigating one of his men.

"Believe me, Captain, it's necessary," Smith expounded, "and I don't want a word of this getting out, not even to Bradshaw over in Kingwood. Understand?" Smith made his voice sound very sincere and concerned, as if the whole nation might be teetering on the verge of collapse and only he and this police captain had the means to prevent it from happening.

"I won't know what to say to the guys in Kingwood," the slim, gray-haired captain complained. This was completely outside his experience.

"Tell them you'll reinstate the charges in a couple of days. Tell them your internal affairs officers are working on the case. I don't give a damn. We need both these men now!"

"All right, all right," the captain conceded. "I'll give you two days, but that's it. We can't have police lieutenants going around tearing up motel offices and roughing up the clerks. Public relations are bad enough around here as it is."

"Two days," Smith agreed. By that time it would all be over, one way or another. He left the attorney there to collect Gene and Freeholder and drove back to the safe house that they were using as a base to wait, and to reorganize his priorities.

Once there, he spoke to two agents he had been holding in reserve for just such a contingency. "Lieutenant David O'Neal is his name. See if you can pick him up at his apartment—" Smith paused to write down the address. "If he's not there I'll monitor the bug until we locate him, then you tail him until you can catch him alone and bring him back here."

"What if he's always got company with him? Detectives usually travel in pairs."

"Lieutenants don't. In any case, if he's out with a partner, use your own judgment, but I want him brought in. We have to find out what he knows, and fast. Be sure and pat him down good, and be damn careful when you take him. He'll be armed and he's probably carrying some Hypnol. That's the only way I know he could have had that Wilson bozo and Freeholder tear up a motel office. Now get with it, we've only got about 24 hours to wind this thing up."

Smith watched the agents leave. When this was all over, he had other orders he was going to have to give. It wouldn't do to have lower grade operatives running around free with knowledge that his little compartmentalized section was going to be controlling Hypnol in the future, using it to promote the senator's political

aspirations among other projects his boss had in mind. And somehow, Smith knew he was going to have to get to Cynthia Tamm and force her to retract her story. Otherwise, foreign agents would never believe that they didn't have possession of the drug. All in all, this assignment was assuming the form of a total cluster fuck. He just hoped he would be able to put all the pieces back in place when it was over with.

DAVID AND Bellingham drove back to David's apartment, taking Fran with them. There, David tried to convince Fran that she would be safe if she stayed there, with a uniformed officer both inside and outside while he and Bell hunted down Boyd Murphy's whereabouts and began tailing him to his rendezvous with Worthington.

Francis wanted to go with them. "Please, David, I won't feel safe anywhere without you around, not after what happened this morning." She hugged herself in an unconscious defensive gesture.

"I didn't do you much good being on the scene there, did I?" David said. A cold ball of dismay coalesced inside at the memory of how close he had come to fouling up the whole operation—and leaving Fran vulnerable to Gene's attentions—or to Smith's dark designs.

"You grabbed Gene's gun when he would have shot me. I'm sure of that now. He is totally out of control," Francis said, squeezing David's hand.

"You've got that right, but Fran, be reasonable—"

David's phone rang and interrupted the discussion. He picked it up and listened for a moment, then hung up.

"Damn. More problems. Our scheme didn't work."

"Who was that?" Bellingham asked.

David looked disgusted. "Someone must have recognized Gene at the Humble station. Somehow, Smith got word of their arrest. He got to the captain in Humble, too; he's dropping all of the charges. An attorney is there now to collect them.

"Can't we delay their release? Hell, I have a contact in the records department there who's an expert at 'losing' paperwork. I could call him."

"I know who you mean," David said. "I've used him on occasion myself, back when I was working the Humble precinct. Unfortunately, the captain is scared of lawyers. They would just threaten a lawsuit and he'd cave in quicker than a cardboard shack in a hurricane. And our boy in the records department would fold just as quick when the captain leaned on him. No, we're just going to have to let it go for now."

"Shit. Well, how about getting some more help then?"

“No. I want to keep this close.”

Bellingham disagreed. “Hell, Dave, you know Smith is going to put a tail on us now, just as soon as he learns what we talked to Gene and Freeholder about.” He frowned, then added, “For that matter, Smith may actually have his gumbos come gunning for us. Don’t forget what he did to Jones.”

“I’ll never forget how Shawn died,” David said. He blinked back tears. “Fran, that’s another reason you can’t go with us. We may run into a hairy situation and I don’t want to risk having you get hurt. You’ve done enough for us already.”

“I want to help,” Fran insisted. “Besides, suppose they come after me as a means of getting to you?” It wasn’t a pleasant thought. An image of Gene and Smith, guns drawn and evil stares on their faces as they leered at her body and forced her outside into their car made her shudder with revulsion. The visage made her squeeze David’s hand tighter and lean against him as if for protection.

Bellingham got up and paced in the area of the apartment not cluttered with rented furniture. “She’s right, Dave. There’s nothing those spooks won’t pull, and Gene is just as bad. For my money, I think they’re all as lowlife as sewer rats.”

David had to admit that Bellingham was right. As sure as politicians lied to the public or lawyers over-billed their clients, Smith would come gunning for him and Gene wouldn’t be far behind. However—“Fran, how about us putting you somewhere else where you’ll be safe, like a hotel under an assumed name?”

“How could you be certain we weren’t being followed?” Fran argued.

“Oh, hell. I can’t,” David admitted. “All right, Fran, you’ve made your point. You’ll have to stay with us. But, damnit, if it should come down to a shoot-out again, don’t drop your gun this time. Hold it with both hands!”

“I will,” Francis said, ashamed that she had dropped it the last time.

“Have you reloaded it yet?”

“No, I forgot.” Her face turned red with embarrassment.

David shook his head and blinked. He was getting tired, otherwise he would have thought of that matter before now. “Well, go ahead and reload it now. I’ll watch so you won’t have problems if you have to do it again.”

Francis removed the spent cartridge and inserted a new one into the .32 with shaky hands, following David’s instructions. She thought of the mess she was in now, and the way she was becoming ever more involved, even if it was by her own decision. Already, the perceptions of the society she had taken for granted all her life had changed drastically, much as her attitude toward Gene now bore little resemblance to the one she had held only a few short weeks ago, especially after contrasting Gene’s personality with that of David.

As soon as they were ready, David made one more call, back to the Kingwood

station. He had a clerk pull Boyd Murphy's sheet, then, luckily, caught Faye there, who had returned after being given some time off to catch up on her sleep. David found out from her the places where Boyd usually hung out. Faye knew them all, having recently done a lot of undercover work, mingling with dealers in order to gather information which David had hoped would lead to some of the bigger drug lords. He wished that was all he had to worry about now. Compared to Hypnot, cocaine and heroin seemed more like slightly tainted candy than illegal drugs.

David gave Faye his fax number and asked her to send him the sheet on Murphy, then told her to notify the captain that he would be out of touch for the next 24 hours. The captain wouldn't like that, but if he couldn't crack the case by then, everything was going to pretty much go down the drain anyway.

Francis peered over David's shoulder at the fax sheets, sliding an arm around his waist as she did so. "He's an ugly cuss, isn't he?" She said, looking at a mug shot of Murphy.

"Yeah, and just as mean and evil as he looks. He's smart, too. So far, he's kept himself relatively clean for a dealer that old."

"Speaking of smart," Bellingham said, "I've got a question for you. How in hell are we going to keep Murphy from making us as cops if and when we locate him?"

"Good question, Bell. I guess we better change into different clothes. Dress like junkies spending all their money on dope, maybe?"

Bellingham laughed. "You've been spending too much time shuffling papers, my man. You need to get back out on the street more often; your talents are getting rusty. Suppose Murphy or one of his clients makes one or the other of us and lets him know who we are? He'll go to ground if that happens, Hypnot or no Hypnot."

David knew Bellingham was right. Odds were, as many junkies as they had arrested, questioned or used as informants, they would be identified within hours. Stymied, he tried to think of what other sort of disguise they might use.

"Would he make me?" Francis asked.

Both men stared at her, comprehension altering their features. David grimaced, knowing Fran had come up with the perfect solution but one which would put her in even more danger and bring her ever more tightly into a world which she scarcely knew existed just a couple of weeks ago. He wondered how he would have handled himself in a similar situation. Would he have been that brave, putting his life into the hands of men with occupations totally foreign to his own? He decided that he might have, had the circumstances been as serious as the present one was but it would have taken a huge helping of courage. Again, his heart went out to Fran, in a wave of love and admiration.

Bellingham was examining Francis in a somewhat different light, an idea dawning. "Fran, you could dress like one of the strippers Murphy hangs out with." He looked

down at the fax sheet Mary had sent them “According to Murphy’s sheet, he’s got a hang-up on strippers. If anyone questions you, you could tell them you just got into town and are looking around for a job.”

“What do strippers dress like?” Fran asked, curiosity replacing the feeling of impending danger she had begun to sense in the room, as if the walls were beginning to close in on them—and the door locks had suddenly frozen into place.

“When they’re job hunting? In as little as they can get away with in public.” Bellingham said, eyeing her voluptuous body.

“No way,” David contradicted. “Fran looks like a high class stripper. She can wear more clothes.”

Francis giggled. “Is that what you think of me? Maybe I’m in the wrong profession.”

“Whoops! Sorry, Fran. What I meant to say is that you’re worlds beyond the usual run of strippers in looks—not to mention your other, uh—Well, what I mean is that you don’t have to let it all hang out to play the part.”

“Just some of it, huh?” Francis stared at David, noting his discomfiture and suddenly remembered his suggestion while she had been packing. “Oh! Now it dawns on me! David, you silver-tongued devil. Now I know why you asked me to bring some sexy outfits. You were already thinking of using me as bait, weren’t you?”

“Well, yeah, I guess I was, in the back of my mind, anyway,” David said, avoiding the piercing scrutiny of her eyes. He looked up. “Fran, honey, sometimes my mind ranges way out ahead of what I’m doing or thinking at the time. You’ve nailed me, though. That must have been what I had in mind, even before I knew it myself. I’m sorry.”

Francis stood up. “I may be sorry, too, before this is over, but I forgive you. Like some of the other things I’ve gotten myself into with you, I guess it has to be done, but I’ll be damned if I know how I’m ever going to play ‘Nancy Nurse’ with a straight face again!”

“You’ll never change,” David said. “I wouldn’t want you too, either. I like nurses, especially those with auburn hair and pretty hazel eyes.”

“Amazing,” Francis said lightly, though inside she was tense as a fox hugging the ground while stalking an unsuspecting rabbit. “A man who notices the color of a woman’s eyes. That’s as rare as a black-footed ferret. Well, what should I wear? Give me a hint, you guys.”

“Uh well, sort of sexy but nothing, uh, that you can...” David’s voice trailed off in embarrassed confusion.

“See through?” Francis completed the sentence. “Bell?”

“Uh, maybe leave off your—your bra, and...”

Francis got tickled and laughed, forgetting the seriousness of the proposed masquerade for the moment. “I can see that you two aren’t going to be much help. Well, gentlemen, I didn’t bring too many things here but at least David did warn me. Give me a few minutes to see what I can turn up with what I have on hand. Would you excuse me?”

David nodded, not trusting his voice but implicitly agreeing to let Francis play the role of an out of town siren. He had to admit that it was a perfect method of scouting out Murphy’s whereabouts without him discovering that he was being watched—if they found him—but he couldn’t help but feel a nagging worry that something else was going to go wrong, and Fran might wind up right in the middle of it.

Francis departed for the bedroom while David and Bellingham exchanged glances, then kept quiet while Francis changed into her costume, each absorbed in his own thoughts.

Francis closed the bedroom door and stripped down to the buff, then began rummaging through the closet and suitcases she had brought, trying to imagine how men would look at her in various combinations of dress—or undress. She wanted to appear voluptuous, sexy and provocative without looking cheap or, God forbid, like a hooker on the prowl.

It took more time than she had intended to spend before she had all the possible garments she might wear laid out. She smiled impishly to herself in the mirror, imagining how David and Bell would react when she returned to the den.

Finally, she decided on her costume, selecting a pair of thin, cherry-red, skin-tight slacks, and pulled them on then slid back out of them. Her panty-line spoiled the effect. She discarded her briefs and pulled the slacks on again. There, that was better. The pants molded themselves to her hips and long slim legs in a smooth, unbroken sweep of bright red cloth, as if the material had been sprayed on and left there to dry.

She picked up a flimsy bra, then dropped it and slipped into a matching red blouse of the thinnest silk, almost translucent. It clung to her firm breasts loosely, allowing them to play freely beneath the satiny fabric. She moved back and forth, watching as her breasts swayed gently beneath the covering. With every step or two the movement caused them to push against the front of her blouse, caressing her nipples with a delicate slithering touch that stimulated them into erectness. She touched the buttons in front and separated them from the tiny, almost invisible buttonholes until the blouse was open halfway down her chest, displaying a remarkable cleavage. Francis twirled, bent and walked back and forth until she was satisfied. The blouse was fixed just right, allowing a stupendous view that exhibited the upper slopes and inside of her breasts and just barely concealed her nipples—unless she bent over too far.

She added conservative, shiny earrings, gold hoops that were neither too large nor too small. She rummaged in one of the suitcases and found a slim black belt that cinched her waist and drew direct attention to the flare of her hips and swell of her breasts. Perfect! Cherry red lipstick which matched the slacks and blouse and a pair of high heeled, black patent leather pumps completed the picture. Eyeing herself one more time in the mirror, she tousled her hair until it fell in unruly waves down to her shoulders then looked at herself again.

Hells bells, if this outfit didn't draw stares she might as well give up and go back to her nursing scrubs! It might cause her a little embarrassment in public, but she knew that there was no way anyone would ever mistake her for the ordinary class of stripper. She looked like a vision just off the plane from Las Vegas, ready to take the Houston nightclubs by storm.

Francis took a deep breath, picked up a small, shiny black hand purse and walked back to the bedroom door, opened it and stepped into the room where David and Bellingham were waiting. She posed with one hand on her hip and the other hanging free, fingertips moving slowly up and down her thigh. Their reaction was everything she had expected and more.

"Jesus Christ, Fran!" David burst out with an exclamation which would have done justice to a teenage boy suddenly transported bodily into the middle of a girl's locker room. He couldn't have been more impressed if Salome had suddenly appeared in front of him and was in the process of dropping her seventh and last veil. "When I mentioned a sexy outfit, I didn't intend for you to start a riot!"

"Sensational," Bellingham agreed, his face flushing slightly when he couldn't make himself avert his eyes as Francis moved her body into another, equally provocative pose. Her unfettered breasts swayed gently beneath the thin, bright red silk as she moved. The translucent red material of her blouse only enhanced the effect as the twin tents, produced by her nipples, becoming erect as the silk fabric moved over them.

"I take it that you approve," Francis said, twirling around then coming to a rest again. Her breasts jiggled enticingly for a moment until they found their center of gravity. The question was directed to David rather than Bellingham, though she smiled at the way Bell's eyes were almost popping from his head.

"Damn right," David said. "I'm almost afraid to go out in public with you dressed like that. In fact, if you ever wear that outfit when I'm with you, you're in a world of trouble. I'll probably get arrested for hunting down and shooting all the sharks trying to put the make on you."

Francis shrugged, producing a remarkable effect. "Well, you told me to bring something sexy. I take it this will do?"

"If it doesn't we may as well give up and let Murphy deal to his heart's content," David said. He had never seen such a luscious vision.

“Shall we go then? I want to get this over with before I get more scared or embarrassed than I already am and change my mind.” Francis’ outward calm belied her inner turmoil, though she was amused and appreciative at David’s reaction—and felt as if she were only half dressed. She knew that she was going to be very self-conscious until she got used to the feel of going around half naked.

“Let’s do it,” Bellingham said. “And I have another suggestion: If we find Murphy, let’s have Fran ask him for a meeting to buy some Hypnol. That way, if we happen to lose him, we’ll have another way to pick him up again, through her.”

David reluctantly agreed. “I still don’t like this, but I have to admit, once Murphy sees Fran, he, nor anyone else, will be watching us. Hell, the way you’re dressed, Fran, we could probably walk into a club with our badges pinned on our chests and no one would notice.”

“Then let’s go,” Bellingham said.

David and Francis followed him out the door, arm in arm. A few minutes later, they were driving away, headed for Montrose, Murphy’s most frequent area of operations when not dealing to the upscale residents of the Kingwood area where the money was better.

Behind them, unnoticed, a plain brown sedan slowly pulled out of the parking lot and took up a position behind them. Smith hadn’t wasted any time in getting a tail on them. A minute later a second car followed, a two-year-old Lincoln town car. The two men inside were strangers to both the detectives and the federal agents, but the Mole would have recognized them had he still been alive and capable of seeing anything.

Juan “Silky” Sanchez now knew every detail about Hypnol, the new drug, extracted from the Mole over a period of several excruciating hours of torture and he intended to get his hands on a supply no matter what the cost. The only impediment to his plans was that he had no idea where Worthington was hiding while he was preparing the next batch of the drug. Silky Sanchez already had a squad of soldiers out leaning on every dealer and user he could think of, trying to run down Worthington’s location but so far the bastard had eluded him.

He also had a pair of gunsels trying to track down Boyd Murphy, whom he had heard was scheduled to receive a big portion of the next shipment of Hypnol that Worthington produced. And finally, he and his most trusted associate, Castro Alvarez, had just begun to keep tabs on the lead detective, David O’Neal, whom he thought probably had the best chance of finding Worthington.

Doing his own foot work was something new to Sanchez, but from what the Mole had told him about the drug, and from all he had heard about it, he didn’t mind a bit. If he could get his hands on Worthington, and an exclusive supply of the drug, he would no longer have to worry about competition, nor bribes nor paying off South American politicians. Hell, with a big supply of Hypnol and control of the formula, the whole world would open out to him, like a plate of oysters, each

containing a perfect pearl resting inside, representing whole countries which would come under his control. All of Mexico, and all of South America, maybe even Norte Americana lay open in his imagination, ripe for exploitation. The possibilities were so wide and endless that he didn't mind a bit using some of his own time in the pursuit. It would be worth it! He touched the concealed weapon inside his suit coat and thought of how clever he was, using a Lincoln to trail the detectives. They would never suspect a car of that caliber might be tailing them.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



DAVID WAS to the cursing stage three hours later. Murphy had not been sighted in any of his usual haunts in the Montrose area and now there were less than eighteen hours to go before the next appearance of the drug—if the street information was right.

Francis was rather enjoying herself, in a way. The clothes she was wearing had not been bought with the idea of so blatantly displaying her body, but rather as a good looking casual outfit to be worn with underwear and the blouse buttoned. It had been disconcerting at first, both embarrassing and discomfiting, as she observed the gaping mouths and avaricious eyes following her as she worked the bars and clubs in Montrose, having to fend off approaches right and left, from men—and not a few females, something she had not anticipated. She was extremely self-conscious at first, but after becoming used to the attention, she began to identify with the role she was playing, much as she had back in high school when she had starred in several plays. She began talking with the ecdysiasts between numbers, pretending that she was new in town and looking around for a good club to work in. When unable to avoid answering questions from the women or when she had little idea of what the conversation was about, she simply turned to an admiring man, at least several of them were always nearby, and let one of them buy her a drink.

Francis tried to spend no more than ten or fifteen minutes in each place, staying only long enough to be certain that Boyd Murphy wasn't on the premises, then moving on. All the time, she held tight to the little black hand purse containing her pistol, glad that so many men and women were willing to pay for her drinks so that she never had to open it and possibly have the weapon spotted.

David wasn't the only person cursing as he waited impatiently at each club for Francis to check it out. The two NSC agents trailing him and Bellingham had so far been unable to find a good spot to apprehend them without attracting attention and they, too, knew that time was running out.

"That was the last one," David said disconsolately as he got out and let Francis

slide into the front seat between himself and Bellingham. "Where in hell can that bastard be?"

"There's still the clubs in north Houston," Bellingham said.

"Yeah, but he doesn't go north very often, according to his sheet."

"Well, we're not doing any good here and he always shows up in Kingwood when he's holding coke. Why don't we try it?"

"I'm game," Francis said, a little laugh entering her voice. Her words were slightly slurred. The drinks she had thought she should sample to keep in character had begun to affect her.

David touched her thigh, running his hands up and down the smooth expanse of silky material, feeling her warm flesh beneath it. In other circumstances, he would have loved to touch every portion of her body but the lack of progress and the fact that he was still worrying about her safety was distracting him. Francis covered his hand with her own and leaned closer to whisper in his ear. "Stop it, please. You'll have me crawling all over you if you don't." David relented, simply holding hands with her while Bellingham drove.

SMITH'S NEW agents were very good. Neither David nor Bellingham had spotted the tail, even though both had been watching for just such an occurrence. And Smith's agents were concentrating so hard on the detectives that they failed to notice the Lincoln following them both. Sanchez had watched Francis going in and out of the Montrose clubs and suspected that the detectives had hired a stripper to help run down Murphy. Sanchez watched her with avaricious eyes. If his other goal didn't have such a high priority, he would have approached the woman himself and offered her an unlimited supply of coke or money to come with him. She really was a looker.

A HALF HOUR later David pulled into the parking lot of the first of the topless (and bottomless) clubs they intended to check just south of the Humble area. It was a part of the city that had deteriorated in recent years, now devoted mostly to topless clubs, dance halls, bars and seedy housing tracts. The inhabitants, illegal immigrants and poor white and black families, either slaved in decrepit industrial buildings or made their living through small-time gambling, theft, prostitution and dealing small amounts of crack and heroin, cut and diluted to reflect the disdain of the main suppliers for this deprived class of buyers. Most of the customers coming into the clubs were from other parts of the city, seeking almost pure drugs, well-endowed prostitutes and exotic entertainment, and they had the resources to pay for their vices.

Francis, recovered a bit from the alcohol during the drive, got out to go inside the

first club, leaving the car parked in an unobtrusive area where David thought they wouldn't be noticed. Smith's agents parked right near the entrance to the parking lot and watched Fran depart. It was still early in the evening and not too many vehicles were present. The evening influx of bored businessmen and convention-goers seeking entertainment hadn't arrived yet, nor had many of the hookers, pimps and drug dealers.

"I think we can take them here," the driver Smith had assigned to tail David said.

"How about the broad? What if she comes back out and sees us?" The other agent asked.

"So what?" the driver said, rubbing his crotch. "She couldn't be carrying, not the way she's dressed. There ain't an inch of her body sticking out except where it's supposed to be. If she interferes, we'll take her with us. Something for dessert after we finish with those hick detectives."

"How are we going to work it?"

"Let's get out and walk towards the entrance like we're intending to go in and watch the show. We'll pass right by their car and take them then."

"I hope the broad comes back outside in time. Man, she's a show all by herself."

"You got that right. Come on, let's go. No, wait, there's another car pulling in." The agents were forced to delay action while that vehicle then one more pulled into the lot and dispensed well dressed customers, just beginning to arrive for happy hour.

Inside, Francis flirted innocently with the bartender, letting him buy her a drink which she didn't really want. While he was mixing it, she looked around in the dimness of the club, lit mostly by stage lights where a blond dancer with a set of truly amazing breasts performed. Francis thought that was her only good feature. As she stripped, the flesh she revealed was slack and she had the beginnings of a paunch. She won't be doing this much longer, Francis thought. She saw no sign of Murphy and wondered if their quest was going to fail, after all the time and effort expended on it.

The bartender, thinking to impress Francis (or perhaps hoping that a hefty dose of alcohol would help her respond more readily to his overtures), mixed her drink much too strong. Francis took one sip and repressed a shudder. It was almost pure ethanol with just a flavoring of mix. Not wanting to arouse his suspicions and certainly not wanting to consume that much more alcohol she hurriedly thought of a way to make an exit without drawing attention.

"Excuse me, Danny, I forgot something in my car. I'll be right back." She slid off the barstool and walked toward the exit, leaving the bartender thinking to himself that she was probably going out to her car for a snort of coke and would be back shortly.

THE TWO NSC agents came up behind Bellingham's car and split to either side. David, his eye on the club's entrance, didn't see the man on his side until the barrel of a pistol was shoved against his temple through the open window which he had opened to let some air into the car. Even this late, the sun shining through the windows was producing a stifling heat. Bellingham saw the man on his side at just about the same time, but it was already too late. He was covered, too.

"Both of you. Take your pieces out, slow-like, and drop them on the floorboard, then get out and into the back seat and scrunch down." The agent was surprised and pleased at how easy it had been to take the detectives. Smith would surely want to reward him and his partner for this day's work.

David was furious with himself for letting them get caught again, but there was nothing else to do but obey orders. Thank God Fran is inside, he thought as he removed his gun from his shoulder holster and deposited it at his feet, and then opened the car door. At least she won't get hurt.

FRANCIS PAUSED at the swinging doors of the club and squinted through the sudden bright sunlight. She saw two men clustered around Bellingham's car, and as she watched, David and Bellingham got out of the car. Narrowing her eyes through sudden tears from the westering sun she tried to see who the strangers were and what they were up to. She couldn't tell, but she didn't intend to be left behind. As a precaution, she unsnapped the flap of her little purse and hurried toward the car.

"HERE COMES the broad," one of the agents said, a smirk beginning to light up his face. He prodded David with his gun, trying to hurry him into the back seat of the car so he could be the first in line for the luscious woman heading their way.

"Good," the other answered, licking his lips, also wanting to get his hands on the woman. Maybe Smith would let them have her to play with as a reward for bringing in the detectives, but whether Smith did or not, he intended to have some fun on the way.

David stopped at the rear door, not opening it yet. "Don't bother her. She's not involved," he said.

"She's going to be," the agent covering David laughed, nudging him with his gun. "Go on, get in inside."

Francis was almost running now. The residual alcohol in her system was affecting her judgment and blurring her thoughts. On the other hand, it had lowered her inhibitions enough so that she wasn't overly worried about possible danger.

"Wait for me!" She called, even though she was close enough now to see that at

least one of the strange men was holding a weapon. An idea raced through her mind as she came nearer to the car, an action she would have had trouble even considering, let alone acting on if it had not been for the alcohol affecting her judgment and her prior involvement with the policemen. She was beginning to think of herself as a partner to David and Bellingham, a woman who was no longer a simple civilian, going about her business with no concept of the dark, malignant undercurrents corrupting the city.

“Damn right we’ll wait for you!” The agent next to David said, loud enough for Francis to hear him while he admired the way the young woman’s breasts were jouncing around beneath her blouse as she ran toward him.

“Don’t hurt her,” David said again, knowing nothing he told them would have any effect whatsoever on their plans, but trying to delay getting inside the car where his options would be even more limited than they already were.

“More company!” Fran exclaimed brightly as she came to a halt almost chest to chest with the gunman covering David. The agent took his eyes off David for a moment, unable to keep himself from ogling Fran’s breasts as she halted and they bounced around inside her blouse.

David saw his chance and tried to make a move but the agent was quick and well-trained. He took his eyes from the delectable sight of Fran’s chest and avoided David’s attempt to wrest his weapon from him. Out of sight of the other gunman, and while David’s captor was distracted, Fran slid her hand inside her purse, brought up her revolver and moved it to within a couple of inches of the back of the agent’s head. Assuming that the woman who had just run up to him couldn’t possibly be concealing a weapon, the agent again motioned for David to get into the car. Unfortunately for him, David’s previous attempt to reverse the situation had put them very close together. As David reached for the handle of the rear door, he pretended to stumble, again trying to get his hands on the agent’s weapon, knowing that if he didn’t make an attempt now there was very little likelihood of having a chance later. Had the agent not had orders to bring the detectives in alive, he would probably have shot David and been done with it. Instead, he jerked back away from him. The back of his head bumped sharply against the muzzle of Fran’s pistol, causing her to squeeze the trigger without intending to. The agent’s head exploded like a ripe red grapefruit.

Bellingham saw his chance as the other agent was startled into turning half way around to see what was happening. Bellingham chopped up at the other agent’s wrist, trying to move aside at the same time and steeling his body against an expected bullet, figuring the agent would discharge his weapon into his body. To his utter surprise, it didn’t fire; the agent had never taken the safety off. Bellingham followed up the chop with a head butt, knocking the agent backwards a couple of feet. He then took a stance to give himself room and delivered a kick squarely between the unfortunate man’s upper thighs, catching his balls with the toe of his boot and crushing them against his pubic bone like a pair of walnuts hit with a

hammer. The agent collapsed, overwhelmed with pain so severe that he was unable to make any noise other than gurgling wheezes to go with the expression of almost unbearable agony distorting his features.

Francis had dropped her gun again, but she made no attempt to pick it up. She stood like an exotic mannequin, ears ringing, still mesmerized from the after-image of the agent's head splattering into oblivion like a burst balloon. Her body felt as if it were floating somewhere out in space.

David reacted quickly and efficiently to the changed circumstances, even though his first impulse was to grab Fran and hug the breath right out of her body. He looked quickly around the parking lot and saw no pedestrians. Knowing that the shot wouldn't have been heard inside the club, he quickly ran around to Bellingham's side of the car and reached down for the collar of the agent Bellingham had incapacitated. The man was beginning to move and groan in short little utterances, "Uh-uh—uh," like a pregnant woman in the first stages of labor.

"Bell! Quick, help me get him inside the car and out of sight!" Bell shook off the adrenaline rush coursing through his body from the surge of action and took the groaning agent's legs while David grabbed him by the upper arms. Between them, they quickly stuffed him into the back seat of their car. David hastily covered all but his face with a tarp he removed from the trunk. He took out his nebulizer and shot a hit into the groaning agent's face, ignoring his agony. He gave the drug a few seconds to take effect, then grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket, not being gentle about it, "Are you with the NSC?" He demanded.

"Yes," the agent answered in a squeaky voice.

"Where's your car?"

The injured man pointed.

"Come on, Bell," David said. "Hurry, before someone shows up and sees us. Fran, snap out of it! Pick up your gun and wait here a minute!"

He took the barest second to make a kissing motion in her direction then he and Bellingham slid into the back seat where the agent was attempting to kick off the tarpaulin. David turned on the miniature recorder he had been carrying for when and if they finally caught up with Murphy, if they ever did. He prodded the prostate agent; getting no response except a groan, he slapped him brutally across the face.

"Why were you tailing us," he demanded, raising his hand for a second blow if his captive didn't answer quickly.

The agent flinched, then spoke up. "We were supposed to take you to the house and find out what you knew," he said, truthfully.

"And then what?"

"I don't know for sure. Probably dump you and your partner and the broad into

the bayou.”

“Is Smith behind all this?”

“You mean Mister Terrell?”

“If he’s the one calling himself Smith, yeah.”

“He’s the agent in charge. He gives the orders.”

David felt like killing the man right then, just like he and Bell had just come so close to being murdered. Giving it some rapid thought, he decided there was no other alternative, much as he disliked the idea. One of the NSC men was already dead and he couldn’t leave a witness behind to trump up charges against himself and Bell—or Francis. Besides, the man had intended to rape Fran—or worse. Taking out both agents might throw Smith off the trail long enough for him to get his work done, if he could ever locate Murphy.

David heaved a sigh of regret. This was a bad scene and what he was contemplating was even worse. He didn’t know if he could go through with it or not.

Bellingham was standing beside David, waiting to see how his friend planned to handle the situation. They had just caused the death of one NSC agent and he knew Smith, that lowlife bastard, would come gunning for them now with fire in his eyes, bent on revenge. While Bellingham waited, David came to a reluctant decision.

“Sit up and take off your jacket,” he said to the trembling young man who still had both hands clutched to his groin.

The agent complied. David wrapped the jacket around his pistol that he had recovered from the floorboard.

“Turn your head,” he ordered.

“Dave—” Bellingham began.

David hesitated. He didn’t want to execute the man but there didn’t seem to be any other choice.

“Bell, what else can I do?” He asked, looking at his friend with features so contorted that Bellingham wouldn’t have known him under normal circumstances.

Bellingham suddenly remembered the recording they had made. “David, wait! We’ve got a record of this fuck’s confession! You don’t have to kill him, just put the tape away in a safe place and send Smith a duplicate. He won’t dare try to prosecute us with it in our possession!”

David let out a long sigh of relief.

“Bell, I’m a fucking dummy. You’re right. We can just let this little fuck go!”

Bellingham grinned. “We can do better than that! If you have any Hypnol left,

give him another shot and tell him to go take Smith out! I won't feel a bit guilty after what he did to Jones."

"Goddamn right, Bell! I won't either, and with Smith out of the way, we'll have a free ride while we look for Murphy. Bell, you're a fucking genius!"

"I'm handsome, smart and sexy, too," Bellingham bragged. "Come on, let's do it."

David ordered their captive back out of the car. He squeezed another shot of Hypnol into his face then gave him his orders: "Listen up, motherfucker! I want you to go directly back to Smith—I mean Terrell's—office, then shoot him dead. You want to plug that sonofabitch so many times he'll look like a piece of Swiss cheese, don't you?"

"Yeah, I want to shoot Terrell. Where's my gun?"

David gave it to him, feeling not a single qualm over his orders. If anyone deserved to die, it was Smith. He watched the agent walk bandy-legged over to his car and drive off, then suddenly remembered that Fran was still standing beside them, looking as if she had just undergone a strenuous workout with all her clothes on, such as they were. She was sweating profusely and reminded him of an infantryman from the Desert Storm war who had been missing in action for days, lost deep in an extensive range of sand dunes after he wandered off from his truck to relieve himself. The same thousand yard stare and haggard features she was displaying were not much different from that of the soldier when he had finally been re-united with his unit.

David gathered Francis in his arms, knowing how she must feel, having just killed a man, even though it had been an accident. He brushed a few locks of disarrayed hair from her forehead and put his arm around her, using the pressure of his hand to urge her toward their car. He would have loved to comfort her in a more endearing manner but there simply was no time to spare. Keeping his arm around Fran, David motioned to Bellingham. "Come on Bell, let's haul ass while we still have a chance." He began urging Francis into the back seat of their vehicle, then after she was seated, climbed in beside her.

"Head for the river Bell, just in case some other SOB is following us. I need to talk to Fran."

As Bellingham drove, Francis gradually began coming out of her fugue. By the time they were parked in a secluded area Bell and David sometimes retired to for a relaxing hour or so away from the job where they could have a beer and discuss the myriad faults of their superiors, the justice system and the rapaciousness of lawyers, Francis was almost fully recovered.

PARKED IN a cul de sac near where David was stroking Fran's body and

murmuring words of comfort to her, Silky Sanchez was wondering what in hell was going on. He had followed the detectives and the girl in his Lincoln, knowing that the policemen were driving down a dead end, unpaved road, but he had no idea of what they were up to. He and his subordinate exchanged puzzled glances.

“What in hell was that all about?” Sanchez asked rhetorically, not expecting an answer. He began peeling the cellophane from a cigar.

The other shrugged. “Word is, the town is flooded with spooks. It could have been them. Or one of the other big boys, trying for some of the action, just like we are.”

Out of the mouth of babes, Sanchez said to himself. He discarded the cellophane and rolled the cigar around between his lips to wet it down.

“So, you got any suggestions?”

“You’re the boss Silk, but I say stay with them. Sooner or later, they’re going to find Worthington, then we can take them out.”

Sanchez grunted, a rumble coming from deep inside his chest. He struck a match and puffed on his cigar until the end glowed.

“If you ask me, Cas, we better take that broad out first. She blew that fucker’s brains out like a fucking pro. In fact, I’m not so sure she isn’t. Cops use them sometimes.”

Castro shrugged. “Maybe she is. It don’t make no difference. She’s gotta be dead meat, just like them gumshoes.”

“That’s okay, but we got to keep them on ice until we locate Worthington. Shit, what if another team shows up and grabs them dicks before we can?”

“No problem, boss. We can always go after that Wilson prick, too, the one that made the buy.”

“So what if someone grabs him first?”

Castro appeared to consider the possibility. “Boss, I don’t think it matters. No one is going to take him or these fucks out before they give up Ben Worthington. All we gotta do is stay close and make sure we grab the Hypnol. That’s all that matters.”

Sanchez removed the cigar from his mouth and held it with two fingers and his thumb, observing it as if it contained knowledge of the ages. He glanced over at his partner, thinking to himself that two persons were one to many to keep the secret of Hypnol.

CHAPTER TWENTY



AT THE AGENCY safe house, sitting on the dilapidated couch that was one of the few pieces of furniture, Smith replayed the tape David had expeditiously forwarded to his office by a taxi driver. He listened to the agent's voice with a sense of disbelief that an operation could get so fucked up so quickly.

Enraged, Smith threw the tape across the room, bouncing it against the opposite wall. The plastic cracked, spilling coils of magnetic tape from one end. Couldn't anyone do anything right? Smith got up and paced nervously, trying to decide what to do next. Surely O'Neal had a copy of the tape, so prosecution was out of the question. He couldn't even order a termination now that O'Neal had quit reporting back to his office—and not while he was still after Worthington. The only alternative was to keep trailing Gene Wilson and start looking for O'Neal again. Surely the detective was hunting Worthington and that might provide another opportunity as soon as he was located again.

As if thinking about the captive produced a string which reeled him back to the new safe house, which Smith knew O'Neal hadn't discovered during the questioning, there came a coded knock at the door. Smith himself went to answer it. He peeked through the small observation bubble. His mouth opened in surprise to see his missing agent standing at the doorway with his hand inside his coat. Quickly, Smith motioned to Brandon, the only other agent present, to go open the door. In the meantime, he drew his own weapon and held it ready. Seconds later, he was glad that he had. As soon as the door opened, the man yanked his pistol out and shot Brandon in the chest then ducked into a formal firing position and scanned the room, obviously looking for his boss.

Smith was just a little bit quicker and already prepared. He fired three times in rapid succession. The Hypnol-dosed agent staggered backwards under the impact of the slugs then collapsed, dead before he hit the floor. Smith cursed, knowing that somehow O'Neal had turned his cohort, probably by using some more Hypnol. He walked slowly forward and stared down at the two dead men, feeling no emotion other than the fact that now he was really short of agents and there wasn't enough time left to recruit more. From now on, he was going to have to get out and do some of his own work. It was a goddamned shame except for one consolation: he knew that he was going to have the satisfaction of taking care of O'Neal personally. He found himself hoping that he could keep the girl alive. He thought that the detective was the sort who would spill everything he knew rather than let anything happen to his woman. Smith reloaded and holstered his gun. Working on the woman would be pure pleasure after this fuck-up, and forcing O'Neal to watch would add an extra bit of delight to the operation. The loss of two agents was going to hurt, but it wasn't all bad.

As Smith made preparations to move to yet another safe house, he remembered

that with the loss of Brandon and the other man, he now had only one agent left, that Freeholder fuck-up, to keep tabs on O'Neal, even if he should find him. Goddamit! He thought of his boss in Washington. What would he do if the detective found the source of the Hypnol before he did? It didn't take much imagination to realize that his boss and the senator would show less concern about disposing of him than they would a stray dog. He felt the dawning threat in his gut as if he were on a sinking ship with neither life preservers nor lifeboats. It was a good thing that Gene Wilson was still working for him. He was a wimp and a fuck-up but better than nothing, and he did have that one other agent he could send out to find O'Neal and keep tabs on the detective while he waited on Murphy to call. The game wasn't over yet! As soon as Boyd Murphy led him to Worthington, O'Neal was going to regret every goddamned thing that had happened since Hypnol made its first appearance. He would see to that!

BEN IGNORED the girl's body as he drained the last of the Hypnol from the big retort containing the new batch of his drug. He began wiping down surfaces and cleaning up after himself then stopped what he was doing. A killing always left evidence, especially the way he had gone about it. There must be hair and fibers and threads from his clothing all over the room, not to mention voluminous amounts of his semen, both inside and outside the girl's body. Too bad he had gotten carried away and not made her last until he was finished, but it really didn't matter. There were others, throngs of them, as many as he wanted, just waiting, never suspecting the power he now possessed, power such as no one else had ever held, not in the whole long history of the human race.

Ben looked over at the girl's body again. A fire would dispose of the evidence. He wondered why he hadn't thought of that before. A fire would destroy everything. The thought filled him with pride and a sudden need to repeat the sexual experience. Maybe this time he would take a really young one, just to see what the pederasts found so exciting about it. Yes, that's what he would do, just as soon as he delivered Murphy's share of this batch of Hypnol and collected his payment. After that, it would all be fun and more fun, for the rest of his life. And no one could stop him.

Ben split the liquid drug into a series of vials. Let Murphy do the work of breaking it down into individual hits. That's what dealers were for. He had more important things to think about.

After making certain that he had everything he wanted from this place, Ben dialed the number he used to contact Murphy and left a message.

"Call me at this number between eleven and midnight. I have your shipment ready." He knew Murphy would get the message from his pager within an hour or two, leaving him plenty of time to check into a motel, not designated as yet. He would wait in the parking lot or some other place out of sight to make certain Murphy wasn't being followed.

After making one more round of the room, he scattered the remains of the volatile chemicals he had left over around the bed and over the girl's body. He wanted to be sure that it was totally consumed. Satisfied, he struck a match and threw it onto the bed. It landed beside the girl's head, almost unrecognizable now as anything which might have once been human. The fire caught and flames began spreading rapidly. Ben picked up his bags and left, almost floating with the power he felt lifting his spirits to undreamed of heights.

DAVID DECIDED that they all needed a break before continuing, even though time was growing ever shorter. Fran, unused to the proximity of so much violence or involvement in the most complex and important case of David's career, needed time to recover, not to mention a chance to wash off the bits of blood, brains and bone from the backlash of her accidental shot to the head of Smith's agent. Her clothes were unblemished but some of the gore had splattered her face. More of it had gotten on David, and he needed a quick shower and a change of clothes as much as Fran needed to wash her face. In fact, they all needed a rest before hitting the streets again.

David was still wondering if he had done the right thing by sending the doped up agent after Smith with orders to kill. It bothered him more than he wanted to admit. Never, during all the years of his career, had he even thought of taking justice into his own hands. He knew he was going to have unpleasant thoughts of what he had done for a long time to come, even though, like many other cops, he had occasional fantasies about disposing of a really evil miscreant, especially one of those who managed to beat the system and walk out of the courtrooms scot-free. He knew the justice system wasn't perfect, not by a long shot, but those sort of cases grated on his nerves.

David decided that his own place was probably safe for another few hours so they went there. He let Bellingham drive while he comforted Fran as best he could. She was still in a mild state of shock but seemed to be recovering. Just having her next to him made him feel somewhat easier, too. After all, Fran was now as mixed up in the Hypnot case as he was, if not more.

Once ensconced behind his security screen and into fresh clothes, David poured brandy for all of them. Fran decided that now she really needed something to take the edge off her reaction to the events she had participated in over the last several days. It was all so far removed from her previous existence that she felt as if she had been transported to a foreign country where the culture was so strange as to be almost incomprehensible. While they drank, with Bellingham seated opposite David and Fran nestled against him on the couch, David thought over the events of the past hour.

"You know, Bell," he said, "I think it would be a good idea if we drove separate vehicles from now on. If that little scumbag doesn't do Smith in, there's no telling what will go down. It's me they were tailing, not you. I doubt if either of them even

knew who you were.”

“I got you, but if our man misses, Smith might wring the information from him—and find out that I’m a cop. What’s the purpose of separate vehicles then?” Bellingham said.

David swirled the brandy remaining in his glass. “I hate to admit it, but I think I’ve proved that I need a backup before I get myself and Fran both killed. What with Smith, Gene and God knows who else after the Hypnol I won’t feel safe with us all in the same car.”

Bellingham rubbed his chin as if he were imitating David’s mannerism. “You know, Dave, I think I have to agree with you, but there’s only one of me. What happens if it turns out that there are several gangs after you—or Murphy or Worthington try to take you out? You and Fran could both get blown away or captured and there’s not much I could do to help. Think of something else.”

David decided that they could stand one more helping of brandy but he poured the glasses only half full and added coffee to them. Time was short now, very short, and he didn’t want them to have their senses dulled. He sipped from his glass, feeling the powerful liquor warm him up inside and give his mind a mild shock, like suddenly being alerted to a breaking story on the evening news. He thought over everything which had happened since Fran’s first complaint, trying to determine if he was missing anything. Suddenly he remembered Preston’s promise to cooperate and wondered if there was any help to be had from that source. The image of Bobby Jenkins appeared in his mind, too, his earnest demeanor forming a picture that reminded him of a young boy out fishing on a calm summer day. And then there was Bradshaw. Could he trust the captain?

David stood up and walked around, swirling the brandy and coffee mixture without looking down at it. A small amount of it slopped over the rim of the glass and dampened the carpet. He ignored it. Something was trying to rise out of his subconscious, like barely remembered words from an old book. And suddenly he had it.

David faced Bellingham and tendered the proposition. “Bell, Preston came to me with a promise to cooperate anyway he could so long as it would prevent Worthington from dropping another big batch of Hypnol on the street. Also, I’ve been ignoring Bobby Jenkins. He wants to help, too. Suppose we put them on call, but not let them know exactly what’s going down yet? Tell them to keep their phones handy, but don’t call them unless we fall into a pile of shit. Would that work?”

Bellingham drained his glass and set it down on the coffee table. “It would help,” he said, “but can you trust them?”

“I know I can trust Bobby Jenkins. He’s as anxious to keep this junk under wraps as we are. As for Preston, he came across like an alter boy on Easter morning when I talked to him. I think he’ll be straight with us, but even in the worst case,

supposing he's still after the Hypnot, we'd still have him for a back-up—and in any case, after it all goes down, you and I should be able to handle him.”

Bellingham eyed David and especially Francis, sitting beside him. Like David, he was feeling decidedly uncomfortable over Francis' involvement in the chase. The thought of having a back-up on call eased his mind considerably.

“Okay, boss, it sounds all right by me. Let's do it.”

David gave a sigh of relief and patted Fran's thigh.

“Thanks, Bell. I'm glad you agree. The way things have been going, I'm liable to get us both killed without some help waiting off stage. I'll lay out our itinerary for the rest of the clubs and you can follow, but not close enough for anyone to notice. Then if we get in trouble, maybe Fran can keep her gun in her purse instead of having to use it to rescue us again.” He smiled at Fran. “That could get old pretty fast.”

“It's already getting old,” Francis said. “If I have to go through anything like that again, you had better start looking for someone else to use as bait.”

“You did good,” Bellingham reassured her. “I've seen veteran cops freeze in situations not nearly as bad. You're a natural.”

“No I'm not. I'm just a woman falling in love with a detective that needs rescuing more often than a quadriplegic who's lost his wheelchair,” Francis said.

David pulled her face to him and kissed her thoroughly, unmindful of Bellingham sitting just a few feet from them. Fran's expression had suddenly made him realize that he was falling in love with her, too. He had never expected to find anyone like her, caring yet decisive in the face of odds which would have set most women to screaming and flapping their arms in useless confusion.

“Did I say something right?” Francis asked when she came up for air.

“More right than you know.” David took a deep breath and drained the last of the brandy. He looked at his watch. “Twelve more hours, folks. We better get moving if we intend to find Murphy. Bell, Fran and I will go in her Jeep; it's not a cop-type car.” He reached for the phone book beneath the side table of the couch and thumbed through the yellow pages until he came to the listing of night clubs specializing in exotic dancers, checking each of them against the ones listed on Murphy's sheet. He took a pad and pencil and began writing, making two copies. When he was finished, he handed one list to Bellingham and tucked the other into his shirt pocket.

“This is where we'll be checking for Murphy, in the order I've listed the clubs. Don't follow too close but don't lose us, either.”

Just as they were leaving, the phone rang. “Ignore it,” David said. “It's probably just the captain. If we're alive tomorrow I'll explain all this shit to him.”

“Always glad to work with an optimist,” Bellingham said.

A few minutes later, they were on their way.

Murphy was finally run to ground at the second place they stopped. By this time Francis had his image printed in her mind as firmly as if it had been scanned into a computer and saved in a permanent file. She had also become familiar with the décor and arrangement of the strip clubs and how the patrons crowded around areas where the action was taking place. She threaded her way through a nest of tables and chairs, set as close together as seats in an auditorium, then past another group of more spacious accommodations where the big spenders paid for leg room—and other things.

Francis recognized Murphy at once, even though his face was animated with lust from the woman performing a lap dance for him, her gyrating loins almost touching his nose. As she watched, he pulled a bill from a roll and tucked it into her G-string, a garment so small and flimsy that there was barely room for the bill.

Francis looked away from Murphy and headed to the bar. She slid onto a stool and ordered a drink quickly before someone offered to buy one for her. She took her time with this drink, not wanting to attract any more attention than she already had by her provocatively tempting stroll through the club. She sipped her drink and fended off several advances from hopeful men and one woman, telling each of them that she was meeting someone else. Finally, when she thought enough time had passed, she pushed her glass away, declined the offer of another from the barmaid and sauntered out, leaving only the dregs of her drink behind her in the cocktail glass. Once outside, Francis saw that Bellingham had caught up with them and was chatting briefly with David.

David could almost tell from Francis’ expression that she had found their man. He held his breath, waiting, until she came up to the car window and spoke in excited tones. “He’s in there! Now what do we do?”

“Now we wait,” David said. “It’s only ten hours until the drug is supposed to be on the street. That means Murphy must be going to meet Worthington before too long.” He yawned. “Do y’all think you can stay awake until morning?”

Bellingham imitated David’s yawn then felt around in his pocket and brought out a tin of pills. “How about some Nodoz?” he asked

“I think we can all use it,” David said. “It’s still going to be a long wait.”

He took a pill from Bellingham and handed one to Fran. They chased the pills with drinks from a bottle of Ozarka. David yawned again, then turned to Bellingham, “You know, I think I’ve got a better idea than just hanging around and then following Murphy. Why don’t we grab him as soon as he leaves here and make the sonofabitch talk? That way, we’ll know where he’s meeting Worthington right now.”

“What if Worthington hasn’t called him yet?”

“If he hasn’t, I bet he will before long,” David said. “In fact, I’ll give odds that’s what he’s in this part of town for. This is a long way from where he usually hangs out, and we know that the first source of Hypnol originated in this area.”

“How will we take him?” Bellingham asked, feeling the usual sense of rising excitement when preparing for a bust.

“Easy,” David said. “That is, if Fran doesn’t mind using a little coercion on him.”

“Like what?” Francis asked. Again, she felt as if she were in a plane descending toward a landing in some strange foreign country.

“All you have to do is go back in and play up to him. As soon as he gets a phone call, lure him outside, or if he doesn’t bring him out anyway. In either case, try to keep his attention focused on you.” David looked her up and down appreciatively. “That shouldn’t be a problem, should it?”

“Not if I can get him away from that lap dancer,” Francis said. Remembering the almost painful exhibition of lust Murphy had been displaying when she spotted him, she found herself dreading the prospect of going anywhere near the man.

“If she’s any competition, I want to meet her,” David said, drawing a poke in the ribs for his effort. He held up his nebulizer which still contained a small amount of Hypnol. “I have enough of this stuff left for a couple more hits. I’ll use it on him to find out where he’s meeting Worthington, then Fran and I will follow him in my car. Bell, you can tail us. With any kind of luck at all we can wrap this all up by daylight.”

Francis hesitated. “David, this is asking a lot of me. You didn’t see that scum in there with a woman standing practically in his lap, with her G-string close enough to his face to get hung up on his teeth. He was masturbating through his pants like a twelve year old and looked as tripped out as a California Moonie.”

“Remember what Ben did to you. And what Gene intended to do.” David hated to remind Fran of either incident, but he knew she was the best bet of getting Murphy alone long enough and close enough to dose him with Hypnol. Murphy hadn’t remained free so long by being stupid, regardless of Fran’s description of him.

Francis took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “All right. I’ll do it. I’ll try not to get sick on him.”

David kissed her. “Thanks Fran.”

Francis made certain that she passed in front of Murphy when she went back inside. He was sitting at the bar now, but with his back to it so that he could watch the stage. Francis walked slowly, undulating her hips and moving her upper body enough to cause her breasts to sway back and forth beneath her flimsy blouse, producing a spectacular effect. Every man in the place who wasn’t hypnotized by a lap dancer or the two women getting down to the basics on stage followed her with their eyes. She ignored them and took a seat at the bar, only one stool away from

Murphy. When he turned around to get another look at the beautiful woman who had entered the club and sat down near him, Francis gave him a teasing smile then turned away. This is getting ridiculous, she thought. I'm a nurse, not a goddamned undercover cop.

A minute later, from her peripheral vision she saw a man slide onto the stool next to her. She didn't have to turn around to know who it was.

"Hey, I haven't seen you here before. Can I buy you a drink?" Murphy was no longer interested in the stage show.

Now Francis did twist around to face her quarry. She smiled slowly again and used her hands to smooth her blouse down over her breasts, trying to appear appreciative of Murphy's gaze, which was locked with undivided attention on the considerable cleavage displayed by the half-open blouse.

"Sure. Thanks. What's your name?"

"Murphy. Boyd Murphy. Where you from?"

"Las Vegas. I heard the clubs pay good here."

"They do. Hey, if you're looking for a job, maybe I can help. I got some influence with most of the owners," Murphy said expansively—and probably inaccurately.

The bartender slid a drink in front of Francis, the same thing Murphy was drinking, scotch on the rocks.

Francis tried her best to look interested. "Hey, that's good. I don't want to go to work just anywhere. Maybe you could sort of steer me in the right direction?"

"No problem at all. Anything else you need?" Murphy was exuberant at the good fortune which had caused this luscious woman to choose him for her attentions, so much so that he didn't bother wondering why she should have picked him despite his defective eye and pockmarked face.

"I could use some crack if you know where I can score," Francis said.

Murphy knew he had her now. Crack heads would do anything for a rock, and if this broad performed as well as she looked it would be worth parting with a hit or two. And if her actions didn't coincide with her appearance, well, he was going to be scoring big with some Hypnol in a few hours. Probably this dame hadn't heard of it yet. If crack didn't work, Hypnol certainly would.

"I can get you anything you need," Murphy bragged. He put his hand on Francis' thigh and squeezed, then began moving his hand up and down, stopping just short of her crotch. He was already getting another erection, even after just paying for a lap dance. Francis felt nothing at all from his touch other than an abiding, overriding disgust at the touch of his hand, as if a snake was crawling up her leg.

“Great. Let’s go.” Fran said, feeling an urgent desire to get out of the club and away from Murphy’s unwelcome attentions.

Murphy looked at his Rolex. “Sure, babe, but we’ll have to wait a few minutes. I’m expecting a call.” As if on signal, his mobile phone began vibrating in the pocket of his jacket. He pulled it out and flipped it open. Fran listened closely though she pretended she wasn’t interested. Maybe he would reveal Worthington’s location just from his conversation.

No such luck. Murphy spoke only a few words. “Yeah. No, no one. Yeah, I got it ready for you, mixed bills. Yeah. Okay, see you then.”

He flipped the phone closed and returned it to his pocket. All the time he was talking, he continued his exploration of Francis’ thighs, moving his hand from one to the other then inching his way up toward her crotch.

“Was that your call?” Francis asked nonchalantly, wondering if she could endure much more.

“Yeah. We can go now,” Murphy said. God, what a great evening this was turning out to be!

“Great!” Francis said. She slid off the barstool, the movement again causing Murphy to get an eyeful. He put his arm around her waist as they walked outside.

“My car is this way,” Murphy said. His hand crept up to the under slope of her breast.

“I can’t wait.” Francis said, walking faster, as if she were beginning to feel the first uncomfortable twinges of withdrawal symptoms.

Murphy laughed, a cackle that sounded like something from a dirty barnyard. “I can’t either,” he said. “What do I get for turning you on?”

“I’ll give you something you won’t believe,” Francis said, bumping him with her hip in order to dislodge his roaming hand. What she really wanted to do was to grab his testicles and squeeze them until he begged for mercy.

“Sounds like a winner to me,” Murphy said. God what a body! And her attitude! Shit, he probably wouldn’t even have to waste any Hypnol on her!

“Here’s my car,” Murphy said. “Slide in and you can show me your stuff.” He pulled a vial of crack cocaine from his pocket and held it in front of her, thinking it would tantalize her into immediate action.

Francis went around to the other side of the pale blue Cadillac Murphy drove, using the barrier of the big car to quickly dip her hand into her purse and bring out the nebulizer, holding both it and the purse in the same hand. She hoped beyond reason that she would have no problem giving him the hit.

Francis slid into the passenger seat, using the barrier of her right leg to conceal

the Hypnot. Murphy reached for her. Francis allowed him to put an arm around her shoulder. She turned into his embrace, then dropped her little purse and lifted her free hand with the nebulizer in it. She sprayed the drug directly into Murphy's face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



THEY'RE IN the car," Bellingham said, unnecessarily. David had been watching. As both doors closed he held his breath and clenched his fists. He bit down and ground his teeth. The wait was almost unbearable. He had fumed inside as he watched Fran and Murphy walking together, the scummy dealer feeling her up like a two bit whore. He started to get out of the car.

Bellingham grabbed his arm. "Dave, wait. Give her a little time, for God's sake!"

David clenched and unclenched his fists. He knew that Bell was right but his friend wasn't in love with Fran. If that slimy character so much as harmed a hair on her head, he vowed to include him in his plan—after tearing him into little pieces!

The doors of the Cadillac opened and David breathed a sigh of relief as Murphy and Francis began walking toward them, this time separated by a reasonable distance, with Murphy out in front of Fran as if he were being directed.

"Stop," Francis told Murphy when they got to the car, on David's side. "He's all yours, sweetheart," she said to David. "But I hope we have some time to spare before going after Ben. I want to take a shower and wash this bastard's filth off of me. And as soon as possible!"

"Let's find out if we have the time," David said. "Get in the back seat Murphy, you slime bag, and stay there and be quiet until I tell you otherwise."

Murphy didn't contest the name-calling, apparently aware that he was indeed a slime bag and knew it in his heart. He slid into the back seat and sat quietly, waiting for instructions. David grabbed Francis and embraced her as hard as if he had been off to a war for years and this was his homecoming.

"Thank you. Thank you," he murmured to her.

Francis hugged David back and felt the uncleanness she had imagined clinging to her body evaporate. "It's all right," she told David. "It's all right now."

David released her. "Bell, I'm going to let Fran drive Murphy's car while I question this little turd. You watch for anyone tailing us. Fran, if that's okay with you, head back to my place. It should still be clean."

"I'll keep watch, but don't take any chances with that Murphy fucker,"

Bellingham warned.

“It’s all right, Bell. He’s under the influence.”

“Did you see anyone tailing us?” David asked Bellingham once they were safely back at his apartment behind locked doors.

“Nope. I think we’re clean, so far. I did see a Lincoln town car a couple of times, but it was way back. I doubt that it was following us. That’s not the type of vehicle the spooks use.”

“We may be clean now, but that won’t last,” David said. “Those spooks might be scumbags but they aren’t dumb. Smith will have someone on us again before long. I just hope he doesn’t catch up to us before we meet Worthington.”

“Me, too,” Bellingham said. “We’ve been lucky too goddamned often for my money. What did you find out from the slime bag there?” He gestured toward Murphy, sitting quietly against the wall.

“He’ll get his final call from Worthington between eleven and twelve.” David looked at his watch. “Damn, only two hours from now. God, I hope we can wind this up tonight and get back to our normal routine. Someone like Segram will seem like a kid shoplifting a pack of cigarettes after this.”

“You got that right,” Bellingham said. “Tell you what, let me make a pit stop here right quick, then I’ll go back down to the parking lot and keep watch in case Smith tags us again. I’ll follow when you leave.”

“Good thinking Bell. Do it.”

Bellingham spent a few minutes in the bathroom then departed, leaving David and Francis waiting with Murphy. David questioned the dealer some more, then gave him explicit instructions about what to say when Worthington called again, in essence telling him to act as he always did so that Worthington would not be the least bit suspicious. Finally satisfied, he and Francis sat quietly together, just waiting, knowing the climax to all the events of the last couple of weeks was fast approaching.

It seemed as if days had passed before Murphy’s cellular phone finally rang.

“If that’s Worthington, answer him just like I told you to,” David said, reinforcing his previous commands. “And write down the time and place where you’re to meet.”

Murphy flipped open his phone and quickly began listening and writing at the same time. When he hung up a minute or so later, David thought he was beginning to act fidgety. It had been several hours since his dose of Hypnol.

“What time?” David asked.

“Uh, three o’clock.” Murphy shook his head as if trying to clear his mind of a bothersome thought.

“Where?”

“At the Holiday Inn on the Beltway, near the airport. Room 154.” Again, Murphy answered hesitantly.

“I think he’s coming out of it,” Francis said, unconsciously shrinking back into the cushions of the couch.

“It’s eleven-thirty,” David said. “That makes it three and a half hours until they meet. I was hoping for a little better spread but we better give him another dose now to keep him under.”

“You do it,” Francis said. “I don’t want to go near him again.” She stared at Murphy with a venomous look of utter contempt.

“I don’t blame you,” David said. “Give me the nebulizer and I’ll do it.” David took the bulb from Francis and dispensed the last hit remaining into Murphy’s face, instructing him to breathe deeply as he did. He wrapped the gadget in a towel and crushed it with a hammer then flushed it down the commode. Coming back into the den, he brushed his hands together. “That’s it. From now on we do things the hard way. I just hope that hit lasts long enough to keep him under control until we catch Worthington.” He smiled fondly at Fran, knowing how happy she was feeling now that the last of the Hypnol had been used.

Francis surprised him. “Why didn’t you just tie him up for the time being? We might have needed that last hit for Worthington.”

Shit! “Sorry Fran, I’m getting groggy, even with the NoDoz. It’s been a long week. Well, that last hit should last, don’t you think?”

“Probably,” Francis said hesitantly. “It took that long to wear off when I got dosed.”

GENE KEPT looking at his watch. “Murphy should have called me by now,” he said to Smith. “He told me it’s always three or four hours between Worthington notifying him and the pick up.”

Smith stared at Gene like a GS-4 clerk who had just made a grievous error on a critically important report. “You’d better hope he calls,” he said.

“What if he doesn’t?”

“Then we have no further need for you.”

“Don’t talk like that! What if O’Neal has gotten to him?”

“Hmm. Let’s wait. We should pick up his trail any time now. If O’Neal has him, you can go along to the meeting.” Smith was thinking that if anything else went wrong, maybe Gene would be useful in distracting O’Neal, or Murphy, or even the fibs if those incompetents happened to enter the picture. After that, he could be

disposed of.

Gene shivered inside. He didn't like the way Smith was looking at him, as if he were a piece of spoiled meat.

Smith's cellular phone rang. He answered with alacrity, features brightening, then fading back into a scowl. A few seconds later he hung up.

"Good news?" Gene asked hopefully.

"Maybe. We've found O'Neal again. He was just seen leaving his place with a broad and another cop with him. He must be going to see Murphy."

Smith had no idea that David had already found Murphy and was to meet Worthington, nor had his agent on the scene paid any particular attention to Murphy leaving in his Cadillac since neither he nor Smith knew what the dealer looked like nor what kind of car he drove.

"IT'S TIME TO go," David said. "Are you ready Fran?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." Francis had changed clothes while they were waiting and now felt more comfortable and natural in jeans and a light sweater, with a bra beneath. And underwear.

"All right, Murphy, on your feet. It's your show now." David prodded Murphy outside and over to the Cadillac. "Drive directly there," he told the drugged dealer. "Park like you usually do, then wait until you see us on the first floor walkway near his room. Knock on the door with the signal he told you to use. When he opens up, tackle him. I'll be right behind you. Understand?"

"Yes, I understand," Murphy said. Attacking his supplier seemed like a fine idea.

David was apprehensive about letting Murphy drive off by himself, but there was no other way. He couldn't take a chance on Worthington possibly watching from concealment to be certain that Murphy was alone. As Murphy drove off in the Cadillac, he and Fran followed in her Jeep. David had decided that the jeep would be unlikely to attract Worthington's attention; there were thousands just like them in the city, most of them owned by suburbanites or tourists.

David was so intent on keeping Murphy in sight that he failed to notice Smith's agent following him. Bellingham tailed David and Francis in David's department sedan, alert to the possibility of other players who might be on the same mission they were. Before leaving, David had told him to use the radio to alert Preston and Jenkins should he spot anyone behind them. The mission was going to be hairy enough as it was, and if it turned out that their drugged agent had failed to take out Smith, he figured on needing some help. He and Bell could only handle so much by themselves.

Bellingham was more observant than David. He spotted Smith's car behind the

jeep and began cursing like a sailor. He knew it must be another NSC agent. With time so short, Smith had to take the chance that David knew of Worthington's location. Now what?

Behind Bellingham, the Lincoln town car pulled out from a secluded parking spot. Sanchez and Castro thought they were only following David and Fran in her jeep, also unaware that Murphy was leading the procession in his Cadillac. Within a few minutes, Sanchez spotted the agent's car between his Lincoln and the jeep. He watched it closely for a few minutes to be certain that what he was observing was deliberate, and then spoke to Castro.

"There's a tail on O'Neal. I think it's a cop car. He must have decided he needed a backup."

Castro shifted in the passenger seat. He wiped his hands on his trousers and began checking his Uzi. "Leave it to me, boss. I'll take him out."

"Not yet," Sanchez said. "Let's wait a bit and see what's going on."

Bellingham had spotted the Lincoln, following him at a steady pace. He realized now that he should have been more suspicious, but it was a little late for recriminations. Now he was boxed between two vehicles, and wasn't certain which contained who. He reached over for the radio handset and thumbed it on.

"Kingwood dispatcher," a female voice answered.

"Listen up," Bellingham told her. "This is Bell2JK. Notify Jenkins at DEA and Preston at the FBI office. You'll probably have to roust them out of bed, but get them moving. I want them on their way in ten minutes. Have them meet me at the Holiday Inn on the Beltway near the airport. Tell them to park and wait for instructions,"

He had the dispatcher repeat back his instructions then hooked the radio back in its slot. That was all he could do for now except call for backup from roving patrol cars and David definitely didn't want them in on the action. He certainly hoped David knew what he was doing. At the moment, he sure didn't.

A red light stopped the car in front of him. Bellingham ignored the other vehicle, hoping he hadn't been recognized. He doubted that he had. In general, the fed whomever he suspected was occupying the other car, was probably typical of the genre, generally ignoring lower ranking officers and relating only to the ones in charge.

The light changed and Bellingham let the other car pull ahead of him.

"What the fuck do those bozos think they're doing?" Castro asked, fondling his UZI like a girl with her first Barbie Doll.

Sanchez clamped down on his cigar. "I don't know. Did you make him?"

Castro shrugged. "It's nobody I recognize, boss."

Sanchez debated a moment while he chewed on his cigar. He didn't like the idea of anyone else going after Worthington and the only source of Hypnol he knew of.

"It must be Marino or Alvarez. Fuck, we can't let them other cartels horn in on us. Hang on, I'm going to catch up with him, then you take him out."

Just as Sanchez sped up, so did the fed that Bellingham had recognized, and he, in turn, tromped down on the accelerator, thinking to himself that this whole situation was rapidly careening out of control. The feds were definitely going for broke and he knew they would be desperate and well-armed. They might take out David, Fran and Murphy and Worthington all at one time if he couldn't stop them. He discounted any thought of help arriving from Preston or Jenkins; they would never make it in time.

The Beltway exit ramp was coming nearer, only a mile or so away. Bellingham thought desperately, racing his mind to come up with an idea. He pictured the off ramp in his mind and came up with a maneuver he thought might work. He sped up until he was following closely behind the other vehicle, so close that it in turn speeded up, the driver trying to put some distance between him and what he thought was a tailgater.

As the ramp came into view, Bellingham tromped on the gas pedal. His sedan shot forward and hit the bumper of the other car. The driver sped up some more, then began trying to brake as he saw the Jeep with the detective and his girl turn off the freeway. When he attempted to follow, Bellingham swerved to the right, speeded up again, and hit the car on its right front fender. It veered sharply back into the left lane and before the driver could correct its path, the wheels left the pavement and bit into the soft dirt of the shoulder. Too late, the driver saw an abutment looming in front of him too large to avoid and too wide to go around even if there was a way to do it. There wasn't. Nose up, the car ascended for thirty or forty yards, teetered precariously, then rolled on its side and tumbled back down the abutment. Bellingham never saw what happened; he was too busy steering his careening vehicle along the exit ramp, barely getting it under control in time to get out onto the feeder road without wrecking his car, too.

Sanchez, following in the Lincoln, observed the whole thing.

"That was no fucking accident," he said. "It's beginning to look like we're headed to a fucking convention."

"Well, that's some who won't be there," Castro said. "So much the better." He held his UZI in his lap, ready for anything.

Sanchez rolled the cigar around in his mouth. What Castro said made sense. He squinted his eyes, trying to figure out what was going on and suddenly it came to him.

"Goddamn! That must have been one of Marino or Alvarez's hit men, taking the other one out so they can get to Worthington first!" He turned to the small Hispanic shooter riding beside him. "Well, I got news for them fuckers. Neither one of them is

going to make it. When I catch up with whoever the hell is driving that sedan, they're going to be sorry they ever fucked with me! Get ready, Cas, and make sure you don't miss!"

Castro fingered his UZI, eager to carry out the order.

The agent in the wrecked car was shaken and bruised but otherwise unhurt. As soon as he was able to crawl from inside, he immediately pulled out his cellular phone and called Smith.

Smith again answered his phone with hope written over his face and again was disappointed. He listened for a minimum time then snapped his phone closed and grabbed his jacket. "Come on, Wilson. We gotta go!"

"Why? What happened?" Gene asked.

"That fucking O'Neal is smarter than I gave him credit for. He had a backup behind him. They ran my man off the road and wrecked his car. He's out of the picture now, and so are we if we can't pick up O'Neal before he gets to Worthington."

"How in hell are we going to find him?" Gene asked, running along beside the chief NSC agent.

"We got lucky," Smith panted as he ran toward his car. "He's on the Beltway, heading west, right near here. We're only a couple of blocks from the Beltway. If we hurry, we can pick him up as he passes. Come on, move your ass."

Gene slammed the car door shut as Smith roared out of the driveway. Smith was as mad as a cat just dunked into a flea bath. With his last free agent out of the picture, and three others dead, and the rest still out on the streets, that left only himself and Wilson to try to stop O'Neal, capture Worthington, and make off with the Hypnol. He glanced sideways to where Gene was sitting beside him, still fumbling with his seatbelt. He hated the thought of having to use that wimp, but it very well might come to that.

"Wilson, you said you wanted some work. Now you've got it. Check your piece. You may have to help me with O'Neal and Worthington."

"Damn right I will," Gene said, happy to finally be included as an active participant in the operation. If he performed well, there was no telling where it might lead. He pulled out his gun, checked the loads and returned it to his holster. Just give me a chance at O'Neal, he thought to himself. I'll blow that motherfucker away, then take Fran out in the country and make her sorry she ever met the sorry bastard. Smith won't mind, he thought. Not if I'm the one who kills O'Neal!

"I DON'T LIKE the way that went down at the ramp," Sanchez said. "Marino drives that way, and so does Alvarez, but I ain't got no idea which one it was." He

glanced behind him, seeing no other headlights. The Beltway was almost deserted at this time of night. “We’re going to pass that cowboy in a minute, whoever he is. Take him out; we don’t need the competition.” Sanchez pressed the gas pedal and eased the Lincoln up beside the other car, now driving with only one headlight. Castro readied his UZI.

Bellingham looked over to his left just in time. He saw the window of the Lincoln town car, which had appeared suddenly beside him, being rolled down. Perhaps that warned him. At any rate, he glimpsed a reflection of light from a streetlamp glancing off the metal barrel of the UZI and instinctively ducked and cut the steering wheel hard right. The stutter of the UZI sounded like a loud, rapid clashing of cymbals. Bullets penetrated the cab of Bellingham’s car, crashing into the dash, shattering the side and front window and blowing out one of the front tires. One bullet traced a fiery path through the muscles of his upper shoulder. Another skinned a furrow across his forearm and exited without breaking the bone. A third sliced a burning brand across the top of his thigh. Just as he raised himself back up to see where his vehicle was headed, the airbag exploded in his face as his car came to an abrupt, bone-jarring halt. The airbag deflated and he looked around, groggily wondering what he had crashed into—and who had done the shooting which caused it.

His car had come to rest against the lamp pole of a long-term parking lot for air travelers. The pole was bent almost double and embedded in the hood of his car. His sedan wouldn’t be going anywhere for a while, nor would he unless he could find an alternate form of transportation. So much for David’s backup!

Bellingham became aware of his wounds. He checked them quickly and decided that he wasn’t mortally wounded, and in any case Dave and Fran had to be warned that he was certainly going to be delayed, at the very least. Bellingham dialed David’s cellular number and got an almost immediate answer. He reported quickly.

“Dave, you’re going to have company. I took out one scumbag, but a Lincoln Town car just zapped me with an UZI. I don’t know whether it was Smith, the fibs or one of the Mole’s successors but watch out for them. They’re on your tail.”

Bellingham listened for a second then continued, “No, I don’t think I’m hurt too badly, but I’m stuck here temporarily. I’ll catch up with you soonest. Take care, you hear?” He closed the phone and got out of his battered vehicle, having to slide back and kick the door to get it to open. The first thing he saw was the parking lot attendant, standing there with his mouth open, gazing in awe at the wrecked, bullet punctured car and the big man exiting from it, blood streaming from his shoulder, forearm and wetting his thigh with a dark stain.

“I-I’ll call the cops, mister. You just take it easy. You’re hurt.” The elderly attendant made a motion as if to go back into his tiny office.

“No time, pops. I need a car. Do you have one here?”

“Just my own, but—”

Bellingham flipped out his badge and displayed it. “Pops, this is the most important thing you may do for the rest of your life. Give me the keys to your car. I need it fast.”

The old man made shoving motions with his hands. “No, I can’t—”

Bellingham didn’t have time to argue with him. He drew his gun, wincing at the pain in his shoulder as he did so. “Pops, I don’t have time to argue. If you don’t cooperate, you’re going to be in deeper shit than a doodlebug on the ass end of a diarrheic cow. Now give me your keys and I’ll personally tell every reporter in town that you’re the baddest sumbitch in the valley. Here, I’ll even give you a receipt. What’s your name?” Bellingham took out a business card and scribbled the man’s name and minimum description of his vehicle, an old 1987 wine-red Toyota pickup, on the reverse side of it. While the attendant was reluctantly bringing his pickup from the parking spot, he unlatched the trunk of his inoperable car and took out a twelve gauge short-barreled shotgun and loaded it with number five buckshot, chambering a round then adding one more shell. He winced, wondering if he would be able to use the scattergun.

Minutes later, Bellingham drove off, watching in his rear view mirror as the old man headed into his office. He had ordered him not to communicate with the cops until daylight. He hoped he would keep his word. After that, it should all be over, one way or another. Right now he had lost precious time and needed to make it up. Going into a dust-up against mobsters (as he now believed the men in the Lincoln were) with UZIs, David was certainly going to need some assistance. He drove with one hand while brushing away still dripping blood with the other.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO



NO! I’M NOT leaving your side until this is over with,” Fran whispered firmly to David after they were parked at the Holiday Inn. “I’m scared someone will kidnap me again. Besides, you may need help. Bell is out of it now.” By this time, Francis was beginning to believe that she could handle anything up to and including a rampaging menagerie of wild animals—and felt as if someone had just released them from their cages.

David disagreed. “Ah hell, Fran, I keep getting you involved in this shit. I get paid for risking my life; you don’t.”

Francis was adamant. “I get paid for trying to help save lives, David. Can you even imagine how many people, women and kids included, will die if this horrid drug ever gets loose? Every hospital in America would be full to the brim. Besides, I haven’t done that bad so far, have I?”

“Actually you’ve done better than me. Come on then; it’s almost time. Let me go first, though, and let me go inside once Murphy attacks Worthington.”

“All right.” Francis left her empty purse in the car but brought the .32, holding it in her hand with extra rounds carried loose in a side pocket of her jeans. David, unknowingly following Bellingham’s example, had also decided on a shotgun. He held it carefully, with the safety already off and more shells in his jacket pocket. He led Francis onto the walkway, a good ways down from room 154, then advanced, keeping the shotgun between him and the wall, held along the length of his thigh to prevent possible night owls from seeing it. He felt excitement rising inside him as a surge of adrenalin flooded his body. He was certain Fran was feeling the same way. He just hoped the situation didn’t get out of hand, leaving her to face risks she had no business taking. He had been trained to face danger. Francis hadn’t. David stopped two doors down from Worthington’s room, then raised his hand in a signal to Murphy, hoping the drug was still working.

Murphy sauntered toward the door to Worthington’s room, anticipating his prize, but his mind was beginning to be troubled with conflicting thoughts. What were the detective and his woman doing here? Was he a renegade cop, coming here for a buy, too? The answer to his self-questioning wouldn’t surface, not while the dose of Hypnol still muddled his mind. He continued walking until he came to the right door. He raised his hand and knocked, three taps, a pause, then a sequence of one, two and followed by three additional taps on the door.

Worthington had been watching from a tiny slit in the curtain for the last half hour, finding that he could observe just about everything from inside as well as from the parking lot. He had seen nothing suspicious, only a single man going and returning to the coffee machines at the end of the walkway. Good. Murphy must be alone, and he was carrying a bulging handbag, the payoff for delivery of the Hypnol. Ben had it ready, concealed in a small canvas zipper bag, the vials padded against breakage. Now for the exchange and a quick exit and on to fulfill his destiny. For that he intended to leave town, not wanting to be around when the shit hit the fan as every miscreant who could get his hands on a hit began to use his product, and many more who ordinarily would never think of breaking the law began to fulfill their every desire. That would be fun to read about, wouldn’t it? Handgun at his side with the safety off, he eased the door open.

Immediately, Ben noticed that Murphy didn’t appear his usual jaunty, nonchalant self. His lips were twisting in odd contortions, as if he wanted to say something but couldn’t get the words out. And he was hesitant about coming on inside, standing there like a child waiting for traffic to clear before crossing the road. His bad eye was twitching as if an insect had crawled under his eyelid and was trying to escape.

Murphy made a mighty effort to overcome the fading effects of the Hypnol in his system. His eyes blinked and tears formed. He wrenched the words out like forcing them through a steel-mesh barrier. “Ben—the—the cops—”

David had been watching and knew the drug was wearing off. He hoped that it

would last just long enough for Murphy to lunge into Worthington as he had been instructed to do but knew that strategy had failed as soon as Murphy hesitated, then painfully gasped out the truth. David rushed forward, shotgun raised.

Ben heard the thud of David's feet hitting the cement walkway and drew back quickly. He had taken a double room with connecting doors, just as he always did to give him an escape route in case a deal went down bad. He had taken only a couple of steps back before David appeared behind Murphy, skidding to a stop, trying to control the aim of the shotgun at the same time as he scanned the room, oblivious to the danger of a possible ambush. This was the climax to the whole operation, the culmination of a chase which had taken more odd directions than a Rocky Mountain goat path and now he was in the forefront of the battle, ready to risk everything in a last effort to prevent the dissemination of Hypnol to the world. He was acting on the plan he had devised with a reckless disregard for his own safety.

Worthington shot Murphy in the belly as David skidded to a stop behind him. Murphy grunted and fell back against David, his coat catching the muzzle of the shotgun and deflecting the barrel away from the man standing there with a smoking pistol in his hand. The smell of cordite assaulted David's nostrils, bringing back memories of combat in Iraq. Worthington fired again, this time into Murphy's chest. Desperately, David attempted to hold Murphy upright as a shield and at the same time bring the shotgun to bear. Worthington fired one more time then slammed the door shut as the weight of Murphy's body tore from David's grasp, at last freeing the shotgun. Immediately, he raised it and blasted the lock into smithereens and shouldered the door open.

Ben was just beginning to open the door to the adjoining suite. David fired over his head. The buckshot tore a ragged, five-inch hole in the wall just over Ben's head. "Hold it!" David yelled.

Worthington halted, then ducked and whirled, firing his pistol wildly. David was unharmed, but one bullet hit the grip of the shotgun and knocked it out of his hand. He felt his fingers go numb. David rolled, avoiding another fuselage of shots and tried to draw his pistol. His hand was too numb to handle it. He scrambled away from the sight of Ben's gun, still pointing at him. He banged against a chair, halting his progress. Worthington raised his pistol and aimed carefully this time. He pulled the trigger.

It took a second for David to realize that he was still alive. Worthington's weapon had clicked on empty. He jumped to his feet and ran at Worthington as he turned and again attempted to open the escape door. He was too late. David crashed into him, throwing them both to the floor. Ben struggled like a wild man in his grasp and David felt his hold loosen. Ben got to his feet and kicked David in the ribs and for the third time reached for the doorknob. David knew he couldn't recover in time to prevent Worthington from escaping, though he struggled to his knees, still trying.

Francis heard the shots and yells from the walkway. She had no idea of what was happening inside; the door was hanging closed unevenly after Worthington had

slammed it shut and David had blasted the lock. Unable to stand not knowing what had happened to David, Francis held her .32 out in front of her with one hand and pushed the door open with the other.

Francis recognized Ben, even from the rear. He was twisting the knob of another door, turning it the wrong way in his frantic effort to escape. Hearing the door open, Ben looked back over his shoulder. Francis stared at the man who had so brutally abused her and provided the means for other, equally horrid crimes. A red rage overcame her.

David heard an explosion come from behind him and saw a puff of disintegrating fabric suddenly appear high on Worthington's shoulder. A coil of smoke escaped from the reddening hole in Worthington's jacket and blood wet the cloth around it.

David knew that Fran had entered the room just in time. Francis fired again, missing this time, though she was almost at point blank range. Worthington dropped to the floor, cringing. David turned and saw Francis trying to still the trembling of her hands, both of them grasping her pistol, ready to fire again.

"Fran, don't, not yet!" David yelled, horrified that she might kill the man before he could be questioned. Taking a chance that Francis wouldn't fire toward him, he ran forward and landed on top of Worthington's recumbent figure with both knees, knocking the wind out of him and cracking some ribs. Feeling was beginning to come back into his fingers. Quickly, he pulled Worthington's hands behind his back and handcuffed him then drew a huge breath into his lungs. He hadn't realized he had been holding his breath.

"Let me kill him!" Francis demanded, eyes blazing wildly at the sight of the man who had so horribly degraded her. Seeing his terrified face caused her to lose all sense of morality or right from wrong.

"Fran! Calm down! We have to find the Hypnol first!" David shouted.

Francis hesitated then lowered her weapon. Now her whole body was shaking.

David knew that the sound of the shots was going to attract more cops than an assassination attempt against the president. He had to act quickly. He drew his pistol and put the muzzle of it against Worthington's temple. "You scumbag, you have three seconds to tell me where the drugs are." He twisted the gun sight cruelly into Worthington's skin for emphasis, drawing blood.

"In the bag," Ben gasped, pointing to a canvas sack on the bed.

"Fran, grab that bag and bring it here, quick!" David ordered.

Francis pocketed her pistol and brought David the bag of Hypnol which Worthington had prepared for Murphy. He unzipped it and looked inside. It was filled with vials, padded against breakage but there were several loaded cigarettes on top, syringes of the drug concealed inside, prepared by Ben in case he needed to take out Murphy if he did anything suspicious—and for use on other victims.

Quickly, knowing he was racing against time, David picked up one of the cigarettes and dispensed a dose of Worthington's own concoction into his face. He punched him viciously in the belly when he tried to hold his breath, forcing him to inhale.

"What are you doing, David?" Fran questioned. She couldn't imagine why he was dosing the bastard with Hypnol. He should have just let her shoot him or killed the fucking psychopath himself!

"No time, no time!" David said frantically. "Quick, grab that bag and run for your car. Go to my place and lock all the doors!"

"But—"

"Hurry! No, not that way. Go out this door, through the hall and out the back way, then watch to be sure no one is around before you go to your car. Hurry, Fran, hurry!"

Bewildered but willing, Francis did as David said. David watched her leave the room, pride filling his chest like a soldier being awarded the Medal of Honor. What a woman! Now for the rest of his plan, but first, he needed to question Worthington to be certain he wasn't hiding any more of the drug somewhere else. And quickly, before the cops arrived. Or someone worse.

SMITH AND Gene had missed seeing David and Francis pass them on the Beltway by bare seconds. Smith pounded on the steering wheel, knowing they must have either turned off or gotten past before he was in position.

"Try the Holiday Inn," Gene suggested. "Worthington used the one right here on the Beltway once. I know because that was the only times he ever got busted."

With no better idea in mind, Smith headed that way. From a half block away he heard the sounds of gunfire and knew that Gene must have been right. But—who was doing the shooting? He had to stop it before Worthington was killed. He pulled into the parking lot just as Francis stepped around the corner at the far end of the walkway. Seeing Gene and another man jump out of the car which had just pulled in, she shrank back out of sight, clutching the bag of Hypnol to her chest. She had no idea now what to do.

Smith and Gene ran along the walkway from the opposite end, looking for evidence of where the shots had come from. As soon as Smith saw the shattered lock of the door to room 154, he knew he had found the right room. Regardless of his morals, there was nothing of the coward in Smith's makeup. Drawing his weapon, he kicked the door aside and burst into the room.

David looked up from where he had intended to question Worthington and stared into the barrels of two pistols, one held by Gene and the other by Smith pointed directly at his chest. Ah, shit, I blew it again! He thought. His shoulders began slumping like a California cliff, slowly collapsing under incessant rainfall.

Gene laughed out loud. "You're dead meat O'Neal."

"Shut up, Wilson," Smith said. "Is that Murphy there?" He pointed to the corpse beside the door.

Gene looked closely. Murphy's face was slack and pale with death, but he recognized the former dealer. "Yeah, that's him."

"Then that must be Worthington O'Neal is holding. Is that right, O'Neal?" Smith demanded, waving his pistol to emphasize the importance of his question.

David didn't answer. He could hear the faint wail of sirens in the far distance. Maybe the cops, or perhaps Preston or Jenkins would get here in time to salvage something from the botched operation but now he knew his carefully plotted plan almost certainly had no chance of success.

"I'll make him talk," Gene said, stepping forward with malice written on his face.

"Later," Smith said. "We need to get out of here. Search the place, quickly. He must have the Hypnol hidden here somewhere."

FRANCIS WAS torn between following David's orders and going back to help. When no sounds of shots came from the room, she knew that David must have been captured. She decided that she must try to rescue him, no matter how frightened she was. She would never be able to live with herself otherwise. She stepped around the corner of the building, and again had to quickly duck back out of sight when she saw another vehicle, a Lincoln town car, pull slowly forward and two men get out, both of them armed.

THE TWO DRUG lords in the Lincoln had held back when they heard the sounds of gunfire, then waited again when they saw two armed men cautiously approach the ruined doorway.

"Like I said, a fucking convention," Sanchez whispered.

"I hear sirens," Castro said.

"Yeah, we better hurry. You go first; you got the UZI."

"You want me to waste them?"

"Take out that cop that just went in first. He busted me once and got me a deuce in Huntsville. We'll take Worthington and anyone else there alive then get the hell out of here and sort them out later," Sanchez said. Whatever was going down here, he intended to come out on top.

"Don't forget the Hypnol," Castro reminded him. "That's what we really came for."

“I know that,” Sanchez said irritably. “Come on, let’s do it.”

THE MOBSTER with the UZI came in firing. A stream of slugs from the UZI walked up Gene’s back, killing him instantly. Smith got off one shot then was hit in the upper arm, incapacitating his shooting hand. He surrendered quickly. David, still crouched over Worthington, wondered who these two men were who had suddenly showed up and rescued him. Some of Preston’s agents? Or maybe Bobby Jenkins had sent some help.

“That’s Worthington,” the man with the UZI said, motioning towards Ben with his weapon. “I recognize him from the handbill the cops have been circulating.”

“Man am I glad to see you!” Worthington said, struggling to crawl from beneath the weight of David’s body, lacking orders to the contrary. He was still under the influence of the Hypnol David had given him, but what a person did while dosed with Hypnol depended entirely on who was in control—and who was giving the orders. Once again, David despaired. The two armed men must be drug lords, here after Worthington’s secret. Now the shit was really down the drain. He didn’t expect to live more than a few more minutes. The siren sounds he had heard before didn’t seem to be coming much nearer.

“Where’s your stuff, Ben?” Castro asked. “Let’s get it and get out of here. The big man wants to talk to you.”

“His broad took it,” Worthington volunteered, pointing to David.

“What! Where in hell is she?” Sanchez shouted.

“I don’t know,” Ben said. He didn’t remember hearing David tell Francis to take the Hypnol and run.

“Well, think, goddamnit!” Sanchez said, almost ready to blast Worthington to bits, regardless of his knowledge.

“Maybe over at O’Neal’s place,” Worthington said. “At least that’s where he told the broad to go.” His memory had suddenly returned, perhaps spurred by the two guns pointing at him.

“Do you know where O’Neal lives?”

“No.”

“Shit. All right, Castro, you cover the cop there and let’s get the hell out of here while we still can. Come on Worthington, let’s go.” Sanchez motioned with his pistol. The sounds of the sirens were definitely becoming louder.

David realized with relief that he was going to live a while longer, though knowing how drug kingpins obtained knowledge, he knew he might regret the additional hours of life before it was all over with. He just hoped he could hold out until the end

without revealing anything about Fran or the fact that she now possessed the world's total supply of Hypnol. Maybe his silence could buy enough time for her to disappear with it when she realized that he would not be coming back.

Bellingham heard the sirens, too, coming closer as he drove into the parking lot. He wondered if there had been gunfire or if David and Fran were in trouble. If so, help was on the way. He doubted that David wanted HPD involved unless absolutely necessary but that still left Preston and Bobby Jenkins. Maybe they would arrive in time to help. He still didn't know exactly what David was up to, but he trusted his friend. Now, though, he had better try to locate him. Room 154. He got out of his car, hand inside his jacket, gripped firmly around the butt of his pistol. His shoulder was hurting so badly now that he had to discard the shotgun, knowing that he wouldn't be able to stand the recoil.

Francis breathed a great sigh of relief as she saw Bellingham approaching. Holding the bag of Hypnol in one hand and her pistol in the other she ran up to him.

"Bell, I'm so glad to see you. Hurry, but be careful. I think David is in trouble."

"What's happened?"

Francis had trouble sorting it all out. "Everything on God's green earth," she said. "First we went in, then Smith and Gene came in behind us, and now two other men I don't know are inside with them. I heard a machine gun going off. Bell, I'm so scared I don't know what to do." Francis didn't even think to tell Bellingham what she was carrying in the bag.

"Christ almighty, Fran. Maybe we better wait for some backup. I hear sirens coming this way."

"There's no time, Bell! David wanted to get us out of here before the police arrive. Besides, I'm scared he's in trouble. Maybe—" Her voice choked off as tears began running down her face.

"All right, I'll go see what I can do, but you stay back here out of the way."

"No! I can't stand not knowing. Come on, Bell!" Francis was frantic, imagining everything from bloody bodies to captives in handcuffs.

Cautiously, moving so as to make no sound, Bellingham approached the room, becoming even more careful as he saw that the lock had been shot to pieces. He stood for a moment beside the door, which had not closed completely, then kicked it the rest of the way open and sprang into sight, crouched, with weapon leveled and ready to fire.

It was fortunate that he went in with a low profile. The UZI stuttered, but all the shots went over Bellingham's head, rising in a line of punctures up the wall and into the ceiling as the recoil of a full clip being fired lifted the submachine gun's short

barrel upward. Smith tried to jump out of the way but as the line of slugs chewed their way up the wall one bullet smacked him in the head, squarely between the eyes. Smith collapsed without a sound.

Bellingham fired back from his perfect shooting stance. His first shot took Castro in the chest just as the UZI clicked on empty and the second went into his left cheek, just below his eyeball. Castro fell backward, dropping the UZI. Sanchez hurried his shot. It passed to Bellingham's left with a whine like an angry bee. Sanchez never got off a second shot. Bellingham killed him with a single shot to the heart. He staggered then sank to the floor.

Bellingham slowly raised his body from the crouch and stood upright, trembling with reaction now that the gun battle was over, though he had been as calm as a nun at prayer during the action.

David laughed, almost hysterical with relief. "Bell, you bastard, how did you—"

He didn't get a chance to finish. Francis flung herself against his body, throwing both arms around his neck, one hand still holding the bag of Hypnol and the other clutching her pistol, pointing dangerously in Bellingham's direction. Bellingham strode forward and gently grasped her hand, bending her gun away from his chest. "You can put that away now," he said.

David could hear the sounds of the sirens clearly now, almost upon them. There was no more time for explanations or delay.

"Bell, thanks. You saved my life. I'll thank you properly later but right now we've got to make tracks. At least Fran and I do."

"What about me?" Bellingham asked. He reached up and applied pressure to his shoulder wound. Drops of blood squirted from between his fingers.

Alarmed, David went over to see how badly Bellingham was wounded. Bell brushed his inquiring hands away. "I'm all right, Dave. Or at least I can stand the pain for a while longer."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. Besides, Preston and Jenkins ought to be arriving before long, not to mention half the cops in Houston. What are we going to do?"

David pointed to the two dead hoodlums. "I think one of those guys is Silky Sanchez, and then there's Murphy there by the door. Do you think you can hold together long enough to convince all the authorities that this was one big drug bust?"

Bellingham took his hand away from his shoulder long enough to motion toward Smith's body. "How about him? How do I explain a dead NSC agent laying here in the middle of all this?"

David thought rapidly. "Preston and Jenkins should be here shortly and they promised to help. Get them to take charge and keep the cops at bay, including

Bradshaw if he shows up. Can you manage that?"

"Yeah, I think so, but what are you and Fran going to be doing in the meantime?"

David eyed Bellingham with complete honesty. "Fran and I are going to head for the San Jacinto river. And we're taking Worthington with us."

Bellingham didn't ask any more questions.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

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DAVID KICKED Worthington to his feet and prodded him outside. Francis followed, suspecting what David's plans for him involved but not objecting. David had Francis drive, directing her to the feeder road that passed below and to one side of the river where it crossed Highway 59. Not knowing how much time he might have, nor knowing whether he might be apprehended by the rapidly approaching patrol cars, or thinking he might have the bad luck to get a traffic ticket or become involved in an unavoidable accident or any of the other little gremlins spelled out by Murphy's law, David questioned Worthington as he drove.

"Ben, are you the only person who knows the formula for Hypnol?"

"Yes, I'm the only one." Worthington said, unable to lie.

"Is that bag of Hypnol Fran took from you all you have?"

"Yes."

"Have you left any notes anywhere that could be used to make more Hypnol?"

"No. I have the formula memorized."

"Was Murphy the first person you sold any of this batch to?"

"Yes."

David asked many more questions while having Fran park in a secluded alcove by the river. When he was certain that no one else could be manufacturing the drug he got out of the jeep then removed the lug wrench from the back.

"Give me the bag now," he told Fran.

Francis handed it over, as happy to get it out of her grasp as letting go of a bag full of bloody bandages.

"Stand back," David said. He took out his handkerchief and tied it tight around his nose and mouth. Francis watched as he removed each vial from the bag and

smashed it with the tire tool, letting the liquid soak into the soft earth in a hole he had scooped out for that purpose. He covered the broken glass with more earth and tamped it down with his feet then scattered sweet gum leaves and grass over the spot, concealing it so well that there remained no trace of what was buried there. Then he turned to Fran and touched her cheek gently.

“You don’t have to watch the next part,” he said.

“I want to see it. I’ll never sleep good again until I do.” Fran shook her head; she knew exactly what David intended to do.

“All right.” David took a deep breath and turned to the man who had caused so much misery—and had very nearly let a plague worse than the Black Death loose on earth.

“Worthington,” David said, voice flat and commanding. “Wade out into the river until it’s over your head, then take some deep breaths. Don’t come up for air. Don’t ever come up. Understand?”

“Yes.”

David and Francis stood with their arms around each other as they watched the rising sun outline Ben’s figure as he waded serenely out into the water. It reached his waist, his shoulders. He bobbed up and down for a moment, getting his footing, then stepped forward again. His head disappeared under the water. A minute later they could see bubbles rising and breaking the calm surface of the placid, slow moving water but Ben never came up for air. He never came up at all.

PRESTON AND Jenkins drove into the parking lot of the Holiday Inn almost simultaneously, just ahead of a converging group of patrol cars, coming from every direction imaginable in response to the flood of 911 calls from the residents of the Inn. Bellingham hurried to meet the federal agents.

Preston and Jenkins stared at Bellingham’s bloody wounds as if he were the last man standing after a brawl in a western saloon. Bellingham briefed them quickly, leaving out mention of Francis and David. He told them that Smith and Sanchez had shot it out and that Murphy had told him before he died that he had killed Worthington and disposed of his body.

“Did Murphy say whether Worthington ever produced any more Hypnot?” Bobby Jenkins asked.

Bellingham removed his jacket and shirt and pressed his handkerchief to his shoulder wound before answering. “He didn’t say, but I looked and couldn’t find any on him, nor anywhere around here. I think he never finished that batch he was promising. I hope so, anyway.”

“Me, too,” Preston said. He looked over at Smith’s body and spat on the carpet.

“At least that slimy bastard will never get his hands on any. Listen, Bell, I hear the cops pulling in. Let me and Bobby do the talking. I think we can convince them that this was all Smith’s business and he died without telling anyone what the NSC was really up to.”

“That suits me,” Bellingham said. “I need to stop by an emergency room, but after that I’ll spread the word that we can forget about the Hypnol deal.”

“Will Captain Bradshaw go along with it?” Jenkins asked.

Bellingham shrugged, then winced as it tore at his shoulder wound. “I’ll talk to David O’Neal. Between the two of us, I think we can convince him to let it go.”

Preston nodded, then went outside to meet the cops. Jenkins followed. Neither of them asked where David had gone. It seemed better not to know.

DAVID GOT a court order to allow Francis to enter the home she had formerly shared with Gene. He hired a mover to help bring her belongings and the best of the furniture to his apartment, giving up the furnishings he had rented. While she was busy and happy rearranging his home, and his life, David spent most of his time at the station, coordinating press releases, resolving conflicting stories and getting his team back into their regular routine.

Cynthia Tamm tried to follow up on the series of articles she had begun but soon abandoned the project in favor of a new serial killer. She wasn’t getting any cooperation anyway and was beginning to believe that the story about a new hypnotic drug on the market had been exaggerated and blown way out of proportion, especially since none had ever appeared.

Bellingham received a promotion to lieutenant. He and David remained fast friends but he decided not to ever question David or Fran about what had happened to Worthington. Let sleeping dogs lie. All the Hypnol was off the street and that was satisfaction enough for him.

David was grateful for Captain Bradshaw’s help. He worked the press and the politicians like a professional spin-doctor from Washington. He steered the investigation into the deaths and shoot-out at the Holiday Inn into channels so convoluted that a rocket scientist couldn’t have figured them out. David wondered why the captain was being so helpful, but soon quit worrying about it. Francis was taking up all his spare time and he decided that Bradshaw’s whole-hearted cooperation was probably due to a guilty conscience for bringing the feds into the case in the first place.

Bobby Jenkins received a transfer within a few days after the shoot-out. David figured that he was probably on the way to somewhere in South America, working on a really big drug case.

And as for him and Francis, David came home one day and found some

brochures from a couple of realty agents on the kitchen table. Several country homes listed for sale had been carefully marked for his inspection. He smiled to himself, thinking fond thoughts of Fran. She was on the evening shift this first week back at work, but he figured this was her way of telling him that they would be out looking at homes over the weekend. And she was also telling him that she had accepted his proposal. He dropped the brochures back on the table and took a bottle of Lancer's from the cabinet and set it in the refrigerator to chill. She would be off duty at eleven and he suspected that neither of them would be getting much sleep this particular night. He didn't mind that thought a bit. In fact, he was feeling particularly good this day. Before leaving work, he had finally taken the time to remove the last remaining vial of Hypnol from his safe and destroy it. Case closed.

CAPTAIN BRADSHAW sat in his clean, immaculate office, toying with the last vial of Hypnol in existence. Immediately after returning from the Holiday Inn and while almost every cop from his precinct was still at the scene, he had steamed open the envelope containing the combination to David's safe, then resealed it so perfectly that no one would ever be able to tell the difference. After that, he took a syringe and aspirated the Hypnol from David's vial and injected a clear fluid back into it. Afterwards, he held both vials up to the light and examined them. Good. No one could possibly tell the difference, not even O'Neal.

Bradshaw got up from his chair and twirled the dial of the combination lock to his own safe, listening to the clicks with a happy sense of well-being. Someday soon he intended to remove a small aliquot of the drug and have a chemist he knew duplicate the formula. There would come a time when it would prove useful. He would be able to extract confessions and solve enough intractable cases to smooth his path right into the chief's office just as soon as the old man retired—or sooner if he tried to stay on much longer. After that, who knew? Maybe a run for mayor? Or congress, even. The possibilities were limitless. Of course he would never use the Hypnol to satisfy his personal tastes, even though he continuously caught himself thinking about what he could do if he wanted to. His wife was fat and sexless, completely unsatisfying, and there was this woman he knew. There was something he had always wanted to try with her but had never dared. Now he could. He felt the desire rising in his body like bubbles in a champagne glass. Just one time. He was sure he would only use it that way once. Probably. He wouldn't be tempted to go overboard with the stuff. Would he?

Darrell Bain

DARRELL BAIN has been writing most of his life, though he didn't get really serious about it until the purchase of his first computer, which made correcting his typing so much easier. In the last ten years he has had a total of twelve books either published or currently under contract to be published. Two of his works were finalists for the EPIC 2000 Awards and another nominated for the Frankfurt eBook awards. His writing ranges the gamut of genres from Science Fiction to Romance, from Non-fiction to Suspense and from Children's books to Humorous Adventure and humorous non-fiction.

Darrell served a number of years in the military, including two years in Vietnam. His first published novel, *Medics Wild* was based in part on his time in Vietnam. After leaving the military Darrell obtained a B.S. in Medical Technology and managed medical laboratories in Louisiana, Texas and Saudi Arabia. Eventually he and his wife Betty settled in East Texas where they own a Christmas tree farm located—where else?—on a real road named Santa Claus Lane. Two of his non-fiction works deal with crazy adventures on a Christmas tree farm. Other members of the family include Biscuit the dachshund and Black Spot and Black Dot, the tomcats.

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