



THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

By

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Mystery

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PROLOGUE

*December 24th
11:55 P.M.*

The night hummed, electric with unbridled human energy. An inky, moonless sky made a perfect backdrop for multi-colored light displays and gaudy plastic arrangements of false holly, pine trees, and religious figurines. Nervous wisps of gauzy snow clouds insinuated themselves across the velvet backdrop, their insubstantial fingers tenuously touching the strobe-like flashes, reflecting and magnifying them. Combined with raucous music and the voices of people jostling each other along the streets, the chaotic lightshow of festivities turned the street into a parody of a 1970s discotheque.

It was Christmas Eve and death stalked the innocent on this holiday night.

One tall figure, bundled in a heavy woolen overcoat and slouch hat, watched the festivities out of the corner of his eye while blending with the shadows in a deserted alleyway. But the real cause of his holiday celebration existed on the other side of the window he jealously guarded.

The sensory intrusion of merry-making reverberated through and around the man, a shadow within a shadow, deafening and jagged inside his skull. He ignored it.

The window showcasing an old style 1930s ballroom, like a spectacular 3D movie, ensnared his attention to the exclusion of all else. Within his world, this window, the *only* window to exist, separated him from the only thing he wanted, the only thing he lived for. He focused all his attention on *her*, the one face, one glowing entity, shining in a room full of dead, faceless lumps of useless humanity.

A full instrument band filled the room with cheerful, but seductive, music. She swayed with the crowd while her delicate long-fingered hand grasped the neck of a champagne bottle and her eyes closed in sensual ecstasy. Confetti and ribbons littered her thick hair as it came loose from a pair of fragile filigree combs.

He loved to watch her hair cascading down to her small waist. He reached out toward the frosty glass of the window; impulsively wanting to stroke that mane of silken hair as it tumbled over her shoulders. A golden, strapless dress clung to her curves, imbuing her body with the aura of a priceless work of art. The dress shimmered as she laughed and kissed the men surrounding her on the dance floor.

He watched her move away from her admirers only to bend over and kiss a lone middle-aged man sitting at the bar. The man leered into the mounds of flesh mere inches from his face. Moist, pink lips formed a smile then erupted into a delighted laugh when the drunk at the bar grabbed her arm. She distracted him by pointing at the big screen television mounted above the bar. It showed the giant Christmas tree in front of the White House as it came alive with lights. A split screen showed an even larger and gaudier tree being lit in Times Square, eternally heralding another year of good will, peace and the promise of new hopes and revived dreams.

It officially became Christmas Day.

When her breasts threatened to escape from her dress, the watcher clamped his lips together and ground the painful erection he sported against the brick wall under the window frame. Blood pounded in his ears, his hands shook harder, and his breath fogged up the windowpane. His world narrowed into a pinpoint of anticipation and rage.

The woman drunkenly swayed away from the drunk's grasp and turned to talk to the man pressed tightly behind her. Still leering, the man at the bar leaned forward, rubbing his hand over the satin of her buttocks. The captor standing before her grinned and slid his hand between them to cup her pubic mound, she froze in place, a doe trapped between two predators who pressed her between them without mercy. Her hand snapped up to slap the man who stared into her eyes while grinding his probing fingers between her legs. Raised in midair, her hand stopped, as if an invisible wall prevented her from making contact. She turned and fled.

Squeezing through the crowd, her stiff body made jerky progress toward the room beyond. She disappeared into the connecting room and out of the watcher's view.

Shuddering with anxiety and breathless expectancy he waited. His gaze alternated between the window and the street; knowing she'd appear in one or the other. His breath caught in anticipation of seeing her without the coldness of glass between them. While he huddled inside his coat, crouched into the attitude of a cat ready to spring, the crowds on the sidewalks became noisier and their actions more blatantly sexual or violent. Their smells and noises angered him, awakening a sense of violation inside his gut that railed against the very presence in this world of human vermin.

This moment belongs to me! And to her! he thought while watching an approaching couple.

Young, uncaring and holding each other up as they clutched each other's waists, they ducked into the alleyway where he now stood deep in the shadows. They groped, gyrated and moaned against each other; rutting in the alley like animals. Drunk beyond all self-control, they rarely took long and often left with most of their clothes open or

missing, leaving naked bodies exposed to public view. Although deeply repulsed, he liked to watch. Sometimes he followed them when they left. But tonight was for her... only for her.

Tonight, the dream would bring her to him. He'd waited and watched, just like the dream told him to, and now, she would be his. His hands oozed sweat worse than ever and his body shook so violently he was ready to explode. He pulled sweaty leather gloves off and rubbed the moisture from his hands; roughly swiping them over the soft wool collar while subconsciously pulling at it, partially hiding his face. Nervously tucking the gloves into a pocket, he licked dry lips and waited for her, like an impatient teenager on a first date. The thought of finally showing himself to this vision of pure angelic womanhood set panic scurrying around his belly. Frantically putting the gloves back on, he pulled his hat lower to hide his eyes. His gaze swiftly shifted from the doorway to the building, to the street and back to the filth of the alleyway, like a caged animal ready to gnaw his way to freedom. His gaze locked onto the pattern of the brickwork he stood upon, forcing him to notice that snow was falling again.

After what seemed like eons, she stepped out of the building with a white fur wrapped tightly around her body and the dim overhead neon light emphasizing the pale golden cascade of her hair. She stood under the awning, slowly turning her head to the right and left, cornflower eyes searching for a taxi and giving him a private show of her classic beauty as her profile turned to accommodate his admiring gaze.

She's so clean, so pure and she's mine.

He vibrated with anticipation and licked his lips again. He could smell the heavy musk of her perfume.

Shalimar.

Clinging to the staircase handrail for support, her body shivered with the cold.
How he longed to warm her.

Soon...soon.

He poised himself at the mouth of the alley ready to follow whichever way she went. She cursed loudly, realizing the taxis were wisely staying away from the downtown area tonight, then shivered again. The harsh cold seemed to make up her mind for her. Shakily making her way down the stairs on thin-strapped high heels, her hand slid down the rail. He held his breath, hoping she wouldn't fall on the icy concrete. She made it to the sidewalk, turned right and slowly moved down the street away from the alley. The watcher stepped out and turned to see if any of the loud party-makers clogging the street noticed his presence.

He grinned.

Soon she will be mine. The grin widened into a leer.

Soon. The leer widened into a twisted snarl.

His hungry gaze riveted on her retreating back and stayed there, like a possessive hand on her neck, until she disappeared into the night. He knew her destination; a cozy apartment three blocks away.

Soon.

CHAPTER ONE

December 25th
5:30 A.M.

The ear-splitting, high-pitched warble of an ambulance siren, amplified as it careened against claustrophobic brick walls, sounded like harpies screeching into Jake Daniel's ears. A babble of reporter's voices demanding interviews and pictures and the murmur of the crime scene technicians as they scrambled around the site added to the chaos at the mouth of the alley.

Flashing red and blue lights bounced off what was left of the once white snow littering the ground. The grayish slush added to the ugliness of overflowing trash bins scattered up and down the narrow aisle. Jake groaned when pulsating lights splintered against his face, deepening and highlighting deeply etched worry and laugh lines in his forehead and around his mouth. Dark stubble on his cheeks and chin dampened the lights, emphasizing the contrast between the black hair of his head and moustache and the pallor of his skin.

He took a deep breath and blew it out, sending wisps of ghostly fog around his face. The icy air sent a shiver up his back but cleared the left over haze of alcohol from his mind. With an unsteady thrust of his hand into the wrinkled coat he wore, Jake fished two lint covered aspirin out and tossed them into his mouth. He knew they would do little to ease the sensation of bones imploding behind his eyes; eyes he feared were now a ghostly shade of purple, instead of blue.

The aspirin did, however, add nicely to the rancid flavors saturating his mouth; tastes inspired by the odors wafting up from the mound of snow covered garbage and the nude body propped in the middle of it, like a perverse offering to the god of waste.

The resulting sensory overload sent Jake's stomach lurching like a runaway racehorse galloping up and down uneven sand dunes. Jake steadied himself against the crumbling wall with one hand and held the other over his eyes, hoping the dull winter sunrise would disintegrate before he uncovered them. Overtaxed muscles in his calves and shoulders leapt, twitched, and cramped demanding relief. Jake ignored them and concentrated on clearing his mind; groping for the clarity of logic he relied upon to get through the day.

“You okay Jake?”

Jake sighed, dropped his hands, rolled his neck then opened his eyes to see Brian studying him across the body. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just tired, hungry, hungover...”

Brian’s stare lingered an extra beat before he bent his head back to the body lying close to the lightweight snow boots he wore for his early morning runs. “Looks like the same signature to me,” he stated while beckoning to a young man taking pictures of the body. “Cam, do you have a notebook and pen on you?” He patted the pockets of the sweatshirt he wore. “I didn’t exactly come prepared.”

The young man took one last picture of the red lip prints on the woman’s right buttock then lowered the camera and let it dangle from the strap around his neck. He reached into the pocket of his heavy overcoat and pulled out a leather notebook and pen then handed it to Brian. “No worries mate. I always come prepared.”

The leer accompanying his quip was met with a scowl from Jake. “Don’t they teach basic crime scene procedure in Australia, Detective Parker?”

Cam jammed his hands into his pockets and met Jake’s frown with one of his own. “Yes sir, they do.”

“Then why the hell are you trampling all over evidence like a green rookie?”

Cam glanced down at his feet, noted the fact that he was standing in the wet garbage surrounding the body, then quickly stepped back. “Sorry sir. It won’t happen again,” he replied with a clipped tone.

Brian flinched but kept on making notes. “The techs did a good job of going over the site,” Brian murmured while scribbling the details he’d gotten from the head of forensics. “But, there wasn’t much to find...again.”

“Did you make sure the uniforms...,” Jake nodded at a young officer talking to the owner of the bakery next door. “...checked out the trash bins for her clothes, the weapon, anything?”

“Yeah, I had them do that first thing. The crap in those bins! Schmidt had to go home to change. The smell made everyone sick and I don’t mean her,” Brian responded with a smile.

Jake took a deep breath and blew it out in a plume of icy fog. “Damn it, Brian! When are we going to get a break here? Four months! Four damned months and all we’ve got to go on is a drawer full of icepicks and dildos and a lot of photos of kissed asses.”

“Speaking of asses, did you see Chief Hartigan this morning at the station with that undercover cop, Moni Draper?” Cam blurted out. “Crikey, I’d love to get a crack at kissing her ass, I would.”

Jake turned his gaze up to the sky and closed his eyes. His fists formed into hard balls of tension. When he opened his eyes and leveled a warning look at Cam, the young agent backed up and clamped his mouth shut.

“Too bad Johnson checked himself out while he was doing this case. He totally screwed the pooch with the evidence while he was wiggling out and nobody was noticing,” Brian quickly jumped in. “His breakdown set this case back to square one.”

Jake’s shoulders relaxed. “I think that’s why Gary sent me here. He’s giving me a last chance to start over on this case and maybe save my career and my ass too.”

“Asses again,” Cam snorted.

“Go make yourself useful, will you?” Jake grated.

Cam shot Jake a look of thin-lipped irritation, opened his mouth to speak then clamped it shut when he thought better of it.

Brian closed the notebook and pen then handed them back to Cam. “Cam, go interview the guy who found her. The local cops will only ask the basic questions. Get everything the old man saw, heard, smelled or *thought* he saw, heard or smelled.” He pointed to an open metal door with a large bar lock dangling from its handle. “He’s inside waiting for someone to tell him he’s clear before he opens the bakery.”

“On Christmas day? Don’t you think that’s strange?” Cam asked while moving toward the open door.

“Don’t make assumptions Cam. It’s probably one of his biggest selling days,” Jake snapped.

Cam turned and entered the bakery.

“Why do I always get these exchange guys to train?” Jake grated. “Just what I don’t need right now; another dead weight around my neck.”

Brian glanced back at Jake. “Jake, a word in private?” He stepped around the body, moved past latex gloved men still sifting through debris on the ground and moved past Jake toward the back wall of the alley.

Jake followed then stopped when Brian turned to face him. “What is it Brian? I would like to get some sleep and food sometime this month, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Ease up on the kid Jake, can’t you? He’s new to this...” Brian pointed to the body being bagged up by two technicians. “...to this country and to the team. Give him a break. Okay?”

Jake’s shoulders tightened and fatigue disappeared from his face and body. “Last time I looked you were second in command here, working under me. Who died and made you the senior partner on this case all of a sudden?”

The breath Brian held released in a soft sigh. “You did Jake. When Pat was killed. The friend I grew up with and admired died with her.” He scanned Jake’s wrinkled and stained clothes, unshaven face and bloodshot eyes.

All tension and resistance left Jake. His face froze into a shocked mask of despair. Sometimes I think I can’t go on with the farce anymore Brian,” he murmured.

“She was proud of you Jake; proud of how dedicated you were, how you never gave up on anything, no matter how much it cost you. She told me once how much your strength made her feel safe. Why the hell are you running like a coward now? Why are you throwing it all away like this?”

“Fuck off Brian. I don’t want to get into this now,” Jake growled while his body became tenser and straighter.

“Yeah, you never want to hear or deal with anything anymore, do you old buddy? You haven’t crawled out of a bottle long enough to face anything, have you? Just going through the motions. Don’t care about the job, just the paycheck. Why the hell did you, Marti and I bust our asses to get out of the gutter only to have you crawl right back into it? If Pat could see what you’ve become, she’d...”

“Don’t talk to me about Pat, Brian. Not today! You weren’t there; you don’t know what it was like to see her hacked and ...shit!” Jake swiveled on his heel and stared at the technicians as they left the alley, leaving the wrapped body in the middle like a forgotten Christmas present.

Brian’s wide shoulders and large hands tensed at his sides. “That’s uncalled for Jake and you know it. I was close to her and to Jerry, just like you. Is it Christmas that’s got you so angry and twisted up inside?”

Jake whirled. “Goddam it Brian. Our friendship doesn’t give you the right to dig into my personal feelings. Just leave it the hell alone.” He turned and began to walk away.

Brian grabbed Jake by the arm and held him in a vise-like grip. “Look, buddy, you owe me. I’ve kept my mouth shut, I’ve covered for you. Hell, I’ve even risked my job for you but I can’t anymore. Not when you won’t do anything to help yourself. The least you can do is not take me down the shitter with you.”

Jake glared down at the hand gripping his arm. Brian’s pro football ring glittered ruby red in the faint sunlight filtering weakly through gathering storm clouds.

Red as blood. The fleeting thought hit Jake like a freight train. *Always blood and nowhere to go to hide from it.*

Like a shroud slipping over the dying eyes of a man without hope, the sunlight faded into grey then was gone as quickly as it came. Jake looked up and saw black snow clouds gathering like vultures over the death scene.

“It’s going to snow again. We need to get this wrapped up,” Jake muttered while shrugging off Brian’s hand. He stepped around the bagged body and stalked toward the street.

Brian’s arms went limp at his sides as he watched Jake speak with the two uniformed policemen guarding the entry to the alley.

“What the bloody hell crawled up his bum?” Cam asked at Brian’s shoulder.

Brian glanced at Cam then back at Jake, who was staring up the street, ignoring several news cameras and shouting reporters with microphones thrust at his face. “He’ll be okay. Just give him time and space Cam.” Brian shivered.

“Aren’t you cold in just that running suit?” Cam asked with a lopsided grin.

“Did you talk to the baker?” Brian asked around a jaw cracking yawn.

“Yep, got it all. Want to hear it?” Cam opened the notebook and pushed it toward Brian.

Brian held up a hand. “No, type it up and give it to Jake. He’ll want to read it, study it, file it, read it again,” he replied while moving toward the street. He watched Jake push a microphone out of his face and turn to shout at Connie Braxton, a bulldog of a reporter who managed to show up at every murder scene seconds after Jake and his team arrived.

The rotund body of Police Chief Hartigan appeared in front of Jake, spreading the wave of reporters like a whale beaching itself on sand. Hartigan shot Jake a grimace then turned with both hands, begging silence from the reporters who switched their assault from Jake to him when he arrived. “Quiet, people,” he roared.

Momentarily subdued, the sound of the crowd lowered to a dull drone of whispers.

“I know all of you want to know if this morning’s murder is the work of the Holiday Killer. You all know the drill. You’ll have to wait until we know more but I want you to know the Santa Rosa Police Department is on top of this. I’ll call a conference just as soon as I know anything worthwhile. Thank you.”

The chief shot a sickly smile at the jostling reporters and turned to Jake. “Let’s talk,” he mumbled while the reporters crowded behind him, shouting questions again.

Jake and Hartigan stepped behind the uniformed police and under the crime scene tape then moved a few steps into the alley. Hartigan glanced at Brian and Cam then ignored them. “What have you got and it better be good.” He nodded toward the reporters who were slowly dispersing. “They want their pound of flesh.”

Jake’s lips twisted into a curl of disgust. “It’s the same signature, the same lipstick kiss, the same dildo, the same posing and the same icepick in the eye.” Jake shrugged. “Everything points to the same guy.”

Hartigan glanced around, peering into the still restless mob of rubberneckers. “Where the hell is Russell? Shouldn’t this body be gone by now?”

Jake looked up at a sky that looked like night, instead of early morning. Flakes of snow wafted down onto his face. “He didn’t show. I had my forensic team log the evidence and bag the body but we can’t remove it, only Russell or his people can.”

Hartigan pointed at the ambulance parked just outside the tape line. “Then what’s that for?”

“I don’t know. Someone must have called for it but I didn’t and neither did my people.” Jake paused then added with a smirk. “Maybe Russell did. After all, he’s too busy to show up.”

“Well, he must have a good reason,” Hartigan retorted, accompanied by a look that said Jake better not say differently.

At that moment, the antique funeral car Russell liked to drive pulled up, scattering what was left of the reporters and onlookers. He used the car door then his slim, short body to push more of the mob away. He nodded at the two bored police officers manning the line then quickly slipped under the tape and stalked toward Hartigan.

“Hey chief! Bitch of a morning, ain’t it?” Russell slapped Hartigan on the shoulder then turned to face the chief, putting Jake and his team at his back. “What are you doing out so early in this shitty weather?” He rubbed his hands together and hunched into his overcoat. The brown material made the brilliant red of his hair appear brighter.

Jake glared at the back of his head then turned away, beckoning Brian and Cam toward the body.

Hartigan didn’t smile. “Doing my job and placating the media. Why the hell weren’t you here to do yours?”

Russell's smile disappeared and was replaced by a stiff-lipped version of a smirk. "Because I was busy with other things more important. Things you and I both know need doing."

The chief's face blanched. "Yeah, okay then. I knew you had a good reason for being late. But you better get this stiff into the morgue before the snow makes an even harder stiff of it." A twisted smile bent his face into a grotesque parody of humor.

Russell's smile reasserted itself. "Sure thing." Still ignoring Jake, Brian and Cam, Russell turned and made his way to the body. He beckoned for the two uniformed officers to approach. "In the wagon boys."

The officers lifted the body and made their way toward the funeral limo at the curb. Excited news people rushed back to the tape and began snapping pictures.

Russell watched them place the body in the back of his car then turned to Jake. "So, another killing and still no suspects. When are you gonna crack this case hotshot?"

"Screw you Russell! You give us squat to work with and you know it," Jake spat. "Maybe if you and Hartigan got off your lazy asses and actually did some work we'd get somewhere."

"Oh, so the big time FBI loser falls on his face again huh? And he blames it on me." Russell's singsong voice taunted. "I'll gladly take credit for wanting you shown up for the waste of space you are but I won't take any for your screw-ups Daniels. Or should I say string of screw-ups? You did those all by yourself. Why don't you do us all a favor and eat a bullet like the last agent who tried to solve this case?" Russell retorted before turning and heading to his car.

"What the hell's his problem?" Cam asked, watching Russell drive away.

“It’s a long, nasty story,” Brian replied.

“I’m going home,” Jake snapped. “I need food, a shower, some sleep...”

The tall figure of a woman dressed in gaudy clothing waved from the small crowd of onlookers still straining over the crime tape. The two uniformed police were pointedly ignoring her antics, watching Hartigan get into his Cadillac and drive away.

“Oh shit,” Jake groaned. “I gotta get out of here.” He turned and made his way toward the open door of the bakery. “You two work the neighborhood and see what you can find out. Talk to everyone,” he threw over his shoulder at Brian and Cam. “I’ll call in later.” He disappeared inside the bakery and closed the door.

“Why did he do that?” Cam asked with a confused frown.

Brian pointed at the woman and grinned, “Seems Jake has an admirer but he’s trying to discourage her.” Brian chuckled. “Too bad. The guy needs a life. All he does is work,” Brian added.

Cam laughed. “Well, mate, I wouldn’t mind taking on that long-legged lady if Jake don’t want her.”

Brian noted the snow falling harder then pushed Cam toward the bakery door. “The ladies can wait a bit for your attentions lover-boy. We have work to do and the weather ain’t getting any better.”

The phone rang just as Jake stepped out of the shower. Water drops glistened in the thick black hair on his chest and his freshly shaved cheeks and chin were still red with razor friction.

The muted sounds of Celine Dion singing 'I Will Go On' seeped into the tiny bathroom.

The phone rang again.

"Shit!" he exclaimed while glaring at his reflection in the mirror. He reached into a drawer under the sink and grabbed a comb. He raked it through his thick curly hair while concentrating on ignoring the intrusion. He followed with a quick comb to the mustache it took years to grow and train; the mustache he kept in spite of FBI regulations to the contrary.

The phone went on ringing.

He picked up a toothbrush and put paste on it before raising it to his mouth.

The sound of the phone echoed down the hallway.

With a deep sigh, he wrapped a towel around his waist then padded into the kitchen. He stared down at the phone with a scowl on his face. The plain black phone on the countertop harassed him with a nerve-wracking jangle that echoed through the room. A huge orange and white cat stared at him from the top of the couch in the living room.

"No, Glock, I am not going to answer the damned thing so relax," he said to the cat.

Glock lay back down on the soft pillow top of the couch but continued to stare at him with an intense look in his green eyes. Even the falling snow outside the picture window behind him didn't distract him from watching Jake.

The phone rang again.

“Damn it to hell!” Jake snapped.

He strode to the stereo in the bookcases lining the living room walls and punched the off button. The music died.

The phone rang again.

With a snort of disgust, he grabbed the receiver. “Yeah?”

“Jake, Brian. Another body’s been found in the downtown park.”

“I’ll be right there.” Jake slammed the phone down and turned back toward the bedroom.

He made it to the hallway then stopped, bit his lip, frowned down at his hands then returned to the phone. He punched out a number and waited.

When the husky voice of a woman answered, Jake took a deep breath and said, “Marti? You wanted a crack at profiling. Here’s your chance to show me it’s worth risking what’s left of my career. Meet me in the Santa Rosa City Park. Move fast.”

He hung up without giving her a chance to respond, stalked to the bedroom and threw his clothes on. On the way out, he threw some cat chow into a bowl, checked the cat’s water then grabbed a stale sandwich off the counter and a carton of chocolate milk from the refrigerator. At the door, he paused, turned his head toward Glock and murmured, “What the hell buddy. I haven’t got much to lose anymore, do I?” The smile that twisted his lips as he left the apartment building looked more like a grimace of pain.

Jake could hear the cat howling when he climbed into his car.

CHAPTER TWO

December 25th
7:30 AM

“He has a *what* up *where*?” Marti gasped. She glanced from Russell to Jake then back again in disbelief.

Oblivious to the slimy black mud caking his slacks, Russell inspected the body before him. It was laying face down, arms outstretched, on its knees, rear propped up, in a clearing surrounded by snow-covered trees. Focused on assessing and recording what he observed, Russell didn’t answer Marti’s shocked question.

Jake leaned over and whispered, “He said the poor son of a bitch has a huge dick shoved up his ass.” The last words came out distorted, muffled behind a hand pressed against his mouth. He fought to suppress a laugh.

Amanda, Russell’s stout, short, devoted morgue assistant, turned, placed large, mannish hands on nonexistent hips and retorted with heavy indignation, “He said, and I quote, ‘The subject’s alimentary canal contains a foreign device commonly known as ‘Every woman’s Ecstasy’, a well known type of oversized dildo.’” She sniffed, patted the spikes of red and black hair on her head back down, adjusted her glasses and turned back to observe Russell as he worked on the soon-to-be newest addition to the county morgue.

“Jesus, I’ve heard and seen some pretty strange things but this is the limit,” Marti blurted.

“This isn’t the worst one Marti. A young woman was found earlier this morning on the other side of town.” He nodded at the body. “This guy got off lucky, compared to her.”

Leaning close to Jake, Marti asked, “Why isn’t he doing this in the morgue? Seems to me this is not the time or place to be examining the body so thoroughly, especially when the Jane Doe from this morning is waiting to be examined too.”

Without turning his head, Russell spoke up. “I’m doing it here, Doctor Joyner, because the anus is wide open and the body has advanced rigor. It goes without saying that when the body is moved this thing will probably dislodge and fall out. I’m sure you understand it’s important to get the details accurately noted before that happens.”

Marti blushed as she asked, "Can't you...er...tape it so it won't come out or something?" For some reason she couldn't identify, the corpse's position embarrassed Marti.

Russell snorted and Amanda laughed out loud with an abrasive barking sound. Russell glanced up at Marti with something close to disdain. "I thought you were a professional." He snorted again and went back to his examination.

“Don’t get shitty, Russell. By the way, when you’re done there, I’d like a *professional* word with you.” Jake took Marti’s arm and gently pulled her away from the tight knot of people working around Russell and the body.

Finding the only tree close by without mounds of snow piled on its branches, Jake halted, turned to face the clearing and pulled Marti around in front of him. He held her shoulders and softly spoke next to her ear. “I want you to take a good look at that scene. Tell me what you see.”

His warm breath sending goose bumps up one side of her body, Marti shivered and tried to squirm out of his hold. “Jake, what is this?”

“Just look, Marti. Look hard. What do you see?” He held her tightly, forcing her to face forward.

Her shoulders slumped and she instinctively leaned back against him, her body seeking warmth against the icy morning air. “Okay, I’ll play. Let’s see... I see a small clearing surrounded by several trees in the middle of the city park. The trees and ground are loaded with fresh snow. The ground is muddy and churned up from the people tramping around on it. The clearing is surrounded by yellow police crime tape and manned by officers keeping the news people out. There are four people collecting evidence in the middle of this clearing. Amanda is holding a bright yellow tarp down with her hiking boots. She is cataloging evidence and noting Russell’s dictated findings. Two other assistants are putting things into plastic bags and handing them to her. She is putting them into a red portable ice chest sitting on the tarp.” Marti stopped, looked over her shoulder at Jake, raised her eyebrows in question, paused, sighed then turned back and continued in a bored singsong voice. “Russell is kneeling on the ground next to the victim. He’s inspecting a naked male corpse that is lying face down in the snow, knees propped up into a ridiculously obscene position. The dead man’s posterior shows a very noticeable picture of female lips painted on with bright red lipstick. He appears...”

“Stop. Doctor Joyner, you get so lost checking out the leaves on the trees that you don't see the trees themselves or the forest. Now take another look and really see what’s over there. Look at the whole thing, the big picture.”

“ Why, Detective Daniels, is this some kind of a test?” When he held her in place, refusing to let her go, Marti gave up the fight for freedom. “ Okay. Okay. The guys working around the site are messing up all the footprints. No, the cops already went over

those. Okay. Amanda has big feet, but then, all of her is big. Uh...okay. I've had enough! What?" She threw up her hands in frustration and swung around to look at Jake, who tiredly smiled down at her.

"Why would an obviously well-off man come out here in the middle of the park at night and take his clothes off? Where *are* his clothes? Why wasn't there a struggle? None of this scene sits right with me and I was hoping you'd have a better idea why ' Miss Microscopic Details'."

"If there are no clothes or anything else to go on, what makes you think he's so obviously well off?" Marti asked with a playful smirk.

Jake sighed, "Smart ass. Okay, you want to be a profiler? Then listen and learn to one who's been there." He closed his eyes. "First, his haircut is top notch, too good to be home done or cheap shop. Second, his hands are tanned, leaving several white bands where his rings once were. Third, his teeth have obviously been well taken care of, he has crowns and gold fillings." He opened his eyes and smiled down at Marti's stunned face. "Is that enough to convince you?"

She snapped her mouth shut. "Okay, I can play this game too. How do you know he doesn't have a brother who's a barber and gets free haircuts? How do you know the jewelry was expensive? How do you know the tan isn't one of those quickie bottled ones? How do you know about his teeth at all? Did you look inside his mouth?"

Jake burst out laughing. "Touché. Maybe there's hope for you yet." He held up his hands, palms out when she raised a small fist at him. "Okay, okay. You're absolutely right. Detectives and profilers have to think about things like that. But, I do know he's well off. The haircut, okay, I'll give you that one. But, the jewelry didn't leave any green

residue like a cheap piece would. And, I did look at his teeth. All in all, I'm sure he's an uptown guy." Jake rubbed his bristly chin with a thick finger and his eyes unfocused as his thoughts turned inward. "Why he came here late last night is anybody's guess." His eyes suddenly refocused on Marti again. "Okay, hotshot, tell me what else you can see."

Marti frowned, turned and looked again. After a couple of minutes of hard concentration, she commented, "You're right. It's too isolated a place for a man who might be mugged to venture into, even for the center of town. There's no area away from the clearing that shows any sign of being torn up and there wasn't a shred of clothing or jewelry left with him. He didn't struggle. Why?" Her forehead puckered in consternation. Oblivious to Jake's inquiring look, she started slowly walking around the clearing, scanning and thinking.

While she slowly scanned the area, Jake leaned against the massive Pine tree he'd unconsciously chosen to stand under. The fragrance of pine permeated the area, making him think of past Christmas holidays with Pat. The thought conjured up the image of her on a happier Christmas day and how their house had looked so empty and forlorn on all the Christmases after her death. That's why he had to sell it and move into a featureless apartment. *Ah, shit! I can't even enjoy a damned tree anymore*, Jake thought with disgust while he pushed away from the tree trunk. Abruptly, an avalanche of snow descended from the center of the tree. He looked up, raised his arms to fend off the white assault then stood transfixed at what he saw when the snow stopped falling. Hidden behind thick pine needles, in the center next to the trunk, a fresh stub of wood protruded. *Someone cut off a branch here. And, it was recent too*. He reached out a finger to test the damp sap still wet on the end of the missing branch.

He lowered his gaze, searching for Marti. She was slowly meandering around the perimeter of the crime scene. Uniformed cops and journalists alike shouted at her as she walked by them. She ignored them all, completely caught up in every minute detail she could gather.

Knowing any active attention from Marti would not be forthcoming any time soon, Jake left her to do her Sherlock act and made his way back to Russell and his team at the hub of the activity. “What have you found, Russell? Anything out of the ordinary...uh...besides the dildo that is?”

Russell stood up, made a futile attempt to knock the mud off his knees and pulled off his rubber gloves. “This one *is* different. Someone is definitely copycatting your serial killer but is adding things to his style. We have the standard lipstick lips on the posterior but this one is actually kissed on, not drawn on like the others. This is a male victim, not a female and there’s the addition of the dildo in the anus. And...this guy’s genitals are missing.

“Missing? You mean cut off?” Jake felt his heart lurch and his stomach knot up in revulsion.

“Yes, missing. They’re nowhere to be found. The man was completely castrated, testicles and all. And my guess is the method used isn’t an amateur one either. Clean, quick and sure. Either our killer has developed some new and amusing way to add to his work or this is the work of someone who wanted to be more creative. I can’t tell yet.”

“What else did you find? Any other deviations from the other murders?” Jake sucked in a deep mouthful of air and waited.

“Only one solid thing. He had a white satin strip tied into a bow around his ring finger. That’s definitely new. There are a couple of physical things that look strange too. I’ll be able to tell you more after I’ve done the complete autopsy.” He held up a hand to forestall another question. “ And before you ask, it will be awhile yet. I still have our blonde Jane Doe to do.”

“Okay. How soon can you have something definite for me?” Jake watched Amanda packing up the cases and the two technicians bagging the body for removal.

“Tomorrow afternoon or evening...at the earliest. Jake, about this morning...”

“Drop it, Russell. It’s been a long morning and will be an even longer day. I don’t have time for this. I’ll be home for the rest of the day if you come up with anything.”

Jake turned on his heel and stalked away from the rising blush of anger suffusing Russell’s face.

Jake caught up with Marti as she approached the outer area next to the parked cars. “Marti, I’m going home for the day. Brian and Cameron are overseeing the collection of evidence here and I told Russell to call if anything important or new comes up. When do you think you might have something for me by way of a working profile?”

“Tonight. I’ll work on it when I leave here. I have a lot to go over but I need to read the case file first and see Russell’s forensic reports on the other victims as well if they’re not in with yours.” She pulled her leather coat closer under her chin and shivered.

“I think it’s getting colder.” White puffs of icy air drifted from her lips as she spoke.

Startled at the abrupt change in subject, Jake paused before stating, “I’ll have Brian or Cameron bring you the case file. It contains Russell’s reports too. Where will you be?”

"I wanted to go home and grab some sleep, but..." she glanced over the crime scene again. "I'm wide-awake now. So, I'll be at the office, probably placating or dodging William for the rest of the day." She smiled, the look transforming her face into a softer version of her normally serious one. "I'll give you a call when I have something solid. Get some sleep. You look like shit. Bye Jake." Marti walked away, heading for the parking lot.

Jake spotted his boss, Gary Ferguson, off in the distance, talking animatedly to Russell. Jake flinched, expecting a tirade about political expediency, budgeting and the lack of any real leads on the series of killings that had already destroyed the career of the last agent in charge. Before Ferguson could buttonhole him, forcing Jake to waste more time trying to explain why the case was so baffling and why no real evidence and leads were forthcoming, in spite of the new killings, Jake stepped behind a news van. He watched Gary and Russell, hoping they'd finish their conversation soon so he could go home.

Gary's tall suit-clad body was just as trim and athletically fit at fifty-five as it was at forty, when Jake was first assigned to the man's unit at the Bureau. His white hair and sparkling blue eyes gave him an air of the polished politician, a joke Jake and Gary often laughed about together while they planned how to circumvent what Gary called 'bureau bullshit' or BBS, their private version of FUBAR. Jake remembered how taken with the man's elegance he'd been and how Gary had befriended him almost immediately. Jake and Pat had spent many a pleasant evening with Gary and his wife Babs before Pat's death had driven Jake into an isolated world of pain, nightmares and liquor. Since then,

Gary had done what he could to keep Jake on the payroll but Jake knew it was just a matter of time before even his powerful friend would be unable to help him.

By the time Gary and Russell had moved off further into the park, still talking, Jake was ready to slam a fist into the van's side panel with frustration and fatigue. He stepped away from the van and scanned the lot of his Cougar convertible while letting his tired mind and body sink into a small lull of relief from tension. It returned with lightning speed when he heard the voice behind.

"Agent Daniels? Is this latest pair of victims the work of the Holiday Killer? Are you any closer to catching him? I heard the man was raped with a dildo. Is this true?"

A small microphone abruptly and rudely thrust into Jake's face sent his blood pressure soaring into the dark snow-laden clouds. Tired, drained and suddenly enraged at the intrusion, Jake knocked the microphone away. Snarling, he spun to face the reporter and stopped just short of punching her in the nose. Connie Braxton, microphone and tape recorder in the snow and arms crossed in front of her face, waited for the blow. The young black man holding a camera behind her stood frozen in shock, his finger was likewise frozen on the shutter button and gave him a look of being captured in one of his own photographs.

"What the hell are you trying to prove? You can't creep up on me that way, shoving things into my face. Damn! I almost hit you, you idiot woman." Jake's body shook with the adrenaline rush he was fighting to overcome.

Lowering her arms, Connie adjusted gold-framed glasses, ran her fingers through her short black hair, straightened her pantsuit and overcoat then stooped to pick up the tape recorder still attached by an umbilical cord to its microphone. She brushed it off,

totally ignored his outburst and, to Jake's astonishment, coolly held it out, waiting expectantly for a reply to her question. Her face registered no apology or embarrassment.

Fighting the fatigue, stress and debilitating aftermath of adrenaline rush, Jake took a shuddering breath and forced his body to relax. "Okay. What do you want to know?"

Her hazel eyes shone behind her glasses and a pink tongue darted out to lick dry lips. She sucked air into her lungs and answered. "I asked if this new pair of victims is the work of the Holiday Killer. Do they both have the same ice picks, dildos and lip prints on them? Are they both blondes? Have you finally found something to lead you to the killer?"

Her voice, high-pitched and loud, grated on Jake's ears. He flinched.

She lowered the microphone and leaned closer with a gleam in her eye. "Come on agent. Come and have a few drinks with me in a nice quiet place where we can talk."

Before he could think or answer, two more news teams descended upon him, all screaming questions and pushing microphones into his face. He ran. As he leapt into his restored white classic Cougar convertible, he heard Connie's annoyingly frantic voice over the others. "Damn it, he was ready to talk! Daniels, come back here! Will you *ever* find the evil monster who's doing this?"

CHAPTER THREE

December 25th
1:00 P.M.

The Stumble Inn's jukebox menu boasted the latest in music. Unfortunately, all of it was at least five years behind the times. Scratchy, unintelligible sounds remotely similar to music, issued from its built-in speakers, a tinny sound that rivaled the scratching of fingernails on a chalkboard. Once in awhile, the record skipped, making the singer sound like someone suffering from terminal hiccups. Not one of the three people sitting in the bar's dim interior noticed or cared.

Jake sat at his usual booth, up against the back wall. He liked to be able to see the entire room, while his broad back rested against the sticky wall. He also liked having the bathroom handy in case he had to duck out in a hurry; something that had already come in handy when the press was determined to corner him about a case. A clutter of Budweiser bottles covered the small, scarred table that his knees continually banged underneath. His bare elbows rested among the bottle corpses, giving his arms the appearance of being giant white pillars, holding up his head in a drunken parody of Rodin's *The Thinker*. He lowered one hand and stuck a finger into one of the many wet rings littering the tabletop. While the finger made meandering patterns in the water, Jake quietly turned his thoughts inward.

The motherfucker is getting cocky. This time, he deliberately changed his routine by using an obviously high-risk dumpsite. Why? Why the hell is he so confident we won't find him?

“Darlin’, when are you gonna tell me what’s ailin’ you? When are you gonna let it out and let it go?” Roxanne leaned across the table, her ample breasts threatening to spill from the top of a low-cut barmaid’s uniform. She reached out and tried to pull Jake’s hand away from his face, her red nail polish making his drawn face look even paler. “Baby, y’all need to go home and get some food and sleep. You’re getting’ drunk and I can’t leave to take care of you.” She sighed, sat back and brushed damp wisps of long blonde hair from her face. She waited for him to return from the personal hell he visited when he came in to drink, which was every weekend and most nights.

“Roxy, I’ve had enough. I’ve seen too many bodies lying in alleyways, in dumpsters and everywhere else...and too many killers still walking on the streets. I’m gonna quit. I’m burnt out and no good to the department anymore...or to myself.” He rubbed tired eyes before raising them to stare at her, expecting the standard arguments to start.

She crossed delicate soft arms under her breasts, making them bulge even further out of her top, sighed and nodded her head. “Okay, I hope you do quit. I think y’all should do whatever you need to do, Jake. Go to Florida or southern California, get a tan, get a new girlfriend but y’all need to do something besides sittin’ here drinkin’ and pissin’ your life away like this.” Roxy took a deep breath before rushing on. “Look Jake. You lost your partner and your wife to a nutcase. It happens. I’m sorry but life goes on. Don’t give up on yourself because of it.”

The thunderclap of Jake’s big hand hitting the tabletop and the empty bottles smashing onto the floor happened suddenly. Roxy jumped, her arms flying outward in alarm as she leaped up and away from the table. “What the hell y’all do that for, you

crazy shithead?" Fear made her accent deepen to the point where Jake could barely understand all but the last word. He laughed, a deep, black hole type of anti-humor laugh.

"Why do you think?" Jake ran both hands through his hair then smoothed down his moustache in a subconscious move to regain his self-control. "God, I'm sorry, Roxy. Shit. Sometimes I'm hopeless. You're right. I'm going home." He staggered to his feet, picked up his heavy overcoat and slipped it on. He threw a wad of bills onto the wet table.

Grabbing his sleeve, Roxy looked up at his face, worry deep within her blue eyes. "What is it, Jake? I've never seen you like this. Never."

He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "Nothing. I'm trapped is all. And...I'm so damned tired." He rubbed his eyes again and summoned up a shaky smile for her.

"Roxy, do me a favor will you?"

"Sure, sugar. You just tell me what you need." She held his hand but her eyes still looked troubled as she stared up into his face.

"Dye your hair. Get rid of the blonde and become a fiery redhead for a while. Will you do that for me?" His lopsided grin took twenty years off his face.

Smiling back, she nodded her head and replied, "Sure, love. I'll be a redhead for awhile...but just for you, sugah, and only for you." She stood on her tiptoes and planted a kiss on his beard-stubbed cheek. Flinching at its scratchiness, she rubbed her hand along his jaw line. "But you have to do something for me too baby. Go home, eat a decent meal, take a hot shower and a shave and get some shuteye. Deal?"

Yawning, Jake rolled his neck and shoulders around, trying to relieve the stiffness before he grinned again. "Boy, have you got a deal honey." Squeezing her hand, he

dropped another tiny kiss on her forehead then turned away. He left her standing there and moved through the shadowy bar toward the door.

"Hey Jake," a raspy voice beckoned from a side booth.

Jake stopped and turned toward the man sitting at the table. Instinctively, Jake did a quick profile on the man, assessing his age, health, strength and level of danger.

Black man in his forties. Voice is educated. Big and in shape for his age. Not packing. No quirky body movements, no avoidance of my gaze. Clear, steady, intelligent eyes. On guard but not hiding anything. Dangerous.

Jake relaxed a touch and asked, "What do you want?" When the man smiled, showing off two gold front teeth, Jake frowned. "Do I know you?"

"Only in passing and that was many years ago. Does the name M.M. Quigley mean anything to you?" The man stubbed out the remnants of an unfiltered cigarette and promptly lit another, bending a match inside its cover without tearing it out to light it.

Add chain smoker to the list.

A red flag went up in Jake's mind. "Yeah, I know you Quigley...and guys like you. Get lost," Jake spat and turned back toward the door.

"Wait Daniels. I can help you with the Holiday Killer. Aren't you interested?" Quigley's voice was a mixture of anger and hope, shout and whisper.

Jake turned back to face him. "And just what can an ex-cop, ex-killer, ex-con do to help catch another bloodthirsty killer?" Jake replied, his voice heavy with sarcasm and loathing.

Quigley stubbed his second cigarette out and folded his hands on the table before answering. "It was an accident! I..." The man visibly took hold of his emotions and

plastered a calm, in control mask upon his face. "Look, I paid for my crime. I got out last week. And I can help you. I've been there. Remember? Over the last 15 years I've lived with the type of guy you're looking for. Besides, talk on the street is that you don't have anything on this guy and you're not long for this town...or the job."

"I don't have time for dirty cops Quigley. Or for killers." Jake's face hardened into lines of distaste and mistrust. He took two steps away before Quigley's voice stopped him again.

"Wait!" Sam Quigley hesitated, reached for his crumpled pack of cigarettes, thought better of it, threw it back onto the table and took a deep breath instead. "Look, I need the work..." When Jake's face suffused with angry blood, Quigley hurried on, "...and I *can* be of use to you. Kinda unofficial like. I can bring the talk off the street for you, go places you can't go and talk to people you don't even know about much less find to talk to. How about it?"

Jake raked the man with a look of disgust. "If I get that desperate, I'll let you know." He turned and headed for the door.

As Jake approached the exit, a woman coming into the darkened room stopped just inside the door and paused to let her eyes adjust to the dim light. Her small body, held ramrod straight, clad in pantsuit and sensible shoes, made her look like a male elf. She remained stubbornly blocking the door when Jake reached her.

"I knew you'd be here." Connie Braxton smiled at Jake's abrupt halt and startled expression.

"No comment." Jake gently pushed her out of the way and moved past her toward the door.

“People have a right to know when they can expect the killings in their town to stop, Agent Daniels. This has been going on for months now. The FBI has sent two agents to look into this, both incompetent, it would seem. You haven’t given them much hope it’ll stop soon. Why?” Connie moved to block his exit again.

Jake knew when he was being baited and he deliberately kept his face expressionless while he blandly responded, “Ms. Braxton, we are doing all we can do to find and stop this killer. You know that. That’s all we can do. Now please get out of my face.” Jake moved around her and opened the door.

Her frantic voice followed him as he swept out the door. “At least tell me if the man in the park was the Holiday Killer! You got him, didn’t you? Why are you keeping it secret?”

Jake stopped, stunned at her inane questions and assumptions. And, with the beer fuzzing his good sense and instincts, decided to address them anyway. “What the hell are you talking about? That poor son-of-a-bitch was some poor schmuck who just happened to stop here for the night on his way home from a business trip. He was a salesman; a common, everyday guy with a common job. Holy shit! Reporters and their warped need to get sensational stories! Isn’t the truth gory enough for you lady?” The disgust he felt for literary vultures vaulted him outside the door with an urgent need for fresh air.

“Hey! Jake! Take it easy, buddy,” Pete hollered from behind the bar, his large belly spread over the countertop as he leaned over it to wave. Jake stopped outside the doorway and raised a hand back at the owner of the bar. Pete flashed what passed for a smile on his round face. “Go get some pussy. That’ll cure what ails ya.”

Jake flapped his hand in weary acknowledgement and finally slipped completely out the door. Pete's gravelly voice and raucous laughter followed. It grated on Jake's already strained nervous system. The dying rays of the sun stopped him outside, like a vampire caught at the end of a bad movie. In spite of its appearance, the sun had done little to melt the ice still slick on the sidewalks. A blast of icy air hit Jake's face when he stepped away from the shelter of the building out onto the walk. It sliced through his brain like a knife, instantly undoing what several beers had worked so hard to do. Jake was sober again. He groaned.

"Got a bad case of Jack's back, huh, boss?" Brian's deep voice asked in a deceptively gentle tone.

"What? Oh, hello, Brian." Jake saw Cameron standing behind Brian, trying to look invisible. "You too Cameron." He turned his attention back to Brian. "Yeah, Jack Daniels strikes again, only this time his name was Budweiser." Jake tried to laugh and stumbled instead. He steadied himself and took a deep breath. "Fact is, I was just on my way home to catch a shower and some sleep."

He nodded at the two men standing by a plain black car sitting at the curb directly under a dimly lit neon streetlight. The shadows cast by the light gave the men and the car an almost comic look similar to the characters in the movie 'Men In Black.' Jake realized he was too tired and had too much beer inside him to think straight. He ran his fingers through his hair then over his moustache before he began buttoning his overcoat, hoping to salvage something of his dignity by pretending to be in control. "By the way, what are you two doing here?" He straightened and slipped on his best professional attitude.

“Looking for you. Since you weren’t at your apartment, I figured you’d be here. You always come here when you want to disappear. Only you don’t.” Brian’s wide smile lit up his plain face, taking some of the sting out of the criticism.

“I’m gonna have to change my habits. I’m becoming too damned predictable. Seems everybody knows where to find me when I want to be alone,” Jake snapped when Connie stepped out of the bar and stopped to stare. She took in the three detective's hostile attitudes with one glance, her twisted red lips vividly standing out in an abnormally pale face. She shot one last look of venom at Jake then turned away, walking swiftly down the street toward a small white Volkswagen beetle.

“Not bad legs on that bird. Who is she?” Cameron stared admiringly at Connie’s retreating figure as she made her way under the streetlights and down the street.

“Someone you’re much better off not knowing. She’s a ball crusher. Worse, she’s a reporter. Now, why are you two here dogging me instead of digging around the murder scenes finding me a miracle or two?” Jake pointedly stared at them with a good attempt at flexing authority he now doubted he really had anymore.

Brian held out a fat manila envelope. “You asked for this as soon as I could get it to you, remember? I knew you’d want to hear about anything we learned from the door to door this morning too.”

“Yeah, I do. Let’s go to my apartment and talk. I want to clean up and get some coffee.” Jake beckoned for them to follow.

Before Jake had taken three steps, the bar's antique doors swung open and Quigley stepped out, blinking fiercely at the sudden neon light that assaulted his eyes. Standing under the streetlight, wearing a trench coat and hat, and with a half-burned

cigarette dangling from his mouth, the man looked eerily like a black Humphrey Bogart. The cigarette fell to the ground when he reached up to grind his knuckles into his smoke-damaged eyes.

Jake, seeing the ex-cop on the sidewalk, paused, scowled, and proceeded down the street with Brian and Cameron trailing along. Cameron glanced inquiringly at Jake's set profile then back over his shoulder at the hunch-shouldered black man in the outdated clothes who was still staring after them. "Hey Jake. Who's the strange looking bloke staring at us? You know him?"

Jake abruptly stopped but remained staring straight ahead like a teenager who is being stalked and knows it. He blew out an irritated breath, turned slowly and stared right back at Quigley, who still stood outside the bar's swinging doors. Jake's face went through a swift change from anger, to confusion to irritation then to resignation. He bellowed at Quigley, "You bring me something worth looking at and I'll listen. But, and don't forget this, you do nothing without telling me. I want to be in on everything you do on this case, including the times when you take a piss break. You got that?" Then Jake turned and continued on his way down the street before the man could respond.

Cameron and Brian stood there, confused and alternating between staring at the stranger who was slowly moving toward an old battered van and Jake's rapidly retreating back. Brian ended up looking at Cameron's expression, which was just as confused as his. "If he wants us to know, he'll tell us," Brian stated. The two men trotted to catch up with Jake.

Both sides of the old part of town were crammed with ancient brownstones, some kept up, and some falling apart but most in-between. A few houses down the street, just

beyond a small line of shops and a neighborhood cafe, Jake turned and went up steep stairs to a stained glass door, its elegance out of step with the rest of the building's neglected condition.

Jake entered the foyer then opened the door of the ground floor front apartment and stepped aside, beckoning the two men to enter. He hung his overcoat on a tall brass coat-rack, then walked into the small kitchenette separated from the living room by a long counter littered with the remains of frozen dinners, coffee cups and file folders. He ran some water into an old style electric percolator while Cameron and Brian self-consciously stood on the bare wood floor and watched him.

Brian was the first to move. He took off his coat, hung it up then sprawled on the big overstuffed, faded couch, completely at home in masculine clutter. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, momentarily grabbing some quiet time, something he often did when he got a breather from the job.

Cameron stopped by a side table to pet Jake's cat, as it lay curled inside a glass bowl and staring up at him with one golden eye and one bright blue one. "What kind of moggy is this, Jake? I've never seen one with an all white body and orange head and tail."

Jake leaned on the countertop. "Moggy? You mean Glock? He's a Turkish Van, a very special breed of cat. They're smart, protective, and they love water. He's my watch cat."

Brian opened his eyes and laughed. "Yeah, watch out, Cameron. That cat almost tore up my leg one night when I came over to pick up some stuff for Jake. Hell, I had to throw my candy at him to get away! And Jake's little herb garden out on the terrace is his

own private domain. Don't ever go out there without Jake." He laughed again when Cameron abruptly pulled his hand away from Glock's fierce gaze and sharp claws.

The cat jumped out of the bowl and gracefully hopped onto the floor. "Well, dip my dingo! That damned cat has one blue eye and one yellow one. It's enough to give a bloke the willies!" Cam stared down at the cat then back at the bowl he'd just exited. "Hey! He was laying on top of a turtle...and the bowl is full of water." Cameron gazed down into the bowl while rubbing three long scratches on the top of his hand.

"Jake told you he loves water. He's always taking the turtle out to play hockey with it. Weird pets for a weird guy." Brian laughed again.

Glock, tail held erect and fur flared out around his neck, lifted his head, sniffing into the air before slowly stalking toward the coat-rack. When he was within a foot of it, he suddenly leapt onto Jake's overcoat and knocked the rack over onto the floor. Cameron jumped back as the rack came crashing down. "Bloody crazy moggy! Is he always like this?"

The cat dug his claws into the overcoat and wrestled Jake's handkerchief out of the pocket. Jake laughed. "Only when he's in his detective mood. He thinks he's onto something there." Jake went back to fixing the coffee cups, adding sugar and milk then setting them on the only clear spot on the countertop he could find.

Brian mumbled, "That cat is tweaked, very tweaked."

Jake glanced up when Cameron wandered to his floor-to-ceiling bookcase and looked over rows of books and videos crammed into every shelf. He had the case custom-made several years ago, when his wife was alive to enjoy the books with him. Shaking off the depression threatening to set in at the thought of Pat, Jake scooped coffee

grounds into the coffeepot and plugged it in. “Coffee won’t be long. I’ll be right with you.” He went down the short hallway to the bathroom, leaving Brian and Cameron to fend for themselves.

Cameron’s normally talkative personality emerged as soon as Jake left the room. “I reckon the bloke’s falling apart, mate. He’s a mess; his flat is a disaster area and no woman to bonk on a regular basis. Not that I blame him for keeping the sheilas out; I can’t stand to have one around too long meself. Havin’ to keep a woman around permanent is a pain. But, he’s surely going off the deep end.” Cameron’s dark brown eyes didn’t pause while scanning the book shelves.

His gaze dropped to a large shelf on a level with the couch. “Jeesh, look at all the booze this guy keeps around.” He lifted a half full bottle and peered at the label. “Cheap shit too.” He snorted. “Bloody obvious why he’s so screwed up.”

He put the bottle back and straightened up then scanned the books along his line of sight. A finger rubbed lightly over the bindings of various book titles. “Look at this dodgy stuff.” Cam pointed to a video. “Titanic.” A snort issued from his nose.

Brian’s deep, slow voice contrasted with Cameron’s Aussie accent. “I wouldn’t be so quick to judge if I were you.” He tilted his head, watching Cam pull out one book after another. “What makes you think something’s wrong with him?”

“You seen the books he reads? There’s about twenty here about Jack the Ripper alone! Mate; it’d make anybody wonder. He’s obsessed with murder and the sick fruitcakes who get off on it. Bloody strange, even for an FBI agent.”

Brian joined him in front of the bookcase and read some of the titles. “Yeah, you could say he’s obsessed.” Brian ran a finger over an encyclopedia of serial killers. “But he’s entitled to be, as far as I’m concerned.”

Cam picked up a video and read the title, “Silence of the Lambs.”

“Yeah, and he’s got Hannibal too and every other movie made about these sociopaths. He studies them, gets inside their heads, thinks like them. That’s why he was the best field agent out there. He usually caught them. Until...”

Cam dropped the video back into its slot and turned to Brian. “Until?”

Brian dropped into a near whisper. “Maybe you *should* know. Then you’ll understand why he’s the way he is now.”

Cam folded his arms and waited, with a gleam of interest in his eyes.

“A couple of years ago, to celebrate his thirty-eighth birthday Jake and his wife, Pat, went out to dinner. He got drunk and Pat went home without him. To make a long story short, Jake was tracking a particularly cold-blooded and vicious serial killer at the time. When Jake got home he was waiting for him with a baseball bat. The guy raped, tortured and killed Pat after he bound and gagged Jake. Jake was forced to watch. He's still blaming himself for not saving her.”

Brian paused. His voice dropped lower, “He hasn't been the same since.”

“I don’t bloody wonder why. Bugger me mate! I’d be totally mental if that happened to me.” Cam’s mouth twisted into a grimace.

“Yeah, well, Jake and I grew up together and I can tell you he’s no psycho,” Brian muttered while turning his attention back to the books lining the shelves.

Cameron's outstretched hand, in the process of pulling another video off the shelf, dropped to his side. He turned, set the coat rack back up on its three legs, took his coat off and hung it up next to Brian's then he slowly sat down on the sofa next to Glock. He took a deep breath and blurted out, "Bloody hell, mate. I admit it, I'm an untrusting bloke. I'm even lookin' at the boss as a suspect." He took another deep breath and stared at his hands, inspecting the black hair covering them like his life depended on uncovering their secrets.

"I'd be worrying about your value as an agent if you didn't Cameron." Jake stood inside the hallway, freshly shaved and washed.

The two men turned to face Jake. Brian took a deep breath and let it out; Cameron fidgeted on the cushion then concentrated on stroking Glock.

Before either of them could embarrass themselves further, Jake moved to pour the coffee. "Just out of idle curiosity Cameron, how did an Aussie cop end up in a small town like Santa Rosa, affectionately known as 'Sacramento's asshole' by those who live here?"

Cameron sat up straight, fought to keep a normal expression on his face and cleared his throat. "When I finished me training in Queensland, I itched to see the States and I wanted to learn Yank law enforcement. I want to be the best." His obvious discomfort translated itself into fidgeting and knuckle biting. He now gnawed on two fingers at once.

"How long have you been here? I mean in the States?"

“Let’s see...I started here about a year ago. Couldn’t get a big city to grab me up but Santa Rosa wanted some newspaper space so they hired me sight unseen. Yeah, about a year now.” Cameron visibly relaxed.

Jake nodded, mentally confirming something he’d wondered about earlier. “Okay. Tell me about your morning. Tell me something good and tell it in detail.” Jake turned to Brian, standing frozen in front of the bookshelf, then to Cameron, who now looked uncomfortable and unsure again. Jake pointed to the cups waiting on the counter then sipped his own and waited.

“Cameron talked to the old guy who owns the butcher shop next door to the alleyway where the woman’s body was found and I talked to the couple across the street who own the pawn shop. They all saw and heard unusual things last night. Cam, why don’t you tell him about Mr. Schwartz?” Brian walked over to the countertop and picked up a steaming mug of coffee. He sat down on a barstool, wrapped his muscled calves around its legs and turned expectantly toward Cameron.

Cameron cleared his throat and pulled a notebook out of his shirt pocket. “Mr. Schwartz is the 62 year old bloke who owns the butcher shop on the east side of the alleyway. He said he often stays in the back working into the late hours. Says he needs the extra bit of cash. He was hacking a new slab when he says he heard a scream. That was about 1 a.m. or so. He weren’t too clear on the time. The window looking into the alley is barred and painted over so he couldn’t see anything. He put it down to Christmas high spirits and kept on working until 2 a.m. Then he went home as usual.” His clipped, professional-sounding report finished, Cameron relaxed and gratefully took the cup of coffee Jake held out to him.

Jake returned to the counter and sat down on a barstool next to Brian. “I thought you said they *all* saw something unusual.” He cocked a thick black eyebrow at Brian.

Cameron leapt in to add, “The old bloke said when he left the shop he saw a hooker sitting on a stoop down the street. He noticed her because she sat in the shadows and, at that time of the morning, the gals are usually already gone. Anyway, he thought it was fair strange, her being there at that time, even for a holiday night.”

“The couple across the street saw her too. They live above the pawnshop and often stay up until the early morning hours. I think they’re paranoid of break-ins.” Brian smiled then pulled *his* notebook out to check. “Let’s see...Mr. and Mrs. Kolowski own the pawnshop. They were up but had the lights out. They say they heard the sound of a car’s tires screeching so loud right outside their window that Mrs. Kolowski went to look. She saw a dark blue or black older sedan blowing blue smoke as it left the street at a high speed. The fact the car managed to lay rubber through the snow impressed her with how fast it was going. She says after the car left, she saw a man hunched over under a big sack leave the alley and head east down the street. She described him as ‘ratty looking’; probably a street person looking for a place to flop for the night. She also saw the hooker on the stoop to the west of the alley.”

Cameron paused and looked up briefly before looking back down at his notes with a flush creeping up his collar. He continued the report with something close to an embarrassed smile in his voice. “She said she saw two red eyes glowing from the hooker's face when the woman looked at her window. When I asked Mrs. Kolowski what she meant by ‘two glowing red eyes’ she crossed herself and said ‘werewolf’. All this happened around 1:30 a.m. this morning. She was sure about the time. That's when the

Mrs. decided it was time to go read for a while with her husband since most the television programs were off by then. They went to bed at 2 or so.” He snapped the cover onto the notebook and tucked it back into his shirt pocket.

“That’s all? No other witnesses? Just a body snatcher with a bag, a demon car and a werewolf hooker?” Jake put his coffee cup down on the counter, folded his arms over his wide chest and waited for Brian to reply.

“ Okay, okay, it sounds weird but that’s what we found out. The whole district long ago turned into a high crime, small shop area. The owners refuse to live down there any longer with few exceptions. Even the Christmas celebrations bypassed that area pretty much. At least we got a few leads to follow up, even if they are weird.”

“The man with the sack, the car and the hooker.” Cameron nodded, his bright red hair glowing as the sunset glowed through the bay window behind his head.

“And...the werewolf?” Jake asked, laughing. “Okay, enough of that but it is nice to be able to find some humor in this grisly shit once in awhile. Why don’t you two go follow-up with those leads? I’m waiting to hear from Russell on the forensics. Marti is working on a profile. In the meantime, I need some sleep. Get lost guys.” Jake stood up and swept his arm grandly toward the door, a tired smile on his face.

When Cameron reached the door, with his coat half on, he turned, coughed then stood up straight. “Agent Daniels, may I inquire about your relationship with Dr. Joyner? Er...what I mean is...do you have a brand on her, sir?” His freckled face flushed crimson.

Jake smiled even broader than before. “Call me Jake, Cameron. Marti and I grew up together in San Francisco. We’re just close friends.”

“Thank you, sir.” Cameron’s color lessened to a hot pink.

“Come on, Cam. Your Aussie hot blood will have to wait. We have work to do.”

Brian shoved Cameron out the door, turned and flipped a small salute to Jake. He turned back to the door and exited only to run smack into a man standing quietly in the hallway.

“Oops. Sorry there fella. I didn’t see you,” Brian grinned into the man’s smiling face before he froze at what he was seeing.

The man shook his mane of white hair slowly while displaying a perfect toothy smile. “Hey, sweetie, don’t worry about it. It happens all the time. I’m so ordinary it’s hard to see me.” He swept an arm up and down his length, drawing attention to the heavy gold chains, suede boots and brilliant purple satin shirt with matching slacks that he wore.

When Brian’s gaze traveled over his body and ended up, wide-eyed, staring at the purple contact lens he wore to match the outfit, the man giggled in a high-pitched, girlish voice.

Brian blushed. “I’m just not used to people being so much shorter than I am. My problem is that if I can’t see their face, I run them down.” He chuckled along with the man then held out his hand. “My name’s Brian. I’m a friend of Jake’s.” He shook the man’s hand with a firm grip. “And the shy guy standing by the front door is Cameron.”

The man winced and pulled his hand away. “Wow, you’ve got a nice firm grip there.” He massaged his hand while looking Brian up and down with a practiced ease after giving Cameron a cursory glance. “My name’s Toyboy, Toyboy Tilley. I’m Jake’s neighbor in the back apartment.”

“Uh, nice to meet you...Toyboy. Well, we have to go.” Brian gave the man a nod, a small smile and turned toward Cameron.

Cameron opened the door and waited for him with a knowing smile on his lips. Brian stopped and turned toward Jake, who was observing from his apartment and working hard to suppress a crooked grin. Brian flinched at the knowing smile and snapped out in the deepest male voice he could muster, "See you later, chief. We'll check out those leads and get back to you tonight." Brian turned and quickly moved out the door with Cameron close behind.

Jake laughed loud and long. When he caught sight of Toyboy's amused but puzzled look and twinkling violet eyes, Jake got a grip on his humor and asked, "Were you coming to see me?"

Toyboy nodded, still looking puzzled. "Yes, love, I was. I need to borrow your scissors." He reached up and patted the thick mop of unruly white hair on his head. "I have a very important party tonight and I need a trim. Candy came over to do it for me but he forgot his scissors. May I?" He batted his elaborately made-up eyelids in a parody of a femme fatale.

Jake snorted and shook his head. "I'll never understand guys like you, Toy. Why don't you settle down and get yourself a steady...um...friend?" Jake walked to the kitchen and opened a drawer to fetch a small pair of scissors he used for his own hair on occasion.

Toyboy plucked them delicately from Jake's hand. "Oh, no! Never again. The last boyfriend I had stole every good piece of jewelry I owned, not to mention my best dresses." He rolled his eyes to the ceiling then dropped them to rest lovingly on Jake. "Besides, I'm saving myself for you." He blew a mock kiss in Jake's direction.

“Oh, knock it off or I’ll ban you from ever using my Cappuccino machine again,”

Jake teased right back.

Toyboy flipped his hand at Jake. “No you won’t. You love it too much when I flatter you. Bye, love!” He slipped through the doorway and disappeared down the hallway.

Jake smiled, shook his head again and mumbled to himself, “Well, at least Toyboy’s honest about what he is.” He got up and closed the door with the smile still plastered on his face.

The moment the door closed and he was alone with his thoughts once more, Toyboy, Cameron, Marti, Quigley, Brian and everybody else was forgotten, except for one, and the smile slipped completely off. Jake sat down on the couch and Glock climbed onto his lap. Jake stroked the cat absent-mindedly then reached out, picked up the case file from the coffee table and flipped it open. He stared at the pictures of the butchered faces and defiled bodies of the victims the Holiday Killer was responsible for in the last few months. “The answer is here. I know it is. Sooner or later, it’ll talk to me and I’ll have you, you slimy son of a bitch. I *will* find you and I *will* stop you... if it’s the last thing I ever do in this life.”

He reached out for the bottles that were always kept on the shelves beside the couch. Jake gathered them all in his arms, cradling them like orphaned infants. He moved stiffly toward the kitchen sink. Once there, he paused, gazing down into various hues of amber inside the bottles as they sloshed around inside the glass.

His mouth twisted into a rictus of self hatred.

One by one, he poured the liquor down the drain then dropped the bottles inside a plastic trash bin.

CHAPTER FOUR

December 25th
11:45 P.M.

Blood was everywhere; it ran down the walls, dripped from the ceiling, on the furniture and over the Kirman carpet, almost blending in with the burgundy pattern as if it was meant to be there. The woman lying nude on the carpet stopped screaming but her body still jerked with every slash of the knife that tore into her body. The resulting grunt and thud from the attack almost became a concert of pain unto itself. The faceless form of a man hunched over Pat's still body, his arm rising and falling in a sick imitation of an orchestra conductor wielding, not a baton, but a bloody knife. The scene had all the elements of a play: drama, action and musical score. Only the audience of one was choking and gagging behind the duct tape bound over his mouth and his wrists were bleeding while he thrashed against the rope that held them back from saving her.

Jake felt his heart slam up against his ribcage, throwing the scream that was welling up inside him into a vacuum of despair. He bolted upright in his bed with sweat-soaked sheets wrapping around his legs and feet like the bonds he'd just dreamt he had struggled against. He sucked in air with all the violence of a drowning victim while tears of rage rolled down his cheeks and salty sweat burned his eyes and lips. He grabbed his hair with both hands and yanked as hard as he could, hoping the pain would bring him completely back from the nightmare world he'd tried so hard to drown in booze for two years. When the last remaining cobwebs of the nightmare finally faded, he sunk back and lay staring at a ceiling he couldn't see in the darkened room.

A pounding at the door brought his head off the pillow with a jerk. He reached over and flipped on the cracked ceramic lamp that had been with him since that night of terror, a silent reminder and accuser. The room flooded with yellowish light. His small bedroom came into sharp focus while the pounding continued: the small, rumpled bed, an old, faded dresser, a closet that was nearly empty and a heap of dirty clothes in the corner. None of it had any warmth or feeling of being anything other than transient. For a split second, Jake felt like bellowing with rage. Instead, he leapt out of the twin bed he'd felt trapped inside, and yanked on a pair of wrinkled slacks that were lying on the floor. He scrubbed his face with the damp sheet, pressed his tousled hair and moustache back down with a damp palm then stalked into the living room. When he yelled, "Who is it?" through the door, the pounding stopped.

"Jake, it's me, Marti. Open up for God's sake." Her familiar and normal voice was a welcome relief from the sense of ugliness and filth that still twisted inside his gut. Jake opened the door.

Marti huddled close to the doorframe, shivering inside her coat. It was dusted with snow. Her eyes seemed huge, peering out of a pale, anxious face. Jake grabbed her arm and pulled her inside. "What the hell are you doing out in this weather?" He glanced at the kitchen wall clock. "And at this hour? It's almost midnight." He shut and locked the door after she moved into the room with a hesitant step.

Marti sat on the couch, her coat folded around her shivering body, while she tucked a huge leather shoulder bag next to her for quick access. Her face screwed up with confusion and irritation. "It's your fault you asshole. You told me you were coming over today. When you didn't show up, I called over here but you were gone, so I spent the day

trying to find a connection between the victims. There's always one somewhere if you look hard enough."

Jake stood glaring at her, unsure whether to tell her to go home or to put on the coffee and write the night off as a lost cause. Remembering the nightmare, he opted to remain quiet and let Marti have her say. He raised an eyebrow at her, expectantly waiting for her to deliver the punch line.

Her face suddenly brightened. "I came up with a rough profile I wanted you to see." Her enthusiasm for her work was quickly replaced by irritation at his attitude. "Besides, it's not my fault you weren't around. You said you'd come over and go through this stuff with me. You didn't." She shivered. "God, it's cold in here! Don't you have a heater?" She shivered again and closed her coat tighter around her body.

Jake sighed, reached over to the wall switch and turned the thermostat up. "Look, let me get some clothes on then we'll talk about the profile." He hurried down the hallway toward his bedroom, leaving Marti on the couch glaring at his back.

"You could at least say you're sorry!" she shouted at his retreating figure.

Within minutes, Jake returned wearing the same wrinkled pants but with the addition of an equally wrinkled shirt he'd allocated to the dirty clothes pile two days ago. He flipped on the kitchen light and pulled his prize cappuccino machine out of a cupboard. He filled it with the necessary ingredients and set cups on the counter; all without a word to Marti, who sat watching him with undisguised amusement.

"Going to try and get on the good side of me with the special stuff huh?" she chuckled when he finally came and sat down in the only armchair in the room. Glock,

who had been sleeping inside Jake's forgotten overcoat, jumped into his lap, curled up and promptly went back to sleep.

Jake smiled at Marti with a tired turning up of his lips. "No, just feeling in need of some soul food myself. Now, about that profile?"

Marti opened the shoulder bag she'd brought and pulled out a folder labeled 'Holiday Killer' in red ink. She handed it to Jake with a smile. "I think this might help."

Jake took the folder and flipped it open. It contained photocopies of all the casework documents: police reports, interviews, coroner's reports, victim information sheets and grisly photographs of each crime scene. On top of the pile was a neatly typed report done in a formal style. On the first page, it read:

Holiday Killer Profile

File Analysis Summary

Crime Scene Summary: Organized, controlled, well-planned, deliberate placing of ritualistic props and staging of corpse, obvious drop site, usual lack of usable evidence beyond what is meant to be found. Varying locations with no apparent common factors.

Victim Profile: Women, aged 18-30, blonde, small stature, attractive, well-groomed, [manicures and pedicures indicate victim's are of higher class than neighborhoods where they're found.] general appearance of youth and wholesomeness [IE: little or no makeup- victims do not appear to have been washed or bathed before examination.]

- Psychological- See Psychological Profile [Perp and Victims]
- Statistical- See Statistical Profile

- Geographical- See Geographical Profile
- Conclusions- See final profile analysis compilation.

Jake scanned all the pages where Marti had so laboriously laid out every detail. When he came to the last page, he stopped and slowly read then reread the final recommendation before putting the file down on the table between the chair and couch. He didn't say a word, just sat rubbing his fingers lightly over his thick moustache and his attention turned inward.

Marti sat quietly watching his facial expressions while he read. Now that Jake had put the file down, her face reflected a quick-changing kaleidoscope of hope, fear, pride, doubt and everything around and in between.

Jake felt like laughing, not at her but with her. He restrained himself. Searching for the right thing to say, he stroked Glock's shiny fur and paused before speaking. "That is absolutely fascinating. How did you come up with all that stuff? I didn't think a San Francisco practice that catered to blue-haired old ladies would give you much by way of serial killer profiling skills," Jake said while shifting his body in the chair so he could throw a leg over the overstuffed arm. The movement thrust home to Jake how he must look to her: barefoot with dirty, unironed clothes and rumpled everywhere else. Jake self-consciously tried to smooth down the wrinkles on his pants then gave it up as hopeless. The cat glared at him and rearranged his body to fit comfortably in Jake's lap.

Marti's face, having gone through the entire gamut of emotions, finally settled on tolerant annoyance. "That tells me absolutely nothing, Jake Daniels." She pushed her bag away on the couch and shrugged out of her coat. She had all the appearances of someone

settling in for battle, not discussion. Nestling back into the big sofa with her arms crossed over her chest she asked, "What do you *think*?" The tone of the question killed any humorous remark Jake felt like throwing out. It demanded a sincere answer.

"Look Marti. I know these things help. God knows the FBI uses them often enough. But, and I stress this, we've used the Bureau's profiling service, gone through all the suspects with a magnifying glass and we don't have one that even remotely comes close to matching the profile. To be honest with you, I was hoping you'd come up with something unique, new; something that would help. I'm sorry babe but it shows that you're not used to doing this type of work." Jake tried to soften the criticism with a reassuring smile.

She sighed, uncrossed her arms and suddenly seemed to deflate. "I was hoping that I spotted something the FBI missed." A wry smile touched her lips. "So much for thinking I could play with the big boys huh?"

Jake groaned inwardly. "Look Marti. You're a good psychologist. You're just not trained for this type of work is all." When she frowned at him, he quickly added, "And I do appreciate your help. Who knows? Maybe it *will* help." He ran a hand through his hair. "But right now, I'm just too tired to think straight. Can we discuss this another time?" He threw her what he hoped was an adequately pleading and self-effacing smile.

She returned it with a knowing grin. "Yeah, another time then." She stood up, slipped on her coat and grabbed her bag, slinging it over her shoulder. On the way to the door, she stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. He stayed in his chair, watching her go. "Did Russell ever get in touch with you?"

“No. But, then, I didn’t really think he would.” Jake shifted in the chair to face her squarely. “He usually likes to grandstand if he has anything new. The SOB really likes to make my life miserable.”

Marti turned the knob but hesitated before opening the door. “Why is that? You’ve never really told me what happened between you two to make him hate you so much.”

Jake hesitated, thought, *What the hell!*, and said, “He was in love with my wife, Pat. When she died, he blamed me for not saving her.” Jake looked down at Glock’s curled up body and stroked the cat with an air of inward thinking. “More like he blames me for living.”

Marti froze at the door. Jake had never talked with her about Pat before.

Just how deep does this hatred for Jake go? As far as killing to make him look bad and maybe destroy him completely? Marti’s face seemed to reflect.

Jake glanced up at her when she didn’t answer right away. He could see her discomfort and indecision. “Don’t worry about it Marti. I can talk about her without falling apart.” He smiled and held up a hand. “Good night bud. Go get some sleep. I have an early morning meeting with Russell and the chief. Maybe I’ll have something new by this afternoon.”

Marti returned the gesture with a wan smile. “Okay, Jake. See you tomorrow.”

She opened the door, froze for a fraction of a second when her eyes locked onto the red writing smeared over the front panel, snapped her head around toward the outer door, screamed and jumped back into the room; all with a fluid grace that rivaled a sumo wrestler. Jake, unaware of what she was seeing but acting out of years of instinct, leapt

up, throwing a startled and angry Glock into the air. Fur standing up in terror, the cat scrambled up the bookcase while Jake grabbed Marti, threw her back into the room and flung the door open wider, all in one smooth motion. He was poised on the balls of his feet, crouched to protect his torso and had his hands ready to do battle. The light from the living room showcased the now fully open door. It made the blood red letters on a brilliant white background stand out like a lurid movie marquee. The message read:

You must move fast

Or you won't catch me.

I'll kiss the broad's ass

Just to pleasure me.

The Holiday Ki...

Jake scanned the hallway then turned back to face the door. He read the message out loud then hit the door with a fist that made the solid wood bulge with the impact. He swore, slammed the door shut with all his might and turned to face Marti. She was huddled against the back wall with both arms wrapped around her chest. Her face was white and strained.

“You interrupted him. We came that close to getting him!” Jake began to pace.

“What did you see Marti? Who was in the hallway?”

When she didn't answer, Jake strode to her, took her by both shoulders and guided her toward the couch. He gently pushed her down and headed to the kitchen for the forgotten coffee he'd made when she first arrived. He poured out two cups and added milk and sugar. As an afterthought, Jake reached into a bottom cupboard and lifted out a full bottle of brandy. He held it up to Marti with a questioning eyebrow cocked.

She shook her head and he shrugged, poured a good dollop into his coffee then put the bottle away before moving back into the living room. Jake silently offered her the cup, refusing to remove it from her line of sight until she took it from his hand. When he'd settled into the chair across from her, taken a couple of sips of the thick, sweet coffee and watched her while she regained a grip on herself, he leaned forward, placed the cup on the table and waited for her to speak.

Marti held the cup tightly between both hands, taking one shaky sip after the other. Her face began to regain some of its color and her expression went from horrified to almost normal. "That was the scariest thing I've ever seen Jake. If I'd left here just a few minutes later, he may have been waiting for me out there. Oh, shit..." Her words came out stilted, jittery and unsure. "He...it...the person...I just saw was staring at me from the street door. It was all black, too misshapen to be human and had glowing red eyes."

She stared into Jake's face with a shocked look of disbelief on her own. "I swear, it did! And he moved so quickly out the front door that I didn't have time to register anything else." Her hands were shaking so badly that, even with both hands holding the cup, the hot coffee began to slop over the sides. Marti put the cup down on the table and collapsed back into the couch, shrinking into herself until she resembled a small, scared child.

Jake rubbed his fingers over the stubble on his unshaven chin. "Red eyes. That's what one of Brian's witnesses said she saw the night our latest Jane Doe was murdered. Glowing red eyes on a hooker sitting down the street from the alley's entrance."

Marti attempted a laugh and failed. It came out sounding more like a gurgle of choked hysteria. "If I wasn't so grounded in science, I'd say it was a demon." Marti shivered and picked the hot cup of coffee back up. She took a deep drink before continuing. "God! It was so...so...inhuman looking."

Jake stood, moved to the phone sitting on the kitchen counter and dialed. "Well, I think we'll find it's very human." He stopped and listened to the voice coming over the phone. "Lois? This is Jake Daniels. Would you beep Brian and Cameron and tell them to come over to my house? Sure. And send whoever's on call from the forensics department too. No, there's no body, just some very sloppy looking writing on my door. I want it analyzed. Okay Lo. Thanks." He hung up the phone and turned back to Marti. "They'll be here soon. Then you'll have your answers. Demons don't need lipstick to write messages," he commented wryly.

"How do you know that it's lipstick? You didn't even check it out." Marti put her cup down and stared at him with wide, frightened eyes.

Jake inspected his hand where a smudge of the red from the door had smeared onto his knuckles and palm. "Because I can smell it, that's why. It's the same lipstick as the killer's. I'd bet on it."

He walked over to the coffee table, searching for something to wipe the smudge off. When he reached down to move the magazines and folders around, Glock, who'd come down from the bookcase and was hiding under the table, suddenly went wild. He jumped up, buried all the claws on his front feet into Jake's wrist and sunk his sharp teeth into the red smudge on his palm.

“Damn it Glock. Let go!” Jake pried the squirming, yowling cat off his hand and held him at arm’s length, glaring at the animal that seemed to have gone mad. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

The cat continued to gyrate and twist, trying with all his might to escape the grip Jake had on the nape of his neck. He yowled in outrage while Jake continued to dangle him in the air. Tiny drops of blood surrounded the red lipstick smudge. Jake’s forehead furrowed with concentration. He raised the bleeding hand to his nose and took a deep sniff of the lipstick. “Well, I’ll be damned. Mint.” His face cleared and he stared at Glock with awe. “It would seem you’re a better detective than I am Glock.” Jake shook his head and stared at the cat.

Before Marti could ask what he was talking about, the door opened with a bang and Brian leapt into the room, crouched, with a snub-nosed .38 in his hand. His tall body, clad all in black, gave the impression of a hunched mound of black granite that had suddenly come to life. Marti threw herself off the couch and onto the floor. In one fluid motion, Jake dropped the cat and reached under his left arm for a gun that wasn’t where it was supposed to be.

When Jake registered that it was Brian, his body relaxed. “Jeez, Brian. What the hell are you doing? You scared the hell out of us,” Jake bellowed, his face suffused with anger and embarrassment at being caught unarmed.

Brian returned his gun to a black leather shoulder holster and grinned while he straightened up. "I was in the building and heard some disturbing sounds coming from here so I thought I'd lend a hand in case you were in trouble." His grin widened when Marti peered over the coffee table at him. "I didn't know you were entertaining.

Jake reached down and helped Marti to her feet. She glared at Brian. "We were going over my profile, you dufus. That's all."

Jake pointed to the door that was once again well lit by the room's lighting. "That is what we were making the noise over. Take a look and tell me what you think." When Brian spun around to stare at the writing on the door panel, Jake added, "There's a forensic team on the way here now." His forehead creased in puzzlement. "By the way, what were you doing in my building in the middle of the night?"

Brian continued to stare at the writing and took a step closer to the door, lifting his finger to lightly touch the red marks. When Jake posed his question, Brian froze and a crimson flush crept up his neck. He opened his mouth to answer then clamped it down when the outside door opened and Cameron, followed by three forensic technicians, tramped into the hallway. Hot on their heels, and racing for the front door of the building, Connie Braxton was fumbling a tape recorder out of her coat while trying to instruct a harried cameraman who kept slipping on the icy road behind her.

Cameron turned and grinned at Connie, shook his head, then slammed the outside door and locked it. With a look of boyish mischief, Cam chuckled and lifted a hand to Brian. "Hey Brian. You sure got here fast." He slapped Brian on the shoulder and came through the door to greet Jake. The technicians, cases in hand, were already pushing through the doorway behind him in order to inspect the writing that had taken on a greasy sheen. Brian moved to stand next to Jake's chair while Cameron flopped down next to Marti, who once again sat hunched in the corner of the couch.

Cameron took in Jake's appearance and Marti's flushed face. "Well, what has been going on here?" He cocked a reddish eyebrow at Jake, then Brian.

Jake shot him a look of abject annoyance. "Tuck your libido back inside its cave Cam. The Holiday Killer just paid us a visit."

Marti shrugged off Cameron's arm from her shoulders and stood up. "Yes, I think so too but...this time, he's made a mistake...a big mistake."

Three pairs of startled eyes locked onto her. She stared back at them and murmured, "This time, he left a live witness."

CHAPTER FIVE

December 26th
8:00 A.M.

“I need answers, dammit, and I need...them...now!” Jake’s fist hammered the shiny walnut surface of the conference room table. The sound reverberated around the sickly green walls of the only room in the police office building to have wooden furniture.

“Before you go ballistic on us again, would you please let me finish my report? Then you can beat the hell out of the table all you want.” Russell’s dry sarcasm met with silent approval from the others seated around the table.

“That son of a bitch was at my place last night and he left me a very ugly message, one that threatened Marti, by the way. If you have anything at all Russell, I want it now. You said one day. You’ve had your day, now where is it?” Jake roared.

Chief Raymond Hartigan, hands laced over a prominent stomach and leaning back in his chair, watched Jake with slitted eyes. His only break in staring at Jake with revulsion and a thin-lipped scowl was when he casually inspected the bulging breasts pushing out of the uniform of the young, brown haired cop sitting sedately beside him. His slow, deep voice cut off Jake’s retort to Russell. “Before you boys get into a pissin’ contest here... sorry darlin’.” He turned and patted the hand of the young policewoman sitting next to him. “I’d like to hear *everything* Doctor Frasier turned up. If we can’t have a killer in hand, at least we can still produce the paperwork to show we’re *trying* to catch him.”

When Jake half rose from his seat to protest, the chief stopped him. "Can it Jake! If you can't show some manners here then go back home and finish dowsing yourself in cheap booze. We don't have time for temper tantrums here."

Jake sat then picked up a glass of water with a trembling hand. He turned his gaze on the cop, which she returned with a vapid, disinterested look before going back to staring off into space.

"Thank you, Chief Hartigan. Agent Daniels seems to think that going over the entire report again is a waste of time. I don't agree... but, for the sake of brevity, I will summarize the report and keep it in layman's terms." Russell gripped a report file at least eight inches thick. He flipped his ponytail, scowled at Jake, smiled at Chief Hartigan and winked at the young policewoman taking notes.

"'For the sake of brevity', my ass. Too late for that." Jake grumbled, sighed and settled back into his chair, a look of resignation on his face and his fingers drumming on the tabletop.

Russell cleared his throat and started again. "On November 27, 1999, Thanksgiving Day, a young woman of approximately 25 years was found in the thick brush of a vacant lot adjacent to Craddock Street at 8:43 a.m. She'd been sodomized with an extra large dildo, which was found still inserted, and she was mutilated and repeatedly slashed on her head and face. Due to the anus' relaxed state and the lack of blood, we know both happened after death occurred. She had been poisoned with a slow acting poison. However, the poison is not what killed her. An icepick, inserted deeply into the vagina with enough force to pierce her uterus and bladder, was the cause of death. The

injuries she sustained internally is what killed her.” Russell peered at Jake from under his eyelids with a smirking flick of the lips.

Jake refused to rise to the bait and adopted a forced calmness and outward appearance of patience he knew would rattle Russell. It worked.

Russell frowned, cleared his throat and continued in an irritating monotone, “The weapon used to slash her appears to be an unusual curve-bladed knife of unknown type. Her torso had been slit from sternum to pubic mound, revealing the entire body cavity. All her internal organs were excised and were not found at the crime scene. However, the body cavity was stuffed with an assortment of rotting garbage, which, I might add, caused me no amount of problems, not to mention the officers who were on the scene before I got there.” Russell chuckled, proud of his sick humor.

When neither Jake, the woman or the chief laughed with him, he quickly continued, “There were no clothes or personal belongings found at the scene. She was later identified by co-workers as Miss Judith Peabody, an unmarried secretary with no family. Autopsy report was filed and copies were sent to the proper investigating officers.” He quickly shot a look of contempt at Jake.

Russell took a deep breath and continued, “The other two victims were...” but before he could continue, Jake jumped to his feet. “I’ve heard all this before, over and over again. I need to know what new evidence we have now, not a rehash of the last year.”

“He’s right, Doctor Frasier. I don’t have time to listen to all this again either. What new findings have you got?” Chief Hartigan’s smug smile at Russell set Jake’s

teeth on edge, reminding him of the lack of respect he commanded in this building these days.

Jake snorted in disgust and picked up his lukewarm cup of coffee. He studiously ignored Russell's smug look of satisfaction.

"Right. I'll start with the woman found in the alleyway. Her body was discovered at 7:12 a.m. by the crew that picks up the garbage dumpsters. Like the others, she was found nude; no clothing or personal items were found at the scene. We place her somewhere between 25-35 years of age, 5 feet 7 inches tall, approximately 125 pounds, in good health and shape. She died somewhere between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m. on December 24 or December 25th¹. Her injuries are unique in statement but similar to those victims found last October and November. They all demonstrated the same type of death method: slashes, the same type of ice pick used, and rape pattern. The one major difference, again, is the organ he targeted for 'special' handling. He removed her left eye, very cleanly I might add, and attached it to the back of her head, using her hair to anchor it in place. Unlike the others, most of her body seemed to be untouched, except for..." Russell let the words trail off, deliberately waiting for Jake to take the bait and blow up again.

Jake saw the trap and swallowed his anger. He asked, "Except for what?" in as nice a way as he could muster.

Russell tapped the sheave of papers against the table and cleared his throat, with a disappointed look on his face. "This one had something new inserted inside her. She had a Christmas elf tucked inside her uterus, impaled by the icepick."

Jake refused to react to this news in front of Russell, the lady cop or the chief. He injected a bland, professional tone into his words when he asked, "There were no semen,

fibers, footprints, fingerprints or any other evidence found? Like the others? Nothing new besides the organ used and the toy inside her?" Jake sat forward, his fingers spread out on the table, waiting to see if Russell would pursue this silent game of one-upmanship.

Russell leaned forward and adopted a superior air. "Like I told the chief earlier, just like the others, she had an unusually carved ice pick lodged inside her vagina, which did the actual killing by piercing major organs. These women bled to death internally. Nothing new there."

Jake exploded. "You like to play games don't you Russell? You didn't say anything about the ice pick being the cause of death before now. It wasn't in your reports either; not before today." Jake glanced at the chief, who sat serenely watching the interplay between Jake and Russell. His eyes, flat and sleepy-looking, did not register any emotion. The cop, whose name badge read 'Monette Draper', studiously read a paper she held in steady hands. Jake dismissed their presence and laid into Russell with more vehemence than before, hoping the chief would at least react to his Coroner's ineptitude, if nothing else. "You let me believe the poison is what killed them. Why? What else are you trying to hide from me?"

"Nothing. She was clean otherwise. Why do you ask?" Russell's expression of superiority disappeared and was replaced with suspicion.

The chief's face suddenly changed from disinterest to pig-eyed agitation; it registered extreme irritation at Jake's questions. He watched Russell as expectantly as Jake.

"I just wondered if there are any differences. What about the man in the park?"

Jake forced himself to relax back into his chair, aware the chief was finally paying attention to what Russell was saying.

I hope the fat bastard has enough brain cells to realize that this prick will get him fired if this case is blown for incompetent police work, Jake thought with satisfaction.

Russell picked up a new file folder and slid it across the table to Jake. "To make a short story even shorter, you have a new killer on your hands."

"What do you mean 'a short story'? What did you find out about this man? You told me at the scene there were several unusual things you wanted to look into. What things?" Jake could feel his temper creeping up again. "And what about the lipstick? Was it the same as what was used on the victims or my front door last night? Did you follow up on what I told your techies?"

Russell's color rose up his neck and settled into hot red spots on his cheeks. "Yes, I did. You were right," he spat as if the words were being dragged out of his throat against his will. "There is mint in the lipstick. It's a special kind of mint, in the same family as catnip and it does only grow in the deep south. Are you happy now?" His last question came out a grating, snarl of suppressed anger.

"Jake felt suddenly calm; deadly calm. "And why didn't you find it before now? How did such a simple piece of evidence get overlooked Russell?"

"I don't have to answer to you, big shot. I choose what is reported and what is not. In case you forgot, I answer to the chief here, not to you," Russell spat the words like he was throwing venom into Jake's eyes. "Besides, you wouldn't know what to do with it anyway. All you FBI big shots are useless. Three of you have looked into this case over

the last year and three of you have failed, including you. Or do they even still consider you one of their own anymore?" A gleam of sadistic malice twinkled in Russell's eyes while he delivered this last insulting question.

When Jake rose with both fists clenched and ready to smash Russell's face, the Chief held out a pudgy hand. "I think Doctor Frasier has a complete report for you, Agent Daniels. I *strongly* suggest you read it. Now, when am I going to get a report from *you*? What do you and your men have on all this? Is there *any* progress at all?" Chief Hartigan's sarcasm came across as phony southern gentility. It turned Jake's stomach and made his breakfast want to go north to realize that the chief had no intention of calling Russell down for his sloppy work or for his petty charade when it came to sabotaging any case that would make Jake look good.

"Agent Denton and Officer Parker are out interviewing witnesses to the blonde Jane Doe's case now. I will get my complete report to you when I hear from them. In the meantime, Doctor Frasier was supposed to get this report to me by this morning so I could go over it and follow up with anything new. Instead, he chose to call this meeting. I'd like to know why he's wasting my time here when I could be following new leads instead." Jake's temper, usually hot and passionate, now hardened into cold steel.

Chief Hartigan pulled his large bulk out of his chair. He stretched and hooked his thumbs under the bright red suspenders he wore under a convention blue suit jacket. "I want a complete report from you by tomorrow, Daniels. Russell, thanks for getting me up to speed." He beckoned for the policewoman to follow and both headed for the door.

"Chief! Wait up a minute," Jake growled at the rounded, wide back of the Chief. When Hartigan turned around, one sparse eyebrow lifted and a smirk of disdain appeared

on his pudgy, sweating face, Jake almost abandoned what he was going to say. Instead, the man's pig-like eyes and self-satisfied look only enraged Jake. He decided, *To hell with it*, and spat out, "Why won't you bring Marti Joyner in on this? We need a good profiler and she knows her business. She may help to get this bitch solved." Jake knew his tone was lacking respect and patience but he didn't care anymore. This case had eroded his self-esteem to the point where he was ready to walk out altogether.

The Chief's face suffused with angry red blood, his eyes bulged and his thick lips pulled back from bad teeth he usually went to great lengths to hide. He rarely smiled and this time it wasn't a smile, it was a snarl. "Those damned profiles do not solve crimes, Daniels. Even the F, fucking, B, bastards, I, idiots admit they're just guesswork; and, mighty expensive guesswork at that. We can't afford to waste taxpayer's money on fancy shit that doesn't work. Why don't you go back to them if you're so damned determined to do things their way? Otherwise, you do things my way." He turned his back on Jake and rolled out the door, trying for, but unsuccessfully attaining, a dignified exit.

Jake took a deep breath, unclenched his fists and swung back to stare at Russell, who Jake had felt watching this interplay with interest and now was barely suppressing a malicious smile of his own. Jake decided it was time to call a few bluffs and stop playing footsie with these men; men who enjoyed feeling big and important at his expense.

Big fish in a little pond, Jake thought with an image of a blowfish being devoured by a huge shark played like a cartoon through his mind.

He nailed Russell to the wall with a hard, unforgiving gaze. "Why did you do that, Russell? Why do you keep information to yourself and sabotage this case time and again?

Is this some new gag of yours or are you finally coming out of the closet and just being an asshole instead of pulling dirty tricks on me?” Jake stood up and pulled on his coat.

“Screw you, Jake. You always did think you’re better than anyone else, even in high school. Now, you aren’t worth shit. The FBI doesn’t want you anymore; you’re an embarrassment. That’s why they sent you here and we don’t want you but we’re stuck with you. Don’t ask us to like it or you. You’re nothing but a washed up has-been and this case will prove it once in for all. Then, you won’t even have a career to shore up your miserable excuse of an ego. I live to see that day.” Russell continued to sit, arms crossed, with a hard-eyed sneer on his thin face.

Jake picked up the file folder and turned to leave. He stopped at the door, looked back over his shoulder and said, “Your self-destructive hatred won’t bring her back. Neither will mine.” He went out into the hallway connecting the conference room with the police offices at the other end of City Hall. On the way to his office, he shut down all feeling: anger, hatred, fear, guilt, and all the positive ones as well: self-respect, confidence and caring. *It’s not worth it. Nothing is*, he thought while he wound his way down corridors painted in sickly green and headed for the closet he jokingly called an office.

9:00 A.M.

When Jake stormed into his tiny, stuffy office, Cameron and Brian were waiting for him. Both of them gave off hostile and standoffish waves of attitude. When Jake closed the door behind him and spotted Quigley sitting in a chair the door had blocked,

he knew why. Jake stopped and stared down into Quigley's face. The man's expression looked weary and on guard. "So, you do have balls then Quigley." Jake turned, moved past Brian and Cameron as they sat looking over their shoulders at the ex-cop, and eased down into the oversized desk chair he'd taken from the storage room when he was first assigned the office. He leaned both hands on the desk and locked gazes with Quigley, who silently inspected Jake's face in return. Jake frowned at him. "Well? What have you got?"

Quigley visibly relaxed, as if he'd gotten some sort of answer or signal he'd waited for before he felt he could speak. He settled back into the uncomfortable metal chair he'd dragged in from the waiting room, reached for a cigarette, thought about it and dropped his hands into his lap with a resigned look on his face before opening up. "The talk on the street is all about how this has happened before; somewhere else besides here. Have you checked the outlying towns for similar murders?"

Brian's face colored at the question. "That's the first thing we did." It was obvious he was fighting to retain a semblance of good manners toward the man, something that usually came easily to him but seemed to be failing now.

Cameron peered sideways at Brian's face with a question clearly etched on his features. Jake saw it and decided to defuse the situation before it got out of hand. "Brian, Cam, before we go any further, I want to introduce this man to you and explain why he's here."

"We know who and what he is," Brian blurted out. "But...I do want to know why you're working with him." The last was spoken with a mixture of sarcasm, disrespect and puzzlement.

Jake ignored the tone and addressed the unspoken question. “I agreed to let Quigley help because, quite frankly, we need all the support we can get right now.” When Brian and Cam jerked their heads up in injured pride, Jake added, “Look. I know how you feel. I feel the same way. I don’t want to be associated with a man who defiled the trust placed in him by the public, not to mention he killed an innocent woman in the process...”

“What about good manners too?” Quigley murmured into the lull. “You’re talking about me like I’m not even here.”

“...But, we may just be able to stop a cold-blooded serial killer and that makes it worth while in my book,” Jake continued as if Quigley hadn’t said a thing.

Brian crossed his arms and stared out the window. Cameron shrugged and looked over his shoulder at Quigley, who met his look with a half-smile. “Okay, mate. I’m with the boss here. If you can help then welcome aboard.” Cameron grinned back at the man, well aware of Brian’s disapproval and uncaring of it.

Jake ignored Brian’s attitude and Cameron’s nonchalant disinterest. He faced Quigley with less than a friendly look on his face; a look that said he’d tolerate the situation, nothing more. He wasn’t about to give Quigley any reason to think he was an accepted part of the team and certainly not anything near being a friend; just a necessary burden that Jake was being forced to bear. “Well? What have you found? And make it good or you’re out now.”

Quigley relaxed even more, seeming to actually enjoy the heightened tension and hostility in the room. “As I started to say before, the talk is that the killer was doing his thing somewhere else before he started here. That means that there’s a whole lot more

evidence you don't know about out there somewhere and I'm betting that, combined with what you already have, you could find him." Anticipating Jake's next question, Quigley rushed on, "All the people who know what's happening on the underside of this town are in agreement. They believe the killer is straight, he hates gays, hates women too and that he started in San Francisco last year before he came here."

"What makes them think that?" Jake leaned forward, his heart pounding with excitement and hope for the first time in four months.

"Did you hear about a gay man killed at that big Gay Pride parade last Halloween? The so-called 'Southern Belle' killing?" Quigley dug a dingy, leather notebook out of his coat pocket and flipped it open. He read, "Raymond Chandler, aged 22, blatantly gay since his early teens, lived in the Castro district of the city, was killed on the night of Halloween during the Gay Pride parade in downtown San Francisco. He was dressed in a Southern Belle costume. He was last seen at midnight, talking with a tall man dressed like Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, complete with long, black hair, blood red lips, and skin-tight dress."

"Yeah, I remember that one. It came up when I was working on the Shadow killer case. It seemed like a straight-up gay killing to me. How is it linked to what's happened here?" Jake leaned hard on his desktop now, hyper-focused on Quigley's face and hoping against hope the man really had something to go on.

Cameron and Brian both held themselves stiffly, with arms crossed and cynical looks upon their faces. They stared at Quigley, obviously waiting for something worthwhile to hear. Jake took a deep breath and hoped they'd restraint themselves long

enough to give the man a chance. Quigley stared right back at them with an insolent smirk on his mouth. “Well?”

Quigley slowly turned his gaze back to Jake and the look of insolence turned into one of respect. He cleared his throat before taking up his report again. “That killing was one of several the authorities dubbed straight gay killings. The truth is, nobody bothered to follow any of them up enough to find the links between them. And, there were a few.” He cleared his throat again, reached for a cigarette, stopped and took a deep breath. “Look, it would be easier if I just gave you a typed report.” He jerked a nail-bitten thumb toward the two young detectives and added, “With those two in the room, I’d rather be out on the streets socializing with pimps and drug dealers. Besides, I need a smoke.” He unraveled his tall body from the uncomfortable chair and stood up. Heading toward the door, Quigley hesitated and turned to deliver one final shot to the three of them. “You may not like it, but the Feds, and the local cops, shoved this one under the rug. If they hadn’t, you’d probably have this guy by now.” With that bullet of criticism ricocheting around the room, Quigley quickly ducked out the door and was gone before Jake or the others could respond.

Cameron recovered first. He glanced at the unnatural calm on Jake’s face then the hardened anger on Brian’s before speaking. “Do you think these killings are being done by a homo boss? Are we looking in the wrong place maybe?” His Australian accent, combined with genuine puzzlement, combined to sound like a cartoon character. Only, this time, not one of them laughed.

Jake ignored the questions. “Follow up on this. Check with the gay community and verify what he just said. Also, get the records on that Southern Belle killing he mentioned. If there’s a connection, we’ll find it. Now, get to it,” Jake ordered.

Brian and Cameron stood to leave. Cameron opened the door then hesitated and looked over his shoulder when he noticed his partner wasn’t leaving just yet. Brian edged up to the desk, looking down at Jake with a set look to his face. “I’d like to follow up on something else if it’s okay with you Jake. Cam can easily handle the rest.”

Jake scanned the younger man’s face, debating whether or not to keep the two of them together or let each go his own way on this investigation. The look in Brian’s eyes warned him that the man had something personal going on. Jake decided to let it go...for now. “Okay, Brian, you follow up this hunch of yours.” When Brian opened his mouth to speak, Jake held up a hand. “Look, if you don’t want to tell me, it’s okay. Hell, whatever works is okay with me right about now.” His gaze hardened a bit when he added, “But I do expect you to bring whatever you find to me and not keep it to yourself God knows, we’ve got too much of that going on as it is.”

“Huh?” Brian looked confused at the comment.

“One word; Russell,” Jake responded with disgust.

“Oh, I got ya. Okay. Well, no problem. I’ll meet you later today here or, if you’re gone for the day, I’ll come to your place.” Brian turned, ignored the quizzical look on Cameron’s face and went out the door without another comment.

Cameron shrugged and followed him out the door, closing it as he left.

Jake stared at the glossy photos of each crime scene that littered one wall over a filing cabinet. He bit his lip, nodded silently then stood and systematically took each

photograph off the wall. He carefully put them into a large manila envelope and placed it inside his briefcase. Then he opened the file cabinet and pulled several files out, then added them to the pile in his case.

Jake took the back door out of the building and climbed into the Cougar. He jumped on to Highway 101, opened up the car's 302 engine, letting the 4-barrel Holley carburetor and Ram Air scoop have its way with the racing engine and headed south toward San Francisco, hoping to catch Marti at her office.

CHAPTER SIX

*December 26th
11:40 A.M.*

The William Robert Nelson building, although close to San Francisco's downtown area, boasted a panoramic view of the Bay Bridge, many miles away. Marti's office, on the top floor corner, was laid out to showcase a huge bay window looking out toward the bay. The view looked more like a big 3D picture than the real thing. Her desk, situated in front of the window, gave Marti the feeling of floating in outer space, unanchored and vulnerable with too much space around her.

Every time I walk into this office I promise myself I'll move this damned desk!

Marti threw a paperclip she was playing with down on the desktop. It skittered across the empty space and vaulted onto the thick, blue carpet, stopping its course abruptly into the thick pile.

Damn it William will you please hurry up? I want to get out of here.

Marti's fingers tapped an unending tattoo on the wooden desktop. Her foot twitched, wanting to jerk up and down, her lip was raw from rubbing it over her front teeth. When Jake knocked on the door and poked his head in, she jumped up like a rubber band was attached to her legs. "Jake! Come in. Come in. I'm so glad you're here. Can I get you some coffee? Tea? Sit down." She hugged him tightly, reluctant to let him go right away.

Pulling away from her, Jake held her at a distance by her forearms. "What is this all about, Marti? Why are you so wound up?" His face showed consternation at this

strange behavior. “Not that I object to all this attention.” His lopsided grin lit up his face and then changed just as swiftly to concern again. “What is it, Marti?”

Dropping her arms she shrugged. “I’m just jumpy. Don’t ask me why because I have no idea. I think it’s because I didn’t sleep well last night and William is after me to make up my mind about the partnership he’s offered.” When he frowned, she quickly added, “Sorry Jake. You don’t need to hear all this garbage.”

“So, old upper crust Billy Bob has finally pissed you off, huh?” Jake grinned at her. “It’s about time,” he added with a smirk.

This time, Marti frowned at him and replied with mock seriousness, “You’d better not let him hear you calling him that. Anything less than Doctor William Robert Nelson is not tolerated in this office.” She giggled. “Hell, even his desk nameplate has the entire name on it.

Jake laughed with her, glad of the respite from heavy thoughts and words.

Marti took a cold Pepsi out of the small office refrigerator then moved to a small, gray sofa and plopped down on its soft leather. She braved a smile and patted the seat next to her. “Come. Sit down and tell me what you’ve got on the murders. Did Russell come through with any new information this morning? Did the forensics people have any new information on the markings on your door? Is the same type lipstick as the others?” She stopped, gasped for breath and laughed. “I *am* wound up, aren’t I?” She sipped her drink then set it down on the marble table with shaking hands.

Jake went to the sideboard where Marti’s secretary kept hot coffee for clients. He helped himself then walked over to sit beside her on the couch. Sipping the strong, hot coffee, he winced and said, “Damn! Karen doesn’t make coffee, she makes mud.” He

took another sip, relaxed back into the sofa and smiled. “And she doesn’t supply any special additives either,” he added in a mocking tone.

Marti hesitated with a frozen smile on her face then the smile became forced but closer to genuine. “Now you know why I don’t drink the stuff.”

She set the Pepsi down on the table then leaned toward Jake, almost meeting him nose to nose. “Okay, Jake, enough stalling. What’s come up or don’t I qualify as a ‘need to know’ person yet?”

He opened his briefcase, pulled the new folder with Russell’s coroner report, the thick stack of files from the previous cases, as well as the photo envelope, and tossed it all onto her lap. “Take a look and you tell me.” He sat back and held his coffee cup with both hands, watching her face for reactions while she read.

Marti pulled the photographs out and set them on the table. Scanning the written report on the new murders, she bit her lip in concentration. When she finished reading the report she looked up at Jake with a worried look. “It seems to me that Russell is going out of his way to make this harder for anyone reading this report. What does this mean? ‘The subject’s toxicological screening indicates the presence of a foreign chemical. See appendix C.’ What the hell does it mean when Appendix C is only a list of abbreviations and numbers? How are we supposed to read this? I had two years of medical school and I can’t make heads nor tails of it.”

Jake sat his cup down and picked up the sheet of numbers she held. “I hoped you could decipher it for me. Russell is playing coy with the reports. He also as good as admitted that he hides some things he finds at the crime scenes too. Why? I have no idea. But I can tell you one thing of interest. Lately, he’s been awfully cozy with Chief

Hartigan. They've both made it obvious they're not going to give me much help anymore. I think they intend to dump the blame for the incompetent handling of this case on me. They want me out and I don't blame them."

"They're *what*? But you've done everything you can to catch this killer. You had this case dumped on you by the Bureau when two of their so-called experts couldn't crack it. And, you've only been working on it for a few weeks; not nearly enough time to do much. Hell, you've even brought me in against the Chief's wishes and I happen to know you've deprived yourself of sleep and other things to stay on it. What the hell does he want from you? You..."

Jake took her hand. "Hey! Calm down, will you? It's okay, really. Yeah, I've given a lot to this case and I didn't get it until the end of November, long after it started, but the truth is, Marti, I *haven't* caught him. I *am* in charge here, the responsible party, and I haven't stopped the killings. There have been two more since I signed on, not counting the guy in the park, and that is not acceptable. I don't blame them for pulling the plug on me. So, chill out, will ya?" He tried to smile but it came out a crooked imitation of a smile; one laced with bitterness.

Marti's eyes misted over. "Damn it, Jake. You don't deserve this." She took a deep breath. After a pause, her face set into stubborn lines and her brown eyes flashed with determination. She stood up and paced in front of the table. "So, okay, we'll play with the new rules then. So much the better. We'll catch this killer in spite of the Chief and Russell. We'll show them how good you are." Her fists clenched open and shut with each step she took.

Jake rose and stood in front of her, stopping her motion in mid-stride. He bent down to look into her eyes. “Marti, what is this all about? Why are you so angry? This isn’t like you at all. I come in here and you’re acting like you’re scared. You’re getting emotional on me when you’ve always been so dependable, so steady. What is this?” His blue eyes bored into hers.

“You want to know what I’m being so emotional about? Okay! I’m tired of holding things inside. I’m tired of William harassing me about becoming a partner here but afraid to say no because it’s all I have right now. I want to catch killers, solve crimes and work with you. And, I’m tired of stiff-necked, sons-of-bitches treating us like they’re doing us a favor when we’re doing all the work and making them look good. And, most of all, I’m mad for *you* because you seem to have lost the ability to fight back for yourself these days. You drink too much, you’re alone too much, you don’t seem to care anymore and I miss my best friend. I don’t know how to help you. There, now you know. Do you feel better?” Her face flushed red with a combination of anger and embarrassment; Marti fled back to the couch and sat down then took a deep drink of her Pepsi.

Jake stood dumbfounded in the middle of the room, staring at her bent head. “Well, that’s a relief to know. And here I thought you might be pissed at me.” He moved back to the couch and sat down. Reaching out for her hand, he continued. “Marti, I appreciate you feeling so protective of me. Lord knows, it’s been a long time since anybody cared enough to get angry for me, but I don’t need it right now. As for Doctor William Robert Nelson, he can shove it. If you don’t want a partnership with him then tell him so. Continue to work here if he’ll let you but keep trying for what you do want.”

He lifted her chin with a strong finger. “Where’s the Marti I know and love? I need her cool thinking right now.” Her face flushed a deeper shade of pink, making her hazel eyes glow with their green and gold colors. Much to his surprise, Jake felt a strong urge to kiss them, one at a time. He jerked his hand back. “What have you come up with, Marti? That’s the main reason I drove down here today. I need your insights on this guy and anything you may have on the new killer Russell thinks we have on our hands too... if you have any.” He moved away from her and picked up his forgotten coffee cup. He rose and went to refill it.

She let out a ragged sigh and stood up. Moving back to her desk, she picked up a thick notepad, tore off several sheets covered with notes and sat down. “I haven’t had time to have these typed up yet but I think you’ll find some of this helpful. You want me to give you a summary or do you want to go over it yourself later?”

Her crisp professional tone elicited a secret smile. He poured milk into his coffee, straightened his face into a somber look and turned around. “Give me a quick run down, if you don’t mind. I’ll take a copy of it with me and go over it in detail later.” He moved to sit back down on the couch and waited patiently for her to begin.

She leaned back, her silk blouse tightening across her breasts. Jake looked away and sipped his coffee. “This is what I came up with on the woman in the alleyway. She...”

“Well hello, Agent Daniels. It is so nice to see you once again. What brings you all the way into the city on this fine winter’s day?” William’s soft, cultured voice wafted from the open door he’d opened so silently that neither Jake nor Marti heard it open.

Jake almost slopped his hot coffee down the front of his leather jacket when he turned abruptly to see the doctor standing in the doorway. His heart thumped against his ribs. “Damn, Doctor Nelson! You’d make one hell of a cat burglar. I didn’t think a guy your size could move so quietly.” He grinned at the man’s straight-faced expression.

“Oh. Well. Yes. Maybe I do move too quietly. I guess I got used to it as a boy. My mother hated being awakened too early so I learned to walk softly.” He didn’t smile. “May I come in or are you in the middle of something important?” He raised both eyebrows to Jake and then swung his mane of white hair toward Marti.

“No, no. Come on in, William. We were just going over the case Jake is involved in up in Santa Rosa; the one I told you about. Help yourself to some coffee.” Marti’s tone, flat and unrevealing, captured Jake’s attention more than the doctor’s gliding walk into the room. Jake noticed how even his razor-creased wool blend dress pants didn’t make a whisper when he walked to the sideboard and helped himself to a cup.

When William turned around, he smiled at them both. “I’m sorry, guys. I know I’m in something of a sour mood today. One of my patients isn’t doing so well and he kept me up all night last night. So, please forgive my lack of good manners here. Do you mind if I stay for the discussion or do you need to be alone? I can come back later Marti...?”

Jake glanced at Marti, waiting to follow her lead. He knew things were sticky between the two but didn’t know how Marti was handling it. Marti smiled back at the doctor. “No, no, William. Please stay. We were just going to go over my preliminary observations. Maybe you can contribute some insights I may have missed. Sit down, please.” She indicated the two big armchairs next to the couch.

William opted for the chair in front of the bay window. The bright winter light behind his white hair gave him a look of haloed saintliness. He settled into the big chair and sighed. “Ah...that feels good. I always did love these chairs.”

“Why don’t you have a pair for your office then?” Marti asked, curious.

“Precisely because they are so comfortable. I’d fall asleep in one everyday and never get any work done.” The doctor chuckled, in a deep smooth voice. His blue eyes twinkled when he laughed. After settling into the chair, his face took on a serious look. “Please, go ahead with what you were talking about before I so rudely interrupted you. Besides, I am very interested in this new line of work Martine is trying out. How does it work in law enforcement, Agent Daniels? May I call you Jacob?”

Jake, quietly listening to the doctor ramble on and wondering why, smiled at the question. “Sure. Call me Jake. As for forensic psychology...you’ll have to ask Marti about that. All I know is she has a knack for figuring out what makes people tick and, right now, I could use her kind of insight. Marti?” He cocked his head, waiting for her to take the lead.

“Doctor Nelson, why do you do this? We’ve gone all through this before. You know very well what this is all about and why I want to work in this field instead of working here full-time.” Marti’s voice revealed more anger than exasperation.

Unruffled, he continued to relax in the big chair, his hands folded over his slim chest. “Yes. We have gone over this before and you are quite right. I am harassing you. I apologize. Of course, you may do whatever you feel is best for your career, Martine. I will not stand in your way. Now, Agent Daniels, would you be so kind as to tell me what is happening with your investigation? I truly am interested.”

The doctor's large head swiveled around and pale blue eyes fixed onto Jake's face. Jake instinctively bristled. "I'm afraid there isn't much to tell. Another two bodies were discovered two days ago. The first, a woman, bears all the earmarks of the same serial killer I've been chasing for the last couple of months, and the man found in the park is so similar we're wondering if our boy did two on Christmas Eve instead of one. Of course, we can't know for sure until everything is gone over. In fact, I just got the coroner's report this morning and came right here to discuss it with Marti. Until I go over it and get all the information I need, I can't say for sure if we have another killer or not. That's it. Nothing new." Jake shrugged his shoulders and nonchalantly sipped the rest of his lukewarm coffee.

William sat forward, placed large square hands on prominent knees and flashed a smile at Jake. "Well, I'm sure it must be more interesting than the way you tell it, Agent Daniels. At any rate, I have to go. I have an appointment coming in soon." He unwound his long body from the depths of the chair and held his hand out to Jake, who stood up with him.

He turned to Marti. "Martine, do you have some time to talk this afternoon? I'd like to get this employment issue settled today."

Marti tensed. "I'm going back up to Santa Rosa with Jake but I can give you a call when I get back. I probably won't be back until later this evening though. Is that okay or do you have plans tonight?"

"Lana and I will be at home, as usual. Give me a call when you get back and we'll talk." His thin-lipped smile contained no warmth when he looked down on her. He headed for the door and almost collided with it.

A tiny, redheaded woman, dressed in an expensive linen suit, stepped into the room, filling it with her presence. “There you are, William Robert. You were supposed to have lunch with me today and discuss our business. Or have you conveniently forgotten again?” Her green eyes flashed and hardened, his face the target for the darts they produced.

“Ah, Lana. My dear wife. How fortunate for me you’ve shown up. I haven’t forgotten our meeting but I have a patient to attend to before I will be there. I will meet you at the restaurant in an hour, if you don’t mind waiting that long.” William checked his watch and frowned.

“Oh, I’ll be there all right. You just make sure you are.” She jabbed her finger into his chest.

“Lana, this really isn’t necessary. Agent Daniels will think we don’t have a happy marriage if you keep this up.” His mouth quirked into a frozen smile but his eyes hardened into tight slits.

She didn’t smile back and she ignored Jake and Marti. “Just be there.” She turned and left without another word.

“Well, you’ve now met my wife. Isn’t she lovely?” The doctor followed her to the door and turned. “Call me tonight Martine. I’ll be home.” He nodded at Jake then left as silently as he had arrived.

Jake sat back down, shook his head and then snorted. “Poor guy. That was his wife? What a bitch.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

December 26th
2:00 P.M.

Marti's tiny apartment smelled of peaches and vanilla. Jake inhaled the subtle scent and felt his body relaxing. Every item the living room contained was elegant and feminine yet functional, from the overstuffed floral furniture and lace curtains to the white tables with their assortment of crystal animals and silk flower arrangements.

Jake felt like a scroungy, unkempt oaf in comparison. He deftly made his way toward a large comfortable-looking sofa, hesitated a fraction of a second while regarding the white background and pastel floral print, then shrugged, grinned at Marti and sank into its large cushions with a sigh. "This place feels like an indoor garden. A guy can't help but feel at home here. Nice job sport," he commented while inspecting the assortment of hanging plants and pleasant pastel shades Marti had used to give the place a comforting feel.

Marti laughed, shrugged off her business suit jacket and walked down a short hall toward her bedroom. "I gotta get out of this suit. Make us some coffee, will you?" she shot over her shoulder before disappearing into the room.

Jake groaned, lifted himself heavily from the comfort of the couch and walked into the small kitchen. He searched for, and found, ground coffee, a new paper filter and the coffeemaker. He filled it with water and set it to brewing, savoring the rich aroma of hazelnuts and vanilla imbued in the coffee grounds. When he returned to the living room, a small CD player, along with slim, gleaming stainless steel speakers, caught his eye on the bank of shelves on the far wall. He strolled over and flicked the on switch.

Immediately the full, rich voice of Helen Reddy singing ‘No Way To Treat A Lady’ wafted from the tiny, but powerful, speakers on each side. Jake sighed with pleasure, tired and feeling drained, sank back onto the couch and used his toes to slip off the black loafers he wore. With a lopsided grin of inane joy, he dug his stocking toes into the thick evergreen carpet, feeling its plush, soft comfort reach up through his feet and into his tight leg muscles. He sighed, closed his eyes and leaned back, feeling for all the world as if he could fall asleep. His mind drifted with the music. *No way to treat a lady, no way to treat your baby...no way to treat a lady.* His eyes flew open then widened in recognition while his face settled into lines of concentration.

Marti’s soft voice yanked him back into the here and now. “Daydreaming or just relaxing for a change?” She sat cross-legged in the matching chair next to the couch, elbows on knees, watching him with a look of curiosity on her face. The burgundy sweatpants and T-top she wore made her look more like the woman Jake knew from childhood, unaware of her fresh innocence and natural beauty.

Jake conjured up a grin for her, hiding the boiling, seething thoughts and images now swirling inside his mind. ‘Marti...if I remember correctly, you’ve always been a movie buff, right?’

She frowned. “Yes, and?”

“And, your preference is for mysteries... murder mysteries, right?” The images and ideas his active brain generated began to coalesce into a theory.

He began to feel excitement. More, he began to feel hope. “Do you remember an old film with Rod Steiger? A film where he played a killer obsessed with killing his mother?”

Marti tilted her head and a small, uncertain smile appeared on her lips. “Yes, something to do with a guy who...” She jerked upright in her chair as if someone had violently kicked her backside. “Lipstick! Red lips! He drew bright red lips on his victim’s foreheads. Damn, what is the title of that movie?” Her excitement transformed into action. She jumped up, rushed to the hall closet and flung the louvered doors open to reveal shelf upon shelf of movie tapes.

Jake joined her, scanning the titles. “No Way To Treat A Lady,” he murmured.

She pulled a tape out of the rack and silently handed it to him. Jake scanned the blurb on the back of the tape, turned to her with his stomach doing flip-flops and asked, “VCR?”

Marti pointed to the gleaming silver machine perched on top of her television. Her face reflected a combination of excitement and puzzlement. Jake slipped the tape in, turned on the set and sat down on the couch, perched on the edge with the eager look of someone anticipating a long-awaited present. When the film credits began to roll, he grabbed the remote control off the coffee table and quickly fast-forwarded the tape. Abruptly, he froze the screen, matching the frozen look of shock on his face.

“There it is. Do you see it Marti? The connection?” Jake’s hands were trembling as he gently replaced the remote back onto the table.

“Yes, I see,” she responded with a throaty gasp. “The lips. In this film, the killer paints lips on his victims because his mother’s red lips are a symbol of her. He’s trying to kill his mother by killing these women.” Her eyes were bright with revelation, just before they dulled with doubt. “But, in the film, Steiger kills elderly women; women obviously mother figures. Our guy kills young blondes. How does that tie in to this case?”

Jake stood up, ran a hand through his hair and moved into the center of the room. He stared out of the bay window behind the couch while he spoke. "I don't know. But, my gut tells me it is related somehow." He shook his head, lifted his nose up and took a deep whiff of the air. "Coffee now?"

Marti shook her head at him. "You're addicted to caffeine... among other things," she grumbled with disgust but went and got their coffee anyway, shutting the television off as she made her way toward the kitchen.

When she returned, placed his mug in front of him and returned to her lotus position in the big chair, her own mug clamped between her hands, Jake arched an eyebrow at her. "Look, let's shelf the brainstorming for the moment. I'd like to ask you a question instead. Okay?"

Marti smiled, reflecting affection and tolerance for him. "Sure, shoot."

"Why didn't you go for the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI when you had a chance Marti? If you really want to be a serious profiler, why didn't you go for it years ago? I was there. I could've helped you. So, why not? And, why the big change now?"

"That's more than one question Jake," she responded with a bantering tone, obviously trying to make light of the questions. When Jake remained silent, waiting patiently for her answer, Marti moved uncomfortably in her seat, cast her eyes down to the cup of coffee now clenched in her fist, instead of just holding it, and nervously chewed her lip.

He threw up a hand. "Hey, kiddo, don't sweat it. I was just curious is all."

"You're getting awfully personal all of a sudden. We've been friends since we were kids Jake and I always thought I could tell you anything but...." Marti stalled out.

“...Now, after the years you were away and married to Pat and all...I...oh hell, there are just some things too personal. Some things I want to keep to myself. Okay?”

He fidgeted on the couch, feeling like he'd crossed some invisible barrier he didn't see coming. He took a deep breath, jumped up and smiled, hoping to defuse whatever faux pas he'd committed. “Look, I have to go now. Let's drop the personal stuff. Fine with me. Just business. Okay? But I want to follow up on this idea about the lips. It may just give us somewhere to look after all. If these killings really did start here, in the city, then it may be connected to that film.” He shrugged into his coat. “Who knows?”

Marti began to unwind her legs while reaching out, as if to halt his abrupt departure. “Jake, I...”

He paused, “I want you to come and stay with me for a while, okay? Until this guy is caught, I don't want you to be alone. Besides, I could use you closer than an hour's drive away.” He stroked his moustache. “What do you say sport? Come and help an old slob out for awhile?” Jake deliberately tried to lighten the mood, aware that he'd upset her somehow. And, he was worried about the threat the killer had written on his door.

The stricken look on her face took him completely by surprise. She turned her face away and stared out the bay window over the couch. “No thanks. I don't need your protection Jake. I'm just fine on my own.” Her voice was cold, remote and held a note of pain that Jake didn't understand.

Knowing he'd really done something wrong now but not knowing what it was, Jake felt his gut twist with a feeling of sick dread. He opted for flight in the face of female emotions he didn't want to deal with. Stiff and unsure, he quickly leaned down,

pecked her on the forehead and opened the outside door. “See ya, kid. I’ll let you know if anything comes of this. You....you, call me if you think of anything else. Okay?” Before she could respond, he was out the door and heading down the hallway toward the exit. Although Jake was unaware of it, the lowering sun glaring through the window before him, making it hard for him to see his way down the stairs. The setting sun bathed his tall body, outlining it with a blood red glow.

“Damn!” Marti swore under her breath.

5:00 P.M.

The Red Rib Café, next door to the Stumble Inn, was Jake’s home away from home. Close to the bar, two blocks from his apartment and serving the best barbecue country ribs, mashed potatoes and redeye gravy in California made it a five star restaurant in Jake’s opinion. He shifted uncomfortably on a cracked red Naugahyde bench seat and squinted through the bay window next to the street, trying hard to see details in spite of the sun blinding his vision as it sank into the Pacific Ocean for the night. “Where the hell are they?” he grumbled under his breath while he held a palm over his eyes and tried to see down the darkening sidewalk outside. He swore under his breath, gave up the search and reached for his cold cup of coffee.

A middle-aged waitress, wearing the unorthodox uniform of jeans and sweater, tall and fit but with the unmistakable wear and tear of a woman who’d seen some real life, sauntered over to his booth with a full coffee pot in her hand. Her wide face was scrubbed clean, plain but strong, and her smile was warm and open. “More coffee Jake?”

She began to fill his mug before he could answer. “Wonder what happened to the boys,” she rasped in her deep, throaty way.

Jake grinned up at her, winked in a familiar way and said, “Ah, Sue, my pet, we don’t need them. Every time I come in here, your Janis Joplin voice and generous round places always makes me forget my work anyway.” An impish glint crept into his blue eyes. “How’s about you and me grabbing a drink after you get off work? Hey, good looking?”

She slung a wide hip toward him, planted a work-rough fist on it and scowled down at him, her hazel eyes just as bright as his. “Yeah, right, Jake. And what will we tell my husband, hey? You know he can’t bowl right unless I fix his dinner for him first. Besides, I don’t think he’ll take kindly toward you if he finds out you’re making eyes at his wife. The Chief don’t have a sense of humor, you know.” She chuckled, deep and throaty then reached out to rumple Jake’s unruly hair like she was placating a small boy. “Sorry, dear, maybe next time.” She turned and swung her hips in an exaggerated swagger as she returned to the kitchen.

“Okay, Hartigan but you remember you had your chance and blew it,” he yelled at her retreating back as she slipped through the swinging doors.

She poked her tousled head of flaming red hair over the doors and replied, “If you get fired and I lose your business then I’ll have to close this little dump of mine. And, I won’t allow that ‘cause then I’d have to stay home with the Chief full-time.” She laughed, a great rolling belly laugh. “Uh uh, no way, honey.” She retreated back into the kitchen again.

Jake turned back to the bay window and scanned the street outside. The darkening gloom, barely lit by a few overhead neon streetlights, gave the street a dead look. Not a soul stirred on the walks yet. *Not until happy hour anyway. Not in this part of town*, he thought to himself as he continued to search for the familiar figures of Brian and Cameron.

Just as Sue hit the swinging doors with her hip, balancing a huge plate of ribs in one hand and a basket of hot sourdough bread in the other, an unmarked police car pulled up to the curb in front of the café. It was painted the standard black that made it recognizable to everyone, especially the criminals. Cameron slid out of the passenger's side while Brian eased his massive bulk out from the driver's. The two men spotted Jake through the window and nodded.

By the time they came through the door, Sue had served Jake's dinner and now waited beside the table to take their orders. "Hey Brian. Cam. You eatin' tonight?" she drawled in her best Sexy Sue voice.

The two cops stamped their feet to dislodge a spatter of icy slush over the worn doormat. They shrugged out of their long winter coats, hung them on the curved wooden coat tree next to the door then slid into the booth across from Jake. Brian grinned shyly up at Sue. "Yeah, I'm hungry Sue. I'll have what Jake's having." He pointed to the platter of ribs sitting in front of Jake.

"Me too luv. And some hot coffee; lots of it," Cam replied before turning to Jake. "Damn, it's cold out there. Anyway, we may finally have something," he announced.

Jake returned a thick, meaty rib dripping with sauce back to the platter, wiped his hands on a napkin and cocked an eyebrow at Cameron. “What? More from the witnesses?”

Brian took his worn, leather notebook from his shirt pocket and flipped it open. “Yeah. The butcher, Mr. Schwartz, when I went back to re-interview him, he remembered something new. He said that around midnight he heard a wailing sound coming from the alley. He told me that, at first, he thought it was just some cats mating or fighting. Later, after he talked to us and thought about it for a while, he said he realized that it wasn’t cats at all. He was sure it was the sound of a man howling like he was in agony or grieving the way the Jewish women do when someone in the neighborhood dies.”

“He’s sure it was a man, not a woman screaming in pain?” Jake leaned forward, forgetting the platter in front of him and dipping his white shirtsleeves into the sauce in the process.

“He said he’s sure; it was a man howling with grief.” Brian shrugged as if to say, ‘It could be true or it could be the faulty memory of an old man. Who knows?’

“Well we know from the lack of blood or any other real evidence at the scene, that she didn’t die there, that’s for sure. That was our boy’s dump sight, not his killing place.” Jake noticed the sauce on his forearms and dunked a napkin into his water glass before absent-mindedly scrubbing at the stains. “He may be right...but, how does knowing that help us?”

Cam, who had been eyeing Jake’s dinner with the subtlety of a starving wolf, looked up at Jake and remarked, “It’s one more small detail that points to what kind of

man he is. From what I've read and been taught, if we get enough information like this, we can find him. At least, we we're finding something new instead of chasing our tails."

"Cam, there just might be hope for you yet," Jake quipped while pulling his dinner platter further away from Cam's hungry gaze. He plucked a hot sourdough roll from its basket, smeared it with butter and bit off a chunk. Jake chewed it slowly, staring out the window, and gave his mind free reign to ruminate on the new small bits of information he'd found that day.

When Sue slid two heaping platters of ribs in front of Cam and Brian and wordlessly retreated, Jake turned from the window and said, "I may have found another interesting bit of information today myself. I'm not sure yet, but my gut tells me it's connected. I just have to find that connection."

Cam tore into his food but Brian politely waited for Jake to continue. When Jake continued to stare at the window without filling in the details, Brian asked, "What did you find Jake?"

Jake turned back to the pair across from him, both now waiting expectantly for the answer. "Sorry, I was just thinking about all these small pieces we're getting. Nothing big or earth-shaking and certainly none of it seems to fit together yet." He tossed what was left of the bread roll onto his platter and told them about the lips, the Rod Steiger movie and what they may be telling about the killer. He concluded, "I think our man is from the south. Every damn thing I come across is about the south in this case. The mint in the lipstick is peculiar to a southern brand, the icepicks—if they come from the same supplier and I think they do—is made by a southern company. The ribbon around the victim's necks is a southern belle thing and the homosexual man killed in the city was

dressed like one. If the same guy did that killing, then there is a definite arrow pointing south. And, Rod Steiger, in that movie, often used a homosexual act and a southern drawl to disguise his true identity. It can't all be a coincidence."

Cam stopped eating and stared at Jake with a stunned look on his face. "You mean, all that stuff is just window dressing? Planted to show us he lived in the south at one time? Why? I don't understand."

Brian pushed his fork moodily around his plate. "Because a sociopath doesn't think anybody is smart enough to figure them out, to find them or to stop them. They play games but they never leave any real evidence because they really don't want to be caught." He leaned forward and stared into Jake's eyes. "Why would he deliberately leave clues that would lead to him? That's not how they operate Jake."

"It is if, according to Marti's profile, he's a classic sociopath who believes he's untouchable, unstoppable and smarter than we are. Her profile states that this killer should be between 30 and 40, experienced at killing, with a past criminal record to prove it. He's white, of southern extraction, drives a van or truck, because he kills in one place and dumps the bodies in another, is highly intelligent with some high-level education and lives alone. He always kills after midnight. She also predicted that because of his highly organized and well-planned kills, he'd be almost impossible to catch. He doesn't leave evidence we can use, but, what he does leave, tells us about his fantasy and the ritual he must perform to fulfill that fantasy. In other words, Marti is convinced that, sooner or later, the fantasy he's playing out will be his downfall. She thinks he'll carry it so far that we'll nail him, just like it did others. Either that, or we'll chase him for years until he makes a stupid mistake, like Ted Bundy did." Jake sighed with frustration. "By leaving

more and more props at his kills, he's taunting us, challenging us to find him and stop him." Jake banged the table with a fist, rattling the dishes. "I wish to hell he'd make a big mistake, any mistake, right now."

Cam, still eating quietly but listening intently as well, wiped his mouth with a napkin and asked, "What about the bloke killed in the park? How does he fit into all this?"

Jake moved his hand through air as if to wipe out the invisible words. "The chief has assigned that to the local cops. Russell says it's a copycat killing, not one of ours. I think the chief is happy to finally have something he can legitimately take credit for with that killing."

Brian took a small bite of his food then picked up his cup of coffee before commenting. "I heard downtown that they've already ID'd him anyway. He's just some poor slob who stopped over for the night. They found a witness who saw the guy walking up the street between his motel and a nightclub late the night before. Evidently, he decided to have his own holiday party and picked up a hooker. The witness had no trouble identifying him because he had that unusual shade of red hair. The woman who saw him approach and eventually leave with the hooker said they walked off toward his motel. What happened to him after that, is debatable."

"At least its one killing we don't have to take the fall for," Cam quipped. He scratched at the healing gouges on top of his hand where Glock had treated him to a swipe a few days before. "Can we see Marti's profile? Maybe it will help us to fix on what kind of guy to look for."

“Sure. It’s at my office, on the desk. Just make copies of it when you get the chance to check in.” Jake fixed both men with an icy stare. “I don’t care what it takes, we have got to find this bastard and fast.”

“Hey, Jake, calm down man. I think Marti’s right, we’ll find him,” Brian pushed his almost untouched dinner away. “But, for now, I’m going to go check on some things Quigley dug up. Where is he, anyway?”

“He called in on my cell phone and I told him to check into that killing in the city. He’s down there now,” Jake replied. “Brian, would you mind dropping over to the morgue and seeing if Russell has anything concrete yet? I want to go over all this in detail tonight.” He played absent-mindedly with his moustache. “There’s an itch niggling in the back of my mind and I can’t get rid of the feeling that I’ve missed something important.”

Brian nodded and squeezed over Cam’s unmoving body and left the booth. He slipped on his long, wool blend overcoat and pulled a pair of black gloves out of the pocket. “I’ll go over later tonight. I know Russell is usually there most of the night.” He hesitated. “I gotta stop off and see a friend first.” He blushed and hurriedly added, “Where you going tonight Cam? Home, or do you have something you’re going to check up on?”

Cam leaned back in the booth with an empty platter in front of him. “I have a date with a lady tonight, thank you very much.” He grinned up at Brian.

Jake left the booth and reached for his coat as well while Brian slipped on the gloves and moved toward the door. “Both of you come to my office tomorrow after lunch. Quigley will have something by then and I’ve asked Marti to come too. We can

discuss her profile then. The five of us need to brainstorm and figure out where we want to go from here.”

Brian answered, “Sure Jake,” and left the café. His tall figure, hunched over against the icy wind that was still blowing, moved slowly down the street.

Cam stood, slid out of the booth and slipped on his own coat and gloves. “Talk to you tomorrow boss,” he said with a gleam in his eyes.

But, by the time Cam’s parting words were leaving his mouth, Jake had left and was making his way toward his apartment. His entire concentration was turned inward, mulling over facts, scenes, bits and pieces and conjuring up images of crime scenes with their weird litter of toys the killer had used to dress the bodies up with.

What the hell am I missing here? he thought as his foot stepped on the first stair leading up to his building. While he fitted his key to the outside door, his mind began rumbling and roaring, like a dam with too much water pushing against its walls, ready to crack, erupt and inevitably drown all those in its path when it finally broke loose.

CHAPTER EIGHT

December 26th

11:45 P.M.

The familiar feel of a soft, warm breast under his hand jolted Cam out of a light doze. He smiled in the dark, remembering how eager and full of lust he'd been just a half-hour ago. "That was fantastic. Will ya get me a beer babe?" he asked the woman who lay still and silent next to him.

"Tell me about the case Cam. You promised me an exclusive. It's time to return the favor and pay up now." Her soft voice was cold, emotionless and without any vestige of the sensuality she'd used earlier when talking to him.

Cam sat up in the bed, braced himself against the cold brass backboard and crossed his arms. "Well, it seems it's been business instead of pleasure hey?" He laughed. "My kind of woman." He reached out for her again but she'd moved silently away from him in the darkness.

The bedside lamp being switched on sent a jolt of pain through Cam's eyes and directly into his tired brain. "Yow, woman. Did you have to turn that bleedin' thing on without warning me first?"

By the time he uncovered his eyes, Connie Braxton already had a pair of jeans and a baggy sweatshirt on and was standing beside the bed glaring down at him. "Get up. I'll make some coffee and meet you in the living room. It's time to talk.... unless Aussie's don't believe in keeping their word." The sarcasm in her voice matched the smirk on her pale face. She cocked an eyebrow at him, smoothed down her short, black hair and waited for his reaction.

Cam felt a surge of anger begin to surface. He brutally suppressed it, aware of what he was capable of if pushed too far, even with a woman. He forced a smile and replied, "Sure, luv, we had a deal and I'll keep my part. I'll be right there."

She turned without another word and left the bedroom, leaving Cam wondering if he should ruin her evening by leaving without giving her the information she wanted. The thought sent a shot of pleasure through him, just as strongly as his anger had been moments before. *It would teach this ball-breaking bitch a lesson she needs*, he thought while he pulled dress slacks, socks and his best blue shirt back on. He grabbed his shoes and sauntered out to the small living room.

"Turn the stereo on," she commanded from the kitchen just before she heard his body hit the couch with no effort to protect the furniture from damage. After a long pause and no music, she added, "Asshole."

After fixing two mugs of instant coffee, she walked into the living room bearing a tray and an irate expression. "Are all Australians as rude and stubborn as you?" she asked while glancing from him to the small, silent stereo sitting next to his elbow on the end table.

"Nope. Most are worse," he responded with a malicious grin. He reached out for the coffee she placed in front of him, put his stocking feet up on the plain wooden coffee table and took a sip before adding, "Okay, now we understand each other. We have a deal. You paid half of yours so I'll pay half of mine."

In the act of reaching for her cup, Connie froze, turned a blazing gaze of incredulity on him and spat out, "Half? You call that only half? What the hell is this, a double cross?"

Cam dropped his feigned act of charm, along with the forced smile. “Look, Connie, we agreed to exchange information about the Holiday Killer case. That...is...all.” When she stiffened, poised to attack, he nonchalantly waved a hand toward the bedroom and added, “That was not part of the deal, just an extra. I thought you wanted it too. Seems you’re more a frigid, ambitious bitch than I thought.”

She thought about it, relaxed and slumped back into the cushion of the couch. “You bastard,” she growled. “You are an insufferable, arrogant, crude, cold-blooded prick.” She crossed her arms and met his unwavering glare of defiance with one of her own.

A loud, belly laugh erupted from Cam, in spite of his awareness that she might not see the humor in the situation and share his pleasure in it. “Shit, you’re right, I am. Now, can we disarm and get down to business without fear of the other pulling a knife or gun?”

In spite of her humiliation, Connie laughed too. She uncrossed her arms and retrieved the cooling cup of coffee she’d left on the table next to his feet. “You’re right, we do understand each other now. No games.” She took a drink and set the cup back down, well away from his feet this time. “But, I did consider dumping this hot coffee on those for a few minutes there.” She pointed at his toes.

He took his feet off the table and sat forward. “Now, what do you have on the case that we don’t have?” When a flash of anger returned in her eyes and she opened her mouth to protest, he quickly added, “I’ll keep my part too, no worries. I just don’t want to waste time telling you what you already know, is all. And, you’re bound to know a lot less than I do so it’ll be quicker and easier if you talk first.”

Connie's face relaxed. She chewed on her lower lip for a moment before beginning. "Okay. You're right, I don't know much but I think I do have a couple of pieces of information Jake would love to have right about now." She paused for effect. When Cam didn't react, she continued, unfazed. "For one thing, I know the killer has a peculiar shade of red hair. Does your precious boss know that little detail?"

This time, he did react. He lurched forward, thrusting his face closer to hers. "How do you know that? Where did you get the information?"

She sat back with a smug and satisfied smile on her face. "I don't have to tell you where I got it, just that I do. And, you can take it as fact."

"Why the bloody hell should I do that? We need proof, not gossip."

"I'll give you the proof when, and if, you need it, not before. But, for now, you can take it as gospel and use it to find the guy." When he scowled at her, Connie asked, "Do you want the rest or not?"

This time, he stiffened with irritation and chewed on his knuckles. "Yes," he snapped.

"All right then. I also know for a fact..." She waited for his outburst, baiting him and enjoying it. "...that the killer used to live in San Francisco. He's killed there too."

Cam remained silent, determined to withhold any satisfaction his frustration might supply.

She shrugged at his unwillingness to play the game. "He killed a gay guy last year and he's killed other women between here and the city since then. I can't give you dates, names and a clear trail of bodies to this town but I know it's true."

Cam waited to see if she would add anything before he ventured another question. “Is that all you have? Or are you holding some back to get my goat?”

A genuine smile twitched on her lips as she answered, “One thing... he has a tattoo on his right buttock, a set of bright red lips.” She watched him intently, waiting for a reaction; this time, with good cause.

Cam didn’t disappoint. He launched off the seat cushion and up onto his feet with enough speed to startle Connie, who threw her body back against the couch in response. “Where the hell did you get all this? Connie, this is not a game anymore. How do you know all this?”

She looked frightened and clammed up immediately in the face of his violent reaction to what she’d said. A host of mixed emotions crossed over her face in rapid succession: confusion, determination, uncertainty then stubbornness, all mixed in with a continuing look of fear and hope.

Cam backed off, agitated and filled with excitement and anxiety. *What if she’s making this up just to get information out of me? How the hell can she know these things? We sure didn’t dig them up. But, that bloke Quigley said as much about the guy in San Francisco.* He decided to accept her information at face value, sure she was too smart to give them false information; sure she knew what would happen to her if she did.

Cam stared down at her, took a deep breath and sat down again. “Sorry, it’s just that we’ve been under a lot of pressure to find this bastard and here you offer up information we don’t have. I have to wonder where you got it and hope it’s true.”

“Oh, it’s true enough.” Connie picked her cup up with shaking hands. “And, don’t forget I’m a journalist. I have sources cops don’t have, not even FBI agents.” She drank

the rest of the now cold coffee and set the cup down before going on. “Now, it’s your turn. What have you got?”

He picked up his cup, looked into it as if consulting tea leaves, set it back down and sat back before he answered. “I still don’t know how much you know. What you gave me was new information. Is that all you have, other than what’s been reported, or were those just the high points?”

Connie stood up, gathered up the coffee things and put them back onto the tray. She held the tray and looked down at him, answering his question with a serious tone; one that was unmistakably sincere. “Look, I’m not playing games here either. All I know is what’s been written and what I just told you. I can’t get a hold of the police files in San Francisco or in any of the other towns he killed in. I know about his hair and the tattoo because an inside source confided it to me. That is all.” She turned and moved into the kitchen with the tray.

Cam sat and thought while she disposed of the dishes. *Truth or dare time, Cam old buddy. Do you really share case information with her or do you pull the old con game and cheat her as you originally planned?* He flinched inwardly at the last part of his thought.

Still wondering how far to go with this, he mentally made a note of the small room where he sat. Sparsely furnished with modern furniture, no plants, pictures, books or woman’s knickknacks of any kind; it held no warmth, no personality and no information about the woman he was debating whether or not to trust. One glaringly out of place object in the room caught his eye, a small trunk, painted with flowers and scrolls, was tucked unobtrusively beside a small desk and chair as if it might be used for filing or

record storage. It was very feminine and very elegant and it stuck out amid the sterile furniture like a painted whore in a nunnery. It also had a new brass lock dangling from the clasp. Cameron frowned and leaned forward, inspecting it closer and speculating on what she hid in it. He made a mental note to check it out first chance he had. With a jolt of shock, he realized the intricate paintings on the top of the trunk, when viewed up close, had the face of devil in the middle of its vines and flowers, complete with horns and fangs. Cam made another mental note to ask Marti what she would make of it. Then he chuckled to himself.

Connie returned, quiet and subdued but friendlier than she was earlier. She eased down to the carpet across the coffee table from Cam, who now sat back and seemed relaxed and casual. She arranged herself into a cross-legged pose with both elbows on the table and looked up into his eyes. “Well? Have you decided to play fair with me or not?”

Cam told her all he knew, except for the information about Marti’s profile and Jake’s theory that a movie about a set of lips was somehow connected. Something inside Cam made him hold back anything Connie might view as silly or desperate. When he finished his recital, she was nodding her head. “Yes, I pretty much figured most of it out myself anyway. But...” her eyes seemed to grow larger, softer and more sincere. “...are you sure the guy in the park wasn’t the killer? I was so sure...”

Cam laughed. “No, he was just a poor, horny guy from San Francisco who came up here, found himself a hooker to have a private holiday party with and ended up dead for his trouble. The local cops are checking it out, of course, but we know enough to know he’s not our guy.” He noticed her disappointment and shook his head at her

woebegone look. “You really thought he was the one, didn’t you? Is that the exclusive you thought you’d get from me?”

“Yes. Damn!” She pounded her small fist down onto the table in frustration. “I wanted that story.” She calmed down almost instantly and sunk her chin down onto her hands resting on top of the table. She sighed. “Oh well, tomorrow’s another day and, I know he’ll be at it again on New Year’s. And if not that holiday, then he’s sure to kill on Valentine’s Day. All I have to do is wait.”

“Valentine’s Day?” Cam asked, not catching the connection.

She lifted her chin. “Yeah, Valentine’s Day. Oh, you don’t have that in your country, do you?” She laughed.

He blushed. “Course we do. I just never had a woman I liked enough to notice the day, is all,” he retorted in self-defense.

She slowly and sensuously eased her body off the floor, taking her time and making a dance of motion out of the simple act of standing up. “You do now, mate. From now on, I’m gonna be a wart on your ass. Until this guy is caught, you have yourself a girlfriend so you better start enjoying it now.” Her eyes gleamed as she moved closer to him, peeling her clothes with maddening slowness.

By the time Connie reached him and stood completely naked before him, with her pubic mound only inches from his face, Cam was hard, ready and having difficulty thinking coherent thoughts. She switched off the table lamp and straddled his quivering thighs. When she took a step closer, he was powerless to argue the point.

1:15 A.M.

The morgue, housed in the basement of the city offices and police station, was accessed through a door set into a larger door the meat wagons used to deliver their dead. When Brian slipped through the outside doorway and into a large, darkened, cavernous space where one of the hearse-like vehicles sat, silent and brooding like Cerberus guarding the gateway to the underworld, he felt the hair on his arms rise in alarm. His cop's instincts, honed over many years of experience, told him to be wary. He ignored them and moved around the vehicle toward a dimly lit hallway leading to the autopsy rooms.

Brian moved steadily down a muted green hall with a white stripe painted down the middle of the floor. "Maybe the people who work here are afraid of getting lost," he mumbled to himself, making his way toward a dull metal set of doors at the end of the hall.

The hall was shadowed like a cheap set from a bad horror movie; only two bare bulbs out of six were still working. "Cheap bastards," he whispered while glancing at the smudged, rusty stains smeared along the walls at hip height.

When he lightly slapped both metal doors with his hands, they swung silently open to reveal a large room equipped with three autopsy tables lined up like hospital beds for the tortured. The last table in line, at the far end of the room, held a still form completely covered with a blood-splattered sheet. The room was just as dim as the rest of the building and Brian squinted, trying to see to the back of the room where a small cubicle was tucked into one corner. The glass windows on three sides were dark and the

door was closed. The only light source was a dim neon tube hanging over the corpse. It threw fitful beams of bluish white down over the covered body, giving the shadows beyond and trapped in the folds of the material a look of writhing black shapes.

Expecting to see Russell or Amanda working in the room or in the office, and finding both empty of life, Brian debated whether or not to come back later in the morning. He checked his watch. "One thirty. Well, so much for hoping to catch him off guard," Brian murmured. "Besides, this place stinks," he added, mentally shutting off his normal physical reaction to the odors of dead bodies, human excrement and formaldehyde.

He turned to exit then heard a faint sound coming from the cubicle Russell used as an office. Brian crouched by instinct and softly made his way toward the room. The closer he got, the louder and clearer the sounds coming from it became. By the time he reached the feet of the corpse, Brian could clearly hear what emanated from behind the closed door.

"Manda, I tell you nobody will ever find out," Russell's whine of a voice declared in a near whisper.

"You said that last time and we almost got caught." Amanda's nasal, masculine voice snapped in response.

A sly grin spread over Brian's face as he crouched down further and hunched against the wall of the office. The sound of thumping made him flinch at the vibrations coming through the thin, pre-fab wall.

Russell's voice sounded muffled when he said, "Damn it, move that over." He began to gasp. "Manda, help me out here. I gotta get that hole filled and this thing is loaded and ready to move."

She groaned in response. The sound of sluggish motion and panting followed.

Brian snickered behind his hand.

"That damned Jake. This will fix his ass. He'll never find what he needs now, the asshole," Russell snapped in a renewed voice. "Make sure that filing cabinet is up against the wall Manda. That evidence will never be found now, not until they tear this dump down anyway." Russell's laugh was mirthless and high pitched.

"Why the hell are you so bent on ruining that guy? What did he do to you to make you hate him so much?" Amanda asked with a combination of curiosity and excitement in her tone.

Brian's silent laughter abruptly stopped. He leaned over and pressed his ear against the wall, intent on hearing whatever it was Russell and Amanda were up to. His face was set into hard lines of determination when he heard the answer.

"I told you I don't like to talk about him. It pisses me off and..." The sound and feel of a body hitting the side of the wall made Brian jump. "...and when I get pissed off, I like to do something about it, bitch." Russell's voice now sounded harsh, deep and raspy.

Amanda groaned again. "Oh, baby. I love it when you get pissed. Hit me again. Tell me. Tell me. Don't stop. I love to hear it. Talk to me baby."

"I grew up with the prick in the city. He pretended to be my friend but he wasn't. He was just like all the rest then: petty, nasty and self-centered. I hate him and I'll do

anything to bring him down off that pedestal of superiority he's climbed up on." The hatred and rage in Russell's voice came through the wall like a living thing. The rhythmic sound of two bodies colliding, and Amanda's howls of pain, added to Russell's gasps as he forced more words out. "He... killed...someone... I... loved... and I'll never forgive him for it...never!" Russell's final word came out in a crescendo of triumph.

What a couple of sick fucks, Brian thought as he began to see why the investigation was at a standstill. *The chief won't help and he and Russell are in cahoots. Russell is hiding evidence and changing the reports. What else is going on in this damned town? We'll have their balls for this.* Brian felt a surge of anger he barely suppressed until he got himself back under control. *I ought to kick the shit out of Russell here and now.* The image of Russell laying on one of his steel tables, battered and nearly dead, made Brian feel better for all of five minutes.

"So, you hide evidence, change the official records, plant false stuff and generally do all the damage you can huh?" Amanda, now recovered, asked with malicious glee in her voice. "I like it." She giggled. "Can we play with the dildo again hon? Can I be the man this time lover? I know you like it that way. I like it too." Her voice purred with sexual innuendo.

Russell responded with, "Sure, I'm a long way from done with you tonight. Now go get the box of goodies, you evil cunt. And, this time, I get the woman on the table, not you." His voice had raised a few octaves and he'd adopted an exaggerated form of the whine he used normally.

Brian decided it was time to get out, sick in his soul and his stomach and determined to tell Jake what he'd found out first thing in the morning. He turned to leave.

When he swiveled on his heels in order to stay below the level of the windows, his left foot hit the wall. He froze.

“What was that?” Amanda asked, her voice breathless and deep with excitement.

Brian stayed low and scrambled past the first stainless steel table, moved between it and the next one and made his way, low and quiet, on the opposite side of the room, hoping to make it to the door and outrun them if they followed. He made it to the double doors, tumbled through them and poised himself to sprint down the hallway toward the exit. He took two steps before he felt a crashing blow to the back of his head and he dropped to the sickly green floor with the white stripe down the middle. In slow motion, what was left of Brian’s brain recorded a finely detailed video image of the stripe as it became larger and wider with each passing moment his face moved toward the floor.

The world went black but the white stripe soon had a dark red blood trail staining it as Brian’s body was dragged away.

CHAPTER NINE

December 27th
10:00 A.M.

“Where the hell is Brian?” Jake thundered, irritated at being stuffed into a small office with three other people, making it impossible to pace, and no bottles of false courage anywhere in sight.

He shifted in his seat before picking up a stray memo and beginning to shred it.

“It’s not like him to be late Jake,” Marti chewed on her bottom lip and watched Jake’s uncharacteristic loss of control while his anger and irritation built to boiling point.

Cam turned to Quigley, who sat quietly tucked into the same corner of the room as he’d sat before, and stared at the man while speaking to Jake and Marti. “Maybe he can’t take the company.”

Quigley rolled his eyes, took a deep breath, crossed his arms over his chest and remained silent.

“Oh, shut up Cam,” Jake snapped. “I’ve had just about enough of uncooperative people. From now on, we work as a team. That means no going your own way, no keeping information to yourself until you’re asked for it and no sniping at people who are trying to help us. God knows we have damned few of those and too many of the other. We..work..together. Understand?” His eyes flashed with a building anger, fueled by worry about his partner. Jake knew Brian would never miss or be late for, a case meeting. He forced himself to sit relaxed in his chair. “Okay, he’s not coming. I don’t know what came up but he’ll have a good reason; he always does. Let’s start anyway.” He glanced at Quigley. “What did you find out about the San Francisco killing?”

Quigley's demeanor changed instantly, from disassociated to professional and alert. "It was our boy all right; same basic M.O., same signature, although not as sophisticated as he is now, and the same placing of the body at the dump site. The big difference is this killing was really bloody and violent. The boy was hacked up like the guy who did it hated him. The locals put it down to a gay bashing but, after I spoke with them, they upgraded it to one of ours. They'll be sending the file down to you in tomorrow afternoon's locked pouch by a courier."

Cam sat forward, eagerly thrusting his face toward Jake. "That confirms it then. I spoke to Connie Braxton last night and she revealed that one of her sources said the killings started in the city and that he has killed in just about every small town between here and there. She said..." Cam's eyes widened when he realized that Jake was scowling at him.

"You spoke to a reporter about this case?" Jake's voice, although low and controlled, had the same impact as if he was thundering and raging.

"I...she..." Cam managed to get out before Jake interrupted him. "What else did she say? And, you better be able to tell me you told her nothing significant in return."

Cam swallowed hard, took a deep breath and replied, "I did discuss the case with her but only because she told me she had information we didn't have. I..." He held his head up and looked Jake directly in the eye. "I told her nothing about your theories or about Marti's profile. All I discussed were small details that I thought would do no damage if she did publish them. In exchange, she gave me three pieces of information I knew you'd want." When Jake relaxed, replacing his look of displeasure with genuine interest, Cam ticked the items off. "First, she said a source told her the killing in San

Francisco was definitely done by the same man. Second, she said that the string of bodies between here and there and the files on those murders were never integrated with ours so we have never had a complete picture to work with. She also thinks he now lives here permanently. Why, I don't know. Third, she claims to have someone so intimately associated with the killer that they say he has a peculiar shade of coppery red hair and a tattoo of a red lips on his right buttock. It all fits." Cam stopped, breathless with having made a long speech and anxious that the information would prove valid.

"Did you believe her?" Marti asked.

"Yes, I did. I didn't think she has any reason to lie. But, she wouldn't tell me how or from whom she got the information so we can't follow it up."

Quigley uncrossed his arms, leaned forward and searched Cam's face with an intense concentration. "Was she sure about the hair color?" he asked with a husky tone in his voice. The heavy lines in his face seemed to deepen and sharpen, giving him the unnerving aura of a gargoyle.

Cam spun his head around to face the man he'd forgotten was in the room until now. "Hair color? Is that what you think is the most important part of what I got?" he asked, incredulous and sarcastic.

"Oh shit!" Jake's explosive response to Quigley's question blasted through the room.

"The hair color! Sonofabitch! Yes!" He slammed his hand down on the desk, toppling an empty Styrofoam cup onto the floor.

Marti and Cam jumped but Quigley maintained his quiet pose of concentrated expectancy.

“What are you talking about Jake? What about the hair color for Pete’s sake?”

Marti asked in bewilderment just before her face cleared, her eyes opened wide and her mouth fell open. “The hair color...the same as the dead man in the park?”

“Yes!” Jake bellowed before he swung on Quigley with suspicion. “How the hell did you know about the hair color of the man in the park? You weren’t there and you don’t have access to the files here.”

Quigley relaxed and slumped back into his affected pose of the unconcerned observer. “I was there, you just didn’t see me,” he stated in a matter-of-fact way. “I told you this case is important to me...and why.”

Cam ignored the exchange and asked Jake, “So, the dead man has a peculiar shade of red hair too? And, that means....?”

“That means that his death isn’t a coincidence or just a copycat of the Holiday Killer; it’s related somehow. That’s assuming your new girlfriend told the truth,” Marti stated in a teasing voice.

“It also might mean that there’s someone, maybe the person feeding Braxton information, who is stalking the stalker.” Jake subconsciously rubbed his fingers over his moustache while he took a minute to think about the implications of what he’d just put forth. He jerked to attention when Marti stood up.

She retrieved the profile report she’d shown Jake from her purse on top of the filing cabinet. With the report in hand, she asked, “Do you want the profile now?”

“Sure, sit down Marti. Give us the summary. You can give copies to them when we’re finished up here.”

She flipped the file open to the last page. "In summary, we're looking for a white man, between the ages of 25-35, above average height, conservative, some high level education but with a criminal record. He's probably been arrested for assault or various sexual offenses. It's just a guess, but he's probably southern born and raised. He's very intelligent, probably attractive and charming to women, lives alone or with his mother, drives a van or truck that is not flashy in any way and he is most likely involved in the investigation in some way or another. Although a highly organized killer of the power/control type, someone who typically leaves few or no pieces of evidence behind, this one very deliberately leaves his signature there for all the see. He's bragging and..." Marti glanced at Jake. "...as Jake pointed out to me earlier, he's taunting you. He feels he's superior, smarter and in complete control but he's not. His fantasy is controlling him and it will dictate that his kills become more and more complex, dangerous and revealing. His personality will begin to fall apart as his kills become closer together and more violent with each one."

"But this guy kills according to the holidays. He doesn't time his kills outside that schedule. How can he fall apart if he's not being driven by an internal motivation?" Quigley surprised everybody by asking.

Marti turned and answered him in a friendly voice. "That's just it; he is being driven internally. It's true he uses holidays to time the kills but it's the fantasy dictating the ritual that is really driving him, not the dates. The holiday element is a statement too but it's the kill that is the ultimate fantasy fulfilled."

"Fantasy? Ritual? What is all this mumbo jumbo?" Cam sputtered, glancing from Marti's face, to Jake's, to Quigley's then back to Marti.

“The *way* he kills, Cam. That is his ritual. He *must* do it a certain way each time or the fantasy he has nurtured and developed for years about killing women won’t be satisfied.”

“There’s a couple of characteristics I’ve seen about this one that are disturbing and not the norm though,” Marti murmured, looking for and finding another page to reference in her report while she spoke.

“I’d say everything about this guy is disturbing and abnormal,” Cam muttered.

Marti flashed a wan smile at him then read from her report. “First, he would be generally classified as an Organized/Nonsocial Offender. They have certain characteristics that are clearly the norm. The ones I just gave you are common but these types usually have other traits this man deviates from. I’ll give you the list of his deviations. If instance:

1. They are usually sexually competent, which means they function well enough to have normal sexual relations. You usually find evidence of sexual assault on the bodies. This guy uses dildos and icepicks, objects instead of his penis. That would normally mean he’s incompetent sexually and using artifacts as substitutes.
2. They usually live with a partner: a girlfriend or a wife. It’s part of their ‘mask of normalcy’ to do so. I don’t think this guy has either. I think he either lives alone or with an aged mother. He kills in the early morning hours so he must not have to worry about explaining his whereabouts to anyone. Of course, there’s always the possibility he has a night job and

can slip away to kill and not be missed, but I don't think so. He's too intelligent for night work, which is generally not white collar.

3. These types are usually geographically mobile. They move around, cruise, and kill all over the country, making it hard to catch them. They very deliberately kill this way in order to avoid detection. This killer started as mobile but now he's switched to one town, one location, for his last three kills. Why? He's now taking unnecessary chances by using high-risk dumpsites.
4. An Organized/Nonsocial Killer also goes out of his way to be very masculine in appearance and in behavior. Yet, this one is highly aware of, and uses, lipstick, scents and traditionally feminine artifacts to dress up his victims.

Marti's face screwed up in concentration. "Again, why? He'd be positively anal about his masculine image." She stopped and blushed when the men broke out in self-conscious laughter. "Sorry, no pun intended." Then she laughed too, relieved to have the tension broken for a few minutes. "These men have a positive self-image bordering on egomania and truly believes they are right about everything, not only for himself but for everyone else. He perceives any and every criticism as a personal attack. He would not risk that by using anything in his ritual that smacks of anything less than being a super-stud, even if it's only in his imagination."

"That's probably why he killed that boy in San Francisco then," Jake stated. "He thought the guy was a woman, took him somewhere to do his thing, found out his

intended victim was a man and killed him in a rage.” He nodded at Quigley’s smile of satisfaction. “Quigley caught it. That boy was killed in a particularly brutal way, making the locals think it was a gay bashing, because his very sex was a criticism of how intelligent and competent our killer thinks he is. Right?” He searched Marti’s face for confirmation.

“Right. He would have been enraged beyond belief at what he perceived to be a deception that got by him; the superman with superior mental powers.” Marti thought about it a moment and groaned. “Oh, God, I’d hate to see what the killer did to that boy when he found out.”

Quigley responded with, “You don’t want to see it miss. But, the rest of the stuff was there too. I couldn’t miss it once I knew what to look for that is. And, thanks to your notes...” he grinned at the confused look on Jake’s face. “...I did know what to look for. Thank you miss.” Quigley bowed his head in a nod of respect to Marti.

She smiled back at him. “No worries, as Cam would say. It was the least I could do to help you.” She frowned at Jake.

“He was given a list of the stuff used with those other victims and he was given a description of the victim type our guy always picks too. What more could you need?” Jake asked, genuinely puzzled.

“She...” Quigley nodded at Marti. “...gave me a list of things, subtle things, to look for that isn’t just evidence. She sees things a whole lot different than cops do. You only look for the things that can be used in court, hard evidence; she looks for everything that tells about the killer as a person, abstract clues, if you will. He may clean up evidence at a crime scene but he can’t wipe his personality off it. Miss Joyner taught me

that.” He shot a wide-mouthed, white-toothed smile at Marti once again, flashing his two gold teeth in the process.

“Well, looks like I need some more training, I think. Maybe you’ll show me some new things too Marti?” Cam asked with a twinkle in his eyes and a leer on his face.

“I think I’m finally beginning to get a handle on our killer,” Jake stated with a new feeling of excitement rolling around in his stomach and his mind. “He is smart, very smart but he’s also an egomaniac and someone who likes to be the center of attention. He’s in control and willing to take risks to prove it to us.” Jake gave Marti an appraising look of respect. “Nice work, Marti.”

She blushed and shifted her gaze from Jake to Cam when she heard him speak.

“So, why didn’t the FBI profiler figure all this out when he did a profile?” Cam asked, looking Jake in the eye with a challenge that reflected disappointment.

Jake took a deep breath and thought, *His heroes are all dying*, before he answered, “Because the man was in the middle of a nervous breakdown and nobody knew it, that’s why.” He fingered his moustache then finger combed his hair in agitation. “That’s not something the FBI shares with outsiders; sometimes, not with their own either,” he added with disgust. “The profile he did was less than useless, it led the original investigator in the wrong direction. And, that got him removed and me here.”

“Okay, where do we go with this then?” Quigley asked.

“It means we start from square one, is what it means. We go with Marti’s profile, the new information about the killer’s past kills and the new evidence from Russell, if we ever get it.” Jake reached for the phone, hesitated then dropped his hand. “I’ll go see him personally later. I want to know why we’re getting the forensics so late.” He eyed Marti,

Cam and Quigley in turn. “Quigley, you hunt down the files for any homicides that match Marti’s criteria between the San Francisco killing and here; same time frame. Get copies of everything. We need to track this bastard and we need more forensic information.”

“Don’t forget he didn’t start out killing. He practiced to get to this level of sophistication. There’d be records of violent assaults, maybe petty stuff like flashing or indecent exposure, certainly a clear record of his escalating need to fulfill this fantasy,” Marti added.

“How can we tell which assaults are his if they aren’t murders?” Cam asked with real interest.

Marti smiled at him. “Like Quigley said, they’ll have his signature all over them. His fantasy has remained the same; only how he’s playing it out has changed. Look for the same elements as the killing, only not so complex or polished. They’ll be there.”

Jake nodded and turned to Marti. “Would you mind talking to some witnesses for me? You’d know the right questions and know the right behavior patterns to watch for better than Cam, Brian or I would.”

“Sure, I’ll call your old buddy Billy Bob and take the rest of the week off. I haven’t been booking patients anyway.” She smiled with a smirk lingering behind it.

“I’ve been weaning them off, getting ready to quit for the last two weeks.”

Jake smiled back at her then turned to Cam. “You and I are going to the big city my Aussie friend. We are going to track down the source for those sex toys our boy likes to use. The local cops didn’t think it was worth looking into. I do. When Brian calls in, I’ll have him hook up with Quigley to track any cases that look suspicious.” He nodded at

Quigley, who was standing and reaching for the doorknob with a pack of cigarettes clutched in the other hand.

All four of them nodded with satisfaction. Finally, the case was going somewhere.

CHAPTER TEN

*December 27th
1:00 P.M.*

The City Morgue reeked of industrial disinfectant. The caustic fumes it gave off hit the back of Jake's throat like acid. He instinctively stopped breathing through his nose and took short, shallow breaths while he walked briskly toward the autopsy room.

It's showdown time, Russell, he thought while he marched closer to the double doors.

Just as he reached out a hand to push them open, his foot slipped on the wet floor tiles. Jake caught himself with a hand on the sickly green wall and stared down at the puddle of water pooling down the middle of the floor. The sickly green water glazed over the once white stripe he'd come to hate as a symbol of Russell's control over a part of his case.

Yes, but this time, he's not getting away with it, Jake swore as he hit the doors with both hands and entered the autopsy room.

Russell and Amanda, gowned and with surgical masks covering their lower faces, jerked up, startled by his sudden entrance. They were working on the man who'd been dumped in the park. Russell was the first to recover. "What the hell are you doing Daniels? You can't come barging in here like this!"

Jake kept coming, like a steamroller without a driver moving downhill and out of control. He didn't stop until he stood almost toe-to-toe with Russell. "Where are the reports on this guy and the Jane Doe you promised me days ago?" he asked without preamble or any attempt at civility.

Amanda stepped closer to Russell, planted her thick-fingered hands on the top of the stainless steel table, leaned forward over the corpse and snarled through her surgical mask, “Who the hell do you think you are? You don’t order us around and you don’t call the shots either. You prick, you...”

Jake ignored her and stalked toward the office behind them. He thrust open the door and quickly moved to the desk that dominated the space in front of a bank of filing cabinets lining the back wall. He quickly and efficiently scanned the contents on the desk, spotted a file with the case number of the Jane Doe and moved back out the door with it in hand before Russell or Amanda had time to recover from their shock and move to stop him. Jake glanced down at the John Doe’s file lying open beside Russell’s hand and snapped, “I’ll be back for that one if I don’t get it by tomorrow evening.” Jake moved toward the exit, hearing the sound of the scalpel Russell had held hitting the floor.

“Wait a minute! Wait a damned minute here,” Russell protested while he frantically clawed at the surgical top and facemask he wore, tearing them off as he rapidly walked behind Jake’s retreating figure. “You can’t take my files. Give that back!” His voice rose into a high-pitched parody of a child complaining to his mother about unfair treatment.

Jake kept going. At the last second, he stopped in front of the exit, turned to glare at Russell and Amanda over his shoulder, stopping their pursuit instantly, and demanded, “Did Brian come by here last night?”

Before Amanda thought about it, she replied, “No, nobody did. Russell and I were alone here...” She clamped her thin lips firmly shut.

Russell, his face twisted in rage, turned and slapped her in the mouth. Her head snapped back with the impact and, shortly after, she whimpered while rubbing her jaw and staring at Russell with wide, wary eyes.

Jake clinched his teeth, pressed his lips together and took a step toward Russell. Russell stood his ground with fists clenched and a gleam in his eyes that begged for a fight. Jake sneered at him, turned his back in contempt, hit the doors and moved rapidly down the hallway toward his car, clutching the file in his hand and sporting a satisfied smirk on his face.

2:15 P.M.

Sonoma Avenue was peculiarly devoid of traffic and Jake made good time as he drove toward Brian's apartment building. He had the top down on the Cougar and was enjoying the first tolerable day in weeks. The sun wasn't even close to clearing the horizon, and the day boasted a crisp 51 degrees. Jake was determined to enjoy it for as long as it lasted. He felt good for a change, allowing him mental space for some free time to think things over without the pressure of immediate decisions or distractions.

Where the hell has Brian gone? That guy is as regular as apricots through a cat's gut, he thought while maneuvering the car through a tangle of cars all trying to turn into a big shopping mall from both sides of the road at the same time; shoppers trying to cash in on the after holiday bargains. The image of a cat eating fruit reminded him of Glock, his

eccentric pet and companion, and how the animal had alerted him to the mint in the lipstick. “Glock. What a character,” he chuckled.

An answering meow in response almost made Jake lose control of the car. He glanced quickly into the back seat and saw Glock stretched out lazily staring up at him with a confident stare. The cat was blissfully sunbathing on the rich, leather seat and, after a moment of staring at his owner, shut his eyes and began to purr.

Just as Jake was beginning to formulate a plan to stop the car, grab the cat and put him into the trunk for safekeeping, he arrived at Brian’s apartment building. As soon as the car stopped, Glock awoke and dove under the front seat.

“Damn it Glock! You pain in the ass,” Jake swore before shaking his head, giving it up as a waste of time and heading for the staircase leading up to Brian’s second floor apartment.

Brian’s apartment faced into a short open walkway with three others; two on each side, also facing inward. Jake walked down the short hall to the open end at the back, leaned over the rusted, metal banister and searched the back parking lot of Brian’s beat up Chevy truck. It sat in the space reserved for him. Satisfied, Jake walked back to Brian’s apartment door. The only distinguishing thing about it was the high-gloss black paint with a new brass letter ‘B’ nailed to it as opposed to the other flaking red doors. Jake knocked and waited impatiently, hoping Brian was awake, in spite of his answering machine picking up the numerous calls Jake had made from his cell phone on the way over.

When the sound of something moving inside reached Jake’s ears, he pounded on the door again and shouted, “Brian, open up. I can hear you in there. What the...”

The door opened but it was not Brian who stood facing Jake in the doorway.

“...fuck are you doing here Toyboy?” Jake finished lamely with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach when realization hit him.

Toyboy, clad in a filmy green robe that did nothing to hide his near nakedness and a big grin on his heavily made up face, replied, “Oh, goodie. Jake, you came to visit. How nice.” Toyboy moved aside and beckoned Jake inside. “ I was just going to make some coffee. Come in, come in dear man.”

Jake hesitated then stepped in to the apartment, instantly noting the litter of male clothing on the deep black carpet and on the black leather furniture, wineglasses and dishes on the glass coffee table and the faint smell of a sweet perfume in the air. He closed the door behind him and stood uncertainly in the middle of the floor, waiting for Brian to appear and wishing with a part of himself that Brian wouldn't show. Jake felt an embarrassment he wasn't used to feeling. He retreated behind his professional side, unsure how to unleash the personal one. “Please go wake Brian up Toyboy. I have business to discuss with him.” His tone, cold and impersonal, carried the weight of unchallenged authority.

Toyboy, making coffee in the kitchen while observing Jake over the counter that separated it from the living room, abruptly stopped all movement. “Are you angry with me Jake? Oh, no, my friend. You are angry...and disappointed. I'm so sorry,” Toyboy whined with tears threatening to spring from his heavily made up green eyes. “I thought you'd approve. I thought you of all people...” he sniffed before covering his face with two very masculine looking hands.

Oh shit, Jake swore to himself. Here we go. Just what I don't need right now.

He forced his voice into a friendlier tone. “Look Toyboy, what you and Brian do on your own time is none of my business.” He blew out a whoosh of air then took a deep breath. “I need to talk to Brian. It’s important. Okay?”

Toyboy lifted his face to inspect Jake’s expression. Mascara, lipstick, eye shadow and eyebrow pencil were smeared over his eyes and cheeks, especially with the matching pale green contacts he wore to match his outfit, made him appear to be the victim of a brutal battering. Toyboy grabbed a paper towel and wiped daintily at his eyes. “Oh dear, I’ve mussed my face now,” he sniffed while carefully using the towel. He stopped and looked at Jake with a woeful waif look. “Okay Jake. I forgive you,” he ended with another small sniff and a stray, lone tear made its way down his right cheek.

“Good. Now, would you wake Brian up please?”

“I can’t. He’s not here. I got here about an hour ago and the apartment was empty. I was going to surprise him. But I got the surprise so I decided to stay and wait for him. Is he coming home soon?” Toyboy shot a wistful smile at Jake and dabbed at his eyes again.

Jake felt a lightning fast snake of intuition slither into his intestines. His mind raced while his face remained stone. “Thanks Toyboy. Tell him to call if you see him.” Jake turned as if sleep walking and opened the front door with numb fingers. His mind screamed, *There’s something wrong. Brian’s missing and there’s something very wrong.*

The look of confusion on Toyboy’s tear and makeup-smeared face, and his unanswered question, were abruptly cut off when Jake closed the door with the finality of shutting off a tomb. While Jake made his way back to his car, he felt cold, disconnected, hollow and very, very alone.

6:30 P.M.

The room smelled of burnt coffee, stale sweat, cat urine and rotting food. Marti's puffy, red eyes and mottled face were hidden behind an oversized handkerchief in a combined attempt to stem her fear, anxiety and the odors assaulting her nose. Jake stalked back and forth in front of the counter that separated his kitchen from the living area. He systematically ripped small fragments from a sheet of paper, leaving them behind in his path, like 'Hansel and Gretel' in the fairytale. Glock paced behind him, grabbing the pieces as they fell, chewing them then spitting them out.

"That fat, incompetent, son of a bitch. One of my men is missing and he won't lift a finger to help. 'Short on manpower', he says. 'Not my problem', he says. Dammit to hell!" Jake pounded one fist into the other hand and kicked at any stray item lying on the floor. Glock made it a point to follow while watching Jake's angry dance with fascination.

Marti's hands flew from her face and a dark anger replaced the misery that hit her when Jake told her about Brian. "Why the hell don't you call the FBI Jake? Doesn't your boss care about you here? Or did they just exile you then forget you're alive? I thought they supervised and helped their field agents. This sucks!" Her last words were accompanied by action. She launched her body from the couch, threw the big front window open to a chilly evening then walked into the kitchen past Jake and poured the old coffee down the drain. "I can't take the smell in this place any longer," she declared while washing out the coffee maker then making a fresh pot.

Jake stopped in his tracks, dumbfounded by her sudden change from weepy and upset to angry and determined. Marti glared back at his stunned stare. “Get your shit together Jake. Brian needs you and I need you. Instead of raving and ranting, why aren’t you out there doing something yourself?” Her body was rigid with anger while she tossed dirty dishes into a sink of hot, soapy water.

Marti’s defensive attitude and unspoken challenge deflated Jake’s anger, replacing it with a tired sense of helplessness he hated. He dropped what was left of the chief’s inner-office memo onto the countertop and sat down on a barstool. “I have been. All day, in fact. I’ve gone everywhere I can think of, talked to everyone he knew, even checked out some new places Toyboy told me about and there’s no trace of him. I’ve run out of ideas. That’s why I called the chief for help. Only the bastard won’t return my calls, or take them. He had his secretary send this...” He poked at the ragged paper with a finger. “...piece of shit instead.” He took a deep breath. “Cam is still out there looking and so is Quigley.”

When she shot him a questioning look, he added, “Finding Brian if he’s in trouble is more important than copying records of old cases; even the Holiday Killer cases,” he imbued the last words with hard, stubborn defiance. He knew his job was on the line for pulling men off the investigation but he didn’t care anymore. Brian was his friend and that’s all he did care about these days, his friends.

Marti filled a cup for him and shoved it across the counter, knocking old papers, files, pens and miscellaneous junk out of the way in the process. “Here, drink this. You look like shit.” She sighed, put her cup beside his, came around the counter and sank onto

the stool beside him. She picked the cup up and gratefully took a sip of the strong, hot Jamaican blend coffee.

“Look who’s talking, Ms. Salvation Army,” Jake retorted while inspecting the set of well-worn sweats she wore. “Or should I say Camouflage Babe with the nifty colors you’re sporting today instead of makeup?” He shot her a crooked grin in an effort to lighten the mood.

“Gee, thanks, buddy. I’ll remember the compliment and return when you have a shitty night and need some sympathy,” Marti pulled a compact out of her jacket pocket and inspected her face. She groaned. “Gag. You’re right. She took the pad and dabbed on a bit of powder-based face makeup, covering up some of the damage, but not all.” She started to close it then thought better of it and held it out to Jake. “Need some?” she asked with the beginnings of a tiny smile on her face.

He scowled at her with a disgusted snort. “I thought you don’t use makeup,” he inquired.

“Only in emergencies, like now.” She snapped the case shut and shoved it back into her pocket before picking up her coffee cup again.

“Emergencies? For makeup?” Jake was genuinely puzzled.

Marti looked uneasy. “Yeah, like when you have two black eyes and you have to go to work. Emergencies. I just...I got in the habit of carrying it. Hard to break old habits, I guess.” She made an attempt to smile but it failed.

“Kurt?” That one word was enough as far as Jake was concerned. It was a host of vile, dirty words all wrapped into four letters.

Marti nodded but remained mute.

Jake remembered the big, handsome lawyer Marti used to live with. She claimed to be in love with the guy and wanted to marry him. Jake had been happy for her, until Marti started showing up at his house in the middle of the night with bruises and cracked bones. In spite of his advice and his willingness to help her, Marti made him promise to stay out of it, frustrating him to the point of wanting to murder the man. A higher power took care of it for her and for Jake. The man was in a super-stud car racing competition and crashed. He survived but ended up in a wheelchair that instantly made him into a childlike dictator. The only improvement to Marti's life was that he could no longer physically abuse her but he found ways to mentally and emotionally do it every chance he got. What Kurt's violence and abuse couldn't do, his tyrannical and petty whining and dependency did; Marti left him.

Marti pulled Jake back into the here-and-now by asking a simple question. "What do we do now Jake?" When he refocused his eyes upon her, she added, "We can't just let this slide. I know I can't."

Her pale face and overly large eyes struck Jake with the force of a sledgehammer. She looked vulnerable and trusting. She trusted him to have the answers. A knot twisted inside his gut at how scared that made him feel. "I can't either," he murmured.

Before he could go on with that train of conversation, the telephone buried under file folders on the counter rang. Jake shoved the files aside and answered it. "Hello. Daniels here," he said into the phone with his best professional tone.

While Jake listened intently to the voice on the other end of the line, he watched Marti rise from her seat, take off her jacket, toss it onto the chair and return to the kitchen. She started washing a sink full of dirty dishes he'd left standing for days. A

twinge of embarrassment then warmth at how she looked standing there surged through him. Hot on the heels of that feeling, he felt guilt; heavy, uncompromising guilt, along with an image of Pat doing the dishes in the house they used to own, the one he sold for half its value after her death. An unwelcome memory of the night his mother died and himself crying for the first time since childhood slammed into him. Then Pat rocking him, soothing him, and telling him, ‘Just let it out my love. Let it go,’ flitted through his mind. A giant hand reached inside his guts and squeezed the life out of him at the image. He shoved all of it: the warmth, the guilt, Marti and Pat both, out of his mind and a hollow, hard knot of anger swiftly returned to its nesting place to replace them. The voice on the phone stopped and Jake hung up without saying a word in return beyond his initial ‘hello’.

When he hung the receiver into its cradle, Marti looked up from the steamy water with a cocked eyebrow; her facial color and eyes now back to normal. “What was that about? You didn’t say a word.”

“I don’t know whether to be pissed off or relieved,” he stated. “That was Toyboy. He said he got back home just now and found a message on his answering machine. Seems Brian had to leave suddenly. The message said Brian’s mother called in the middle of the night. His father has cancer and she wanted him to come down to the city. Seems the old man is dying in the hospital. Brian left in the middle of the night and asked if he’d call me because he couldn’t get me at the office, here, or on my cell phone. Toyboy said he would have let me know sooner but he’s been gone all day himself.”

Marti’s face brightened then faded quickly afterward. “I’m sorry to hear about his dad but I’m glad we at least know where he’s at now. God, I was so worried. A thousand

scenes of Brian hurt, in trouble or worse kept going through my mind.” She finished the last dish, drained the water and wiped her hands on a wrinkled dishtowel. “What a relief,” she sighed and refilled her coffee cup.

Jake smiled along with her while thinking, *Yeah, except for one thing; my cell phone is always on me, my office and this place both have answering machines and Brian would have made sure I got the message first.*

His smile wavered.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

December 28th

2:15 A.M.

Roxy left the Stumble Inn shortly after closing time and made her way down the street toward her apartment. She glanced up periodically, irritated that so many of the streetlights were burnt out again, making the silent streets even more menacing than normal at two in the morning.

At least those cheap bulbs they use make your hair gloriously colored, she mused as an afterthought.

She was the only person in sight, and every window along the block was dark and silent as she walked onward. The lonely clicking of her high heels sounded reminded her of her childhood, when crickets and katydids often clicked all night long during the hot, humid summers in Louisiana. She sighed with pleasure at the memories.

A half block behind her, staying closely in the shadows of the buildings, a dark shape slid along, pacing her as she made her way along the street.

Her long legs ate the ground at a pace the follower didn't anticipate. The silent shadow that glided along the opposite side of the street suddenly speeded up until it was almost directly across from Roxy. A pale hand quietly reached inside a deep overcoat pocket and pulled out a lethal piece of wire. Fingers that held steady, fingered the wire like a man would finger a hard nipple; with loving anticipation. When she turned left down Baker Street, the shadow moved smoothly across the road and accelerated even more after making the same turn. Slowly, but surely, it caught up with her until it was a mere few steps behind.

Roxy seemed to be deep in thought. She mindlessly played with a strand of long, blonde hair and busily chewed her lower lip. Her soft, babyish eyes were watching the pavement as her feet reached forward, one by one, slowly moving her closer to home. By the time she realized someone was stalking her, it was too late. She never had a chance to scream.

December 28th

4:00 P.M.

“Happy Birthday Jake!” Cameron, Pete, Maggie, his wife and the real owner of The Stumble Inn, and Marti all shouted when he walked in the door. Quigley sat quietly at a table looking uncomfortable and ready to run.

“What the hell is this?” Jake barked, taken aback by the group lined up in front of him, dopey smiles on their faces and an expectant feeling permeating the atmosphere.

Pete belly laughed. “I told you he’d be surprised.” He elbowed Marti in the side with a leer on his face. “That call about a robbery is what did it, you know. Old Jake would never stand still and let this place go down.” He laughed again, the sound booming off the walls like the sound of a walrus with indigestion.

Jake saw the cake and candles, the streamers, the champagne and the presents piled on his small drinking table. He flinched. “Oh no. Who was the shit that thought of this fiasco?” he asked, trying not to grin like a lunatic.

“Roxy, of course. She thought it might cheer you up; at the very least, it would give you a good reason to drink without your friends getting on your case,” Marti replied,

matching his idiotic grin. She lifted a finger and jabbed at his nose. “But that’s only good for tonight, my friend. Tomorrow, I go back to nagging you.”

Jake snapped her a salute then looked around the bar. “Where is she?”

Maggie checked the watch on her heavy wrist. Her face, older and more worn than it should be for a woman in her forties, lost its normally open and friendly shine. She looked worried. “Roxy should be here by now. That girl is never late and she always calls if she even thinks she might be, not to mention she’d be here for this party even if she was on her deathbed.” The older woman glanced at Pete with a heavily penciled in eyebrow raised. “What do you think Pete? Want to call her place and find out what’s keeping her?”

Pete shrugged, slapped Jake on the shoulder and waddled toward the telephone on the bar. Jake shrugged out of his overcoat, threw it over the back of the booth and flopped down on its padded seat between Marti and Cameron.

Cam leaned over and whispered, “Hear from Brian yet mate?”

“No, but I did call his mom’s house and asked how the family is doing. The housekeeper said they’ve been at the hospital pretty much non-stop. She said she’d give them a message when she could but not to expect too much because they don’t even come home to eat or sleep. Juanita sounded disgruntled over that.” Jake nodded at Maggie as she pushed a beer stein full of champagne into his hand, plastered his forehead with a wet kiss then waddled away to see what Pete was up to in the back office. “Well, Brian will call in when he can. I’m just pissed at him for not calling by now.”

Marti shot him a dirty look, stood up and strolled over to the ancient jukebox. Within minutes, the rich voice of Otis Redding singing ‘Sitting on the Dock of the Bay’ filled the room.

“So, we get back to work tomorrow?” Cam asked, clearly uncomfortable sitting next to Quigley, who still remained silent and watchful.

Jake drank a long draught of the dry champagne, grimaced and put it down. “Yeah. You and Quigley track down the cases and I’ll hit the porno shops in the city. I’ll contact Brian when I get there. Marti will stay here and interview the witnesses again. We’ll meet up in a couple of days or call me on my cell if you get anything important.” Jake reached for a sandwich, peered in the middle and discovered roast beef, sighed and took a big bite.

Quigley stood, shrugged into his overcoat and paused to say, “Happy birthday Jake,” before sauntering across the room and out the door without another word.

“Strange bloke, that one,” Cam commented, watching Quigley’s exit.

“Yeah, he is but we need all the help we can get right now. The Bureau hasn’t answered any of my calls, the locals have made it clear they only want the results, and the credit, and not before. We’re on our own here Cam. So, Quigley is a welcome addition right now, like it or not.”

“What’s his story? And what the hell is his first name, anyway?” Cam asked, turning around to look at Jake and taking another swig of the beer he preferred over the free champagne.

Jake laughed. “That’s a story in itself. I knew him back in the city about five years ago. He was a good cop: honest, hardworking, and he cared. He cared too much, in fact.

That's what landed him in prison. He went rogue, started taking out killers who beat the system and walked free. The locals pretty much looked the other way, until he killed an innocent woman. Hell, they had to! The system doesn't work anymore. It's so busy worrying about human rights that there aren't any anymore. Nobody wins when everyone demands they do." Jake's voice reflected his frustration and anger. He heard it and toned it down before continuing. "Anyway, Quigley cared. I have to hand him that. Too many years a cop usually gets you a pitiful pension or a bullet for your troubles. He decided to help the system along a little and he paid for it big time when he shot and killed an innocent woman while trying to take out a wannabe drug king. Now, he's out and trying to atone in his own way. He heard about us, came up here, and offered to help. End of story." Jake caved in and took another gulp of champagne.

"And his name? Why only Quigley?" Cam pressed, genuinely interested in the story now.

Jake sputtered, stifled another laugh, and wiped his mouth before answering. "It took me years to find out his name. The most anyone could find out, from his personnel forms and everything else, and we all had a pool running on it too so it really became a huge game, was that his initials are M.M. That's when the guys started calling him 'M&Ms Quigley, the chocolate covered nut.'" Jake snickered, suppressing another laugh.

"But you found out, didn't you?" Cam grinned.

"Yep, I found out and, when I did, I wouldn't tell anyone else. Talk about some pissed off cops when they heard." Jake laughed more freely than he had in years. It felt good.

"And? Are you going to tell me?" Cam leaned forward, eager to share the secret.

“Nope,” Jake quipped with a smirk on his face. He stood and made his way into the men’s room, followed by the sound of Cameron bellowing in protest. Jake grinned, enjoying himself in spite of the pit he fell into every night when he went home and tried to sleep. In two years, he’d never managed to sleep without nightmares.

By the time Jake returned, the place was deadly quiet. The jukebox was unplugged and Cam, Marti, Pete and Maggie were seated silently around a table. Four pairs of eyes looked up and locked onto Jake when he came into the room; four pairs of haunted eyes and not a smile on one face.

Jake stopped, his mouth just as unsmiling and his forehead furrowed with worry, and waited for the bad news. He’d been a cop and an agent long enough to smell death when it visited. It was now sitting at the table with his friends, uninvited and maliciously permeating them and the room with a dark, evil feel that Jake knew intimately. He waited, dreading what was to come.

“Roxy is dead. She was...murdered,” Pete whispered while his face took on an extra twenty years and his eyes looked like they belonged on someone who’d survived the holocaust. “Her landlady found her when I called to see why she didn’t come to your party. The old lady often checks on her so, when I didn’t get an answer at Roxy’s place, I called Mrs. Rossetti. She...” Pete turned white and choked.

Maggie was blubbering so hard her large body was rippling and quivering with the effort. Marti sat, white-faced, shocked and silent beside her, patting the older woman’s arm in an ineffectual attempt to comfort. Cam watched Jake for any sign that would tell him what to do now, how to react, or what to say.

Jake felt the place fade into insignificance. The other side of himself he let live in his body most of the time stirred, shook its neglected mane then roared as it came to full vibrant life after too many months in hibernation. The beast felt no emotions, ties or loyalties to anyone; kept a hard-edged barrier between Jake and other people; the one that snarled and snapped like a ravening beast wanting to destroy all human predators on the face of the earth. That's the one who stood and faced this group of people who looked to him for strength, hoping he'd make it right, make it go away.

On the inside, the beast now raised its head and howled in rage and blood lust. On the outside, Jake calmly asked, "Who's handling it?" He pushed the tall glass of whiskey in front of him aside. His mind mentally catalogued what needed to be done.

The beast roared again. He was ready.

CHAPTER TWELVE

*December 29th
1:00 P.M.*

Bagpipes. Why the hell did it have to be bagpipes? Worse, they had to play 'Amazing Grace' on top of it. Recorded, canned emotion, guaranteed to elicit tears and anguish from the hardest of hearts. Shit! I have to get out of here. I can't stay and listen to this again. Not again.

Just when Jake gathered himself to rise, the voice of his dead partner, Jerry, interceded and stopped him. *Not this time sport. You can't run any longer. It's time to stop and face things now. If you don't, all your friends will end up dead just like Pat and I.*

Jake's hands tightened on the worn, wooden banister in front of his seat; they clenched until the knuckles turned red then white. But, he stayed. The minister was droning on, giving a standard 'Don't blame God when the ones you love die' speech. The handful of people, sitting like captured POWs in the first two rows of folding chairs inside the tiny chapel, set the scene for Jake. They were part of the unreal movie scene where the person in the coffin jumps out, shoots the bad guy and the audience sighs with relief that the hero isn't really dead. Only, this was real life, where the body is really dead and the people sitting around you at the funeral are just as uncomfortable and ill at ease as you are.

Jake's hands shook and visions of icy beer, warm brandy, a dark room and packs of cigarettes taunted him with the oblivion he sought, battling nausea, depression and a headache for superiority in the war for his attention. When Marti leaned over, concern

mirrored in her eyes, and asked, “Are you okay Jake?” he felt like screaming, throwing up, killing someone, anything to rid himself of the jumble of feelings he couldn’t sort out or fight, much less vanquish, from his mind and heart.

He relaxed his hands on the wood, sat back, folded his arms across his chest and replied in a calm voice, “Yes, I’m fine. I just wish this was over.”

Marti stared at his face for a few minutes before turning away. Tension in the tiny room built to the point of being tangible, as the sermon wound down to a close. Jake knew what came next would be what he dreaded the most, filing by the coffin, closed because they couldn’t reconstruct her face beyond a monstrous Frankenstein imitation of Roxy. Worse, he had to say goodbye, let his friend go, get on with his life and he didn’t know if he could do it again.

A small, hunched-back old woman hit the keys of the pump organ the second the minister’s last word was forced out. She launched into a mournful rendition of ‘Old Rugged Cross’ and Jake knew, he just knew, that his legs wouldn’t obey when he had to stand up with the others. Marti, Cam, Pete and Maggie staggered to their feet, forcing Jake to try. He stood on rubbery legs, while still gripping the banister like a lifeline.

“Oh, God,” he whispered when the others began to file down the aisle. Moving ever closer toward the closed, pure white coffin that contained what was left of a woman who had been one of his closest friends, a woman who had held him when he got sick after drinking too much, a woman who had cried when he cried and a woman who had given her affection and kindness without reservation to a man who hadn’t returned her generosity.

Jake forced his hands to let go of the rail and stepped out into the aisle behind the others. *Roxy, forgive me, my friend. Forgive me for not loving you. Forgive me for not telling you how much you meant to me. Forgive me for not saving you from this.*

Jake stepped out into the aisle and stared at the intricate pattern of the carpet under his feet for a moment. Scrolls and whorls of contrasting red, gold and navy blue wound in and out of a pattern his eyes could not follow. Taking a deep breath, he raised his head, glanced to the right at the clear sign that read 'exit' then, with an effort of will, turned to face to the left instead. Jake's back straightened, his neck stretched until he held his head erect and stiff then he began to walk resolutely toward the bier.

He stared down at the lid of the coffin with its litter of sickeningly sweet lilies and roses scattered over the top. The world telescoped down into a miniscule particle of the whole. All Jake could see at that moment was Roxy lying inside that box, her ravaged face and body a ruinous roadmap of destruction, rage and hatred. He tried to push the images out, force them into the nether regions of his brain where Pat, Jerry and all the other friends and family he'd lost still lived, laughed and loved, but she refused to go.

Her sweet southern drawl slid unbidden into his mind. *It's time to fight back sugar. It's time to reclaim your self-respect. It's time Jake. No more running. No more lies and no more living death for you. Find him, give us all peace and be happy again.*

The fingers Jake rested lightly on the coffin's edge jerked back as if burnt. His body jolted with a shock of revelation and self awareness so clear, so concise, so brutal in what it forced him to see about himself, that Jake could not move, speak or breath in the milliseconds while it happened.

“Jake? They’re waiting to take her to the cemetery now. It’s time. Are you coming?” Marti’s voice, low and deep with emotion, flooded through his mind like a welcome rain, washing over the blast of fire that was cremating him from the inside out.

The agony was suddenly quenched and he turned to stare at her with hollow-eyed misery. “Yes, it is time,” he answered and turned away to face the long aisle back toward the exit. “It’s time to stop this; way beyond time.”

Marti’s body tensed, she leaned forward, trying to gaze directly into his face, but he continued to stare down the aisle, listening to an inner voice and seeing another place. “Jake? What are you talking about? What is it?” Her voice trembled and her hand shook when she reached out to rest it on his forearm. “Jake?”

Oblivious to her, Jake stalked down the aisle and headed for the door, his body ramrod straight and his face set into a mask of rigid discipline. Marti trotted after him and caught up with him while he was opening the driver’s door to his car. Without comment, she opened the passenger side and slid in beside him. He started the engine and pulled away from the curb.

They rode all the way to Jake’s apartment without speaking. Marti clutched the door handle while Jake drove toward his destination without reacting to her presence or the people around them. Icy air blasted into the open window on Jake’s side of the car but he kept his eyes on the road, determined and unmoving. When he pulled up in front of his building, Marti scrambled out and joined him at the front door while he fit the key to the lock. Once inside his apartment, Jake headed for the stack of file folders on the countertop of his kitchen. Unmindful of where they landed, he searched through them

until he found those relating to the Holiday Killer case and tossed them onto the coffee table before turning toward the bedroom.

Marti blocked his path. Feet planted apart, fists on hips and anger flashing from her eyes, she demanded, “Okay Jake, enough of this shit. What the hell is going on here? What are you up to?”

His eyes opened wide, as if noticing her presence for the first time. He pushed past her with a, “I have to get to work,” and headed for his bedroom while slipping out of the black suit coat he hated.

Marti spun, her arms dropped down to her sides and she spat at his retreating back, “Oh, no you don’t you son-of-a-bitch! You are not shutting me out anymore. I can’t...” She hesitated, clenched her eyes shut then opened them. Sucking in a deep breath, she followed him into the bedroom... and stopped abruptly in the doorway.

Jake was hunched over, bare-chested and barefoot, his black slacks emphasizing the sculpture of his waist and belly, unselfconsciously pulling clothes out of the top dresser drawer. The blue tie, black jacket and white shirt he wore to the funeral were bunched up together on the carpet. His black loafers were tossed into a corner and rested against the wall with wild abandon. Jake looked up when the sound of a gasp came from Marti’s direction. “Go home Marti. This is my fight, not yours,” he said and went back to rifling the clothes in a second drawer after slamming the top one closed like he wanted to break it. His wide shoulder muscles were bunched with strain and the thick, matted, black hair covering his chest glistened with sweat. His arms worked like machines as they pulled shirts, socks and underclothing out of the drawer and tossed them into a jumbled heap on the floor.

Marti stepped into the room, clasping her hands to keep herself from reaching out to touch him, and whispered, “Let it out Jake. Just let it go.”

Jake froze with one hand holding a baby blue polo shirt and the other clutching a round ball of black socks. Suddenly, he felt like he couldn’t breathe. Time stood still, all air, and light, and motion halted and died in that split second of suspended time. Then Jake was thrust back, back, back...his mother holding him when his father died, saying, “Let it out son. Let it all out,” then a jolt, the roller coaster car diving underneath him through a dark tunnel of time, and Pat holding him when his mother died, saying, “Let it out my love. Let it go,” and Roxy, saying just a day or two before she died, “Let it out Jake. Let it go.” Now, all four women merged in Marti, in the present, in this room where he spent his time denying those deaths, those fears, those words, and Marti saying, “Let it out. Let it go.”

A wall of fear and pain that years of careful work had built up, brick by brick, began to crumble at their foundation. Jake dropped the shirt, dropped the socks then dropped his body to the floor. And the pain, the fear, the knife-sharp agony, and the tears, broke through...at last.

In a flash, Marti was on her knees beside him, holding his head against the silk blouse she wore, stroking his hair, crooning to him, over and over again, “Oh, Jake. Oh, my love. Let it out. Let it all out.”

Jake buried his wet face between her warm breasts, reached up and crushed her to him, oblivious to the force he used or what she was saying. He needed, and the need was all he was or had at that moment.

"The fucker killed her because of me Marti, because of *me*! She was a birthday present from him. His sick idea of a holiday. Don't you get it? She died because of me," he choked as he stared down at the floor with shame, rage, guilt and fear boiling inside him like acid.

Marti pulled his head up with both hands, searching his face with her eyes wet and an anguished look Jake had never seen before. When he saw, really saw, the pain in her eyes, the need he'd held back for so many years was unleashed into a ravening torrent. His hungry mouth came down on hers, devouring her, reaching deep, searching for that place where he could hide inside her strength for a while. Uncaring and unknowing what he did, Jake's powerful hands tore, pulled and pushed Marti's clothes and his own, until they both lay entwined upon the carpet, each frantically moving to join an age old dance of love and comfort.

Jake groaned, reared back, fumbling with the zipper on his slacks, while his gaze raked the body of the beautiful woman who lay open, trusting and acquiescent below him. Suddenly, the merging of Pat, Roxy and Marti made its presence known once again. Before his horrified eyes, Marti's loveliness became a bloodbath of horror. Her smooth, white stomach laid ripped open with purple organs and streams of blood oozing around them. Her face lay in ribbons of ruin and the woman who was Marti disappeared entirely into the melding of years of damaged and destroyed victims.

Jake stopped, clenched his eyes shut, desperately trying to regain the feeling of freedom from the horror he'd felt just minutes ago. His hands dropped limply to his sides and his body sagged while he slowly sat back onto his heels in defeat and despair. He

opened his eyes and saw Marti, her gaze locked onto his, rise in understanding to sit in front of him. She didn't reach out, she didn't touch him, she just sat there waiting.

"Marti, I..." he stammered, unable to look her in the eye any longer.

She reached out a tentative hand and lightly touched his knee. "I know. No need to say anything else Jake. We've been friends too long for excuses or embarrassment."

Marti stood, reached down, retrieved her clothes and slipped them back on without comment.

When she sat on the bed to pull her black nylons on, Jake sat down beside her and gently put his arm around her shoulders. He pulled her over until she was leaning against him. "Marti, would you stay? Just stay with me and...hold me?" he whispered, unsure and unused to asking for any comfort since Pat's death.

Marti looked up into his face with a sad, small smile and nodded. She threw the ruined nylons into the corner and stretched out on his bed while he positioned his body along hers.

He held her in the crook of his arm while he lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling. "I'm sorry Marti. I..."

She rolled onto her side and reached up to place her forefinger against his lips.

"No excuses and no explanations. Remember?"

Jake felt her tears on his chest and sighed, but remained silent, just gratefully holding her. Within minutes, he was asleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*December 30th
6:30 A.M.*

Gray light filtered through the yellowed Venetian blinds on Jake's bedroom window, slanting across his eyelids like fingers, caressing his mind to awaken. He groaned, rolled away from the early morning light and buried his face into the pillow beside his.

Vanilla and Peaches.

His eyes opened slowly, while his ears, and nose searched the apartment for evidence of Marti's presence. There was none. Slowly, Jake rose to a sitting position, planted both elbows on his knees and ran his hands down each side of his face and back into his tousled hair. With leaden movements, he dropped his hands and swung his legs over the side of the bed, reluctant to move entirely from it but knowing he must.

Let it out. Let it go. Be happy again...FIND HIM!

Jake headed for the shower, dropping the wrinkled suit pants and underwear he'd slept in along the way. By the time he came out, Jake felt surprisingly light, calm and clear-headed. He made a pot of coffee and went back into his bedroom, retrieving the trail of dirty clothes as he went. He found a clean, ironed shirt and slacks in his closet and dressed with a feeling of anticipation toward the day's work.

When Jake returned to the kitchen, Glock wrapped his long body around his owner's legs while Jake fixed a mug of coffee. Jake reached down and petted him, aware, and feeling guilty about, how he'd neglected his old buddy lately. Glock yowled encouragingly when Jake opened a new can of cat food and scooped most of it into

Glock's 'Fat Cat' bowl. When Jake placed it beside the animal's freshly drawn water dish, Glock buried his head into the food instantly, purring like a broken lawnmower engine while he ate.

"Sorry sport. I won't forget to take care of you again. I promise," Jake said before retrieving his coffee and moving to his favorite chair to drink it. He reached out and picked up the thick case files off the coffee table. Jake flipped the newest file open and read the coroner's report on Roxy with a sense of determination and excitement he hadn't felt in years.

"Rest, Roxy. I'll find him. I promise you," he said while scanning the report with an objective eye. "Fuck the FBI; fuck Chief Hartigan; fuck Russell; fuck 'em all. I *will* get this bastard. I promise you."

By the time Jake was reading the reports over for the second time, Glock had finished his meal and was contentedly settling onto Jake's lap. Jake ran one hand over Glock's orange and white coat, for the first time in months appreciating how silky and reassuring the animal's fur felt under his hand. "Seems I'm making a lot of promises lately, doesn't it, old bud?" he asked, while awareness of how many promises and commitments he'd been guilty of avoiding for the last two years hit him.

The cat gazed up at Jake with bright golden eyes and meowed in agreement. Jake smiled down at him and replied, "Damn right, Glock. It's break and remake Jake time. I'm back."

7:00 A.M.

Cameron walked by the Stumble Inn, pointedly avoiding looking directly at it while he passed. Connie walked beside him, aware that the big Aussie was preoccupied but unsure how to draw him out on the case again. After Roxy's funeral, Connie noticed he didn't seem so vibrant or adventurous as before the girl's death. Nor was he so willing to trade secrets for sex and games either. Today, she caught up with him when he left the police station, determined to get some kind of information for all her hard work but he'd taken one look at her and kept on walking.

'Cam, will you please slow down? Why are you mad at me? What the hell did I do to deserve this kind of treatment from you?' she asked with gasping breaths as she struggled to keep up with his long strides.

He stopped on the icy sidewalk and turned to face her. He took a deep breath and said, "Look, luv, you've done nothing. It's just that..." He gazed down at the ice-filled cracks in the concrete then around the street as if he didn't know where to focus his attention; anywhere but at her. "...that girl's death did something to me, to all of us, I suppose. I don't feel like playing at this anymore. You and me, doing what we did to get information like it was all a game; that bothered me, ya know? Do ya understand luv? This is real, not a game and innocent people are dying." He finally looked her square in the eye with a hard, determined look on his face.

Connie stared up into his face, unsure whether or not to push it any further. "I understand but, then, this has never been a game to *me* Cam," she replied with sincerity.

"Right. I'm glad you understand." Cam made an attempt at his old flippant way by using a grin and a small salute to her before adding, "Well, I'm on me way to Jake's

place. Talk to you later, okay?” Relieved, he turned away from her and started down the street, leaving her standing there alone.

“We sure will talk again *luv*,” she murmured, with a gleam in her eyes and her cheeks red with humiliation and anger. “We sure will.”

7:15 A.M.

“Where’s Marti?” Cam asked, glancing around Jake’s small apartment, skimming over Quigley on the couch and finally settling upon Jake sitting in the chair facing Quigley.

Jake waved a hand toward the kitchen while continuing to read the file Quigley had brought. “Grab yourself some coffee Cam. Marti won’t be here today. She’s cleaning out her office in the city. She quit the good doctor,” he mumbled, distracted with what he read.

Cam grabbed a cup and filled it before making himself comfortable on the couch. “So, what’s up? Why did you call for a meeting here instead of your office? Anything on Brian yet? That bloody bloke is really pushing it here,” he grumbled with a smile on his lips.

Jake glanced up at Cam. “I haven’t heard from Brian but he left a message not to expect him anytime soon. He’ll call when he’s ready to come back.”

Quigley, holding an unlit cigarette between his fingers and an empty mug in the other hand, leaned forward and asked, “Why *are* we meeting here instead of your office?

I'd like to hear this too." He glanced at Cam and shot him a wink. Cam frowned then smiled back.

Jake tossed the file onto the mound already on the table. "Because the walls have ears, is why." Jake leaned back into his chair and laced his fingers over his stomach. "It's obvious the chief, the coroner and everybody else involved with this damned case is not going to do a friggin' thing to help us. We're on our own and I intend to keep it that way, which means I don't intend to let them know what's going on either. They can bitch and whine to the Bureau all they want; it won't do them any good. I've informed Dan Ferguson, my supervisor in the city, of the situation here. I've updated him on the case and the new evidence. He agrees with me on this for a change. The chief and his petty bullshit have finally pissed Ferguson off and now he wants to get back some of his own." Jake chuckled. "The son of a bitch couldn't care less about me, but he has conceded that we're on our own and he gave me autonomy to proceed without the locals." His eyes gleamed with satisfaction and a hard determination, reflecting an inner commitment he hadn't felt in years, shining through. It felt good.

A cowboy whoop of approval erupted from Cam and Quigley sat back with a wide grin, showing off both gold teeth in the process. Jake nodded at them with a smile of satisfaction and continued, "Okay, we've made more progress on this thing in the last two days than the others did in the last three months. Quigley, bring Cam up to speed on what you found."

"What I found was most interesting, to say the least," Quigley answered in return. "This scumbag has left a trail of bodies all the way from San Francisco to here and he made no effort to cover them up either. But, every damn one of 'em was written off in the

small towns between here and there as a one off, unsolved, and shelved when they couldn't find a suspect within a month or two. Our boy was too smart to kill twice in the same sandbox."

Cam's humor fled and his voice was serious when he asked, "And Roxy? Was she one of his too?" He glanced at Jake then shifted it to the sleeping cat while waiting for the emotional reaction he felt sure was coming.

Jake's voice was calm and detached when he responded with a simple, "Yes."

Quigley, aware of the sudden tension in the room and seeking to deflect it, rubbed the stubble on his chin and frowned. "What I have to wonder is why he changed his pattern here. Like Ms. Joyner said, he has a reason. We just have to find it, is all."

Cam sat forward, feeling relieved to change the subject. "You're sure it was him?"

Quigley turned his head to look at Cam. "Yep, it was him all right. None of them were alike but each one had enough elements in them that match what he's doing here to convince me. It's him."

Jake pointed at the mountain of files. "They're all here Cam. Quigley got copies of every case, including forensics and witness interviews. With all this, Marti should be able to take her profile even further. So, that means we start in the city. The only things we have to go on are the sex toys he uses, he's probably from the south and the fact that he likes blondes."

"Yeah, we know he prefers women but that won't get us anywhere. But, that dildo and the icepick should be easy to find; the icepick especially. I've never seen one like

that before. So, we hit the adult shops and find them?" Quigley asked Jake with a cocked eyebrow.

"Yes, we start there. Maybe we'll get lucky. In the meantime, we need to get this new stuff to Marti. Maybe she can dig something new out of it. Other than that, we hope these files Quigley got for us contain some witness information that will at least give us an idea of what this guy looks like, what he drives or where he lives," Jake replied.

"Okay, we know he's been busy for a lot longer than these local yokels think. What does that do for us?" Cam asked.

"It gives us another piece of the puzzle, is what," Jake responded. "We know he killed in the city but did he start there? I doubt it. So, where *did* he start? If you think like him, and put yourself in his mind at that time, with his level of experience, what do you think happened before the San Francisco killing? Marti told us that he had to practice to get to this level. The question is where and for how long? When we can answer those questions, we'll have our boy."

Quigley picked up his empty cup and rose to head toward the still hot coffeepot. When he reached it and poured himself a fresh cup, he replied in an offhand manner, "Well, for what it's worth, I think I got that handled."

Jake turned to stare at him. "How?"

Quigley returned to the couch with Jake's gaze following him like a bird of prey following a mouse. When Quigley settled into the cushion again and took a sip of the coffee without answering right away, Cam poked him with a finger in the side. "Come on, Quigley, what did you do?"

The man's brown skin suddenly became darker with a rosy flush. "I got a girlfriend who likes using computers when she's not at Tigger's. I asked her if she could...er...access some stuff for me. She's gonna call me tonight and give me what she finds."

"Tigger's Tiger Den? You mean the strip joint on the other side of town? She works there?" Cam asked with a look of admiration on his face.

"Yeah, that's where she works. Anyway, she's a whiz with a computer. She can't sleep during the day so she gets on that thing and chats with people; all sorts of people. She's helping me with some information I need but can't get any other way," Quigley replied in a deadpan voice, tensed and ready to argue if either Cam or Jake objected.

Jake asked, "What information?" His clipped, business-like tone was neutral and calm.

Quigley relaxed. "Because of my background, the local cops in the city didn't want to let me even see these files, much less copy them." He indicated the files stacked in front of Jake. "How do you think I got them anyway? Favors. I called in some old favors."

Cam chuckled and slapped his knee. Jake waited.

"Tigger knows people in high places too. She can get anything we need faster than your badge can Daniels. She's doing a search in the city and every other town in California, dating back a year from the San Francisco kill, for any of the things Ms. Joyner told us about. Every assault, sex offense or murder that shows any of those traits will come up in that search. Tigg will find them and use her friend's codes to access the

case files for us then she'll print them out. It saves me a ton of legwork and she loves the challenge."

Jake whistled. "She sure must have some clout to know the right people to pull this off," he stated.

Quigley smiled. "She does. She used to be a high-class madam before she retired up here." He turned to Cam to add, "And she don't work at Tigger's; she *is* Tigger. She owns the joint and many more like it, all up and down this state."

"Bloody hell, man. I envy you," Cam said, the words bursting out of his mouth in a rush.

Quigley's face settled into its normal roadmap of deep lines when he faced Jake again. "One thing I did notice though. Every one of those cases I found..." he pointed at the files again. "...were done on a holiday, just like the rest. But the real clincher is the timing he used was unbroken, except for one holiday... New Year's Eve last year. I found cases for every holiday except that one. Somehow, someone got away from him and didn't report it; I feel it in my bones. That one holiday is the key to finding this guy. We have to find out who he assaulted then and why that victim got away. Then we'll have him."

Cam snorted. "That's a pretty big assumption mate. Maybe he killed someone and hid the body so well it wasn't found."

Quigley turned his head to look at Cam with a shake of his head. "No, I'd bet on it. Ms. Joyner told us to watch for a pattern. His has always been to dump the bodies in places where they will be found, and quickly too. He wants them found, that's why he

poses them. No, he missed that time. My gut tells me it's the truth. Someone survived and we gotta a live witness when we find that woman."

Jake's eyes glittered with the eagerness of the hunt, the joy of outwitting an opponent and the gut wrenching satisfaction of the kill. "We have to find that case. We have to find that woman. She's the key to catching this sick fuck and I badly want to catch him," he growled while Cam and Quigley leaned closer with both their faces mirroring Jake's expression.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*December 30th
11:00 A.M.*

Jake made his way down the crowded sidewalk toward a small, dark shop someone had euphemistically named The Brass Ass. He hesitated outside, staring up at a gleaming brass rendition of a man's backside stuck into the air and covered with engraved script heralding the name of the shop. Spray painted just below the shop's sign, in childish red letters, was the phrase 'Come on in if you want prime ass.'

Yeah, right. San Francisco, city of asses, he thought as he pushed open a battered door that was once gilded with gold scrolls but was now a pathetic parody of elegance.

While he made his way down the main aisle, Jake marveled at the jumble of strange items that crammed every available bit of space. Everywhere he looked he saw the words 'Adults Only' in huge, lurid red letters and usually combined with just as lurid pictures of women and men in unimaginable sexual positions. The smell of unwashed bodies, plastic and dust assaulted his nostrils as he moved slowly down the narrow walkway between the shelves.

Strange how these places all smell, look and feel the same: like musty, rotting fish, he thought as he forced himself to search every shelf for the items he'd been trying to track down for two weeks now.

Halfway down the second aisle, two men stood holding hands while inspecting the box of an adult marital aid. Both men were dressed in bright outrageous outfits and sported multi-colored hairdos. When they turned and spotted Jake in his normal-looking

suit, overcoat and sensible shoes, they both twittered with amusement. Jake glared at them, sick of being made to feel abnormal and resenting their reverse bigotry. The tallest man shot Jake the finger then pulled the other man down another aisle. Jake shut his eyes momentarily, took a tired breath and thought, *I hate San Francisco. Now, I remember why I got out of here. Rage disguised as love and peace. That's a laugh!*

He finally found the tiny counter where a bored woman, who could've been used for the cover of a 1940s Penthouse magazine, lounged unconcernedly in a tattered chair. Her emaciated body, in a pathetic attempt to appear young and sexy, was encased in black leather and a wide, studded dog collar draped loosely around her wrinkled neck. A forgotten cigarette dangled from her wrinkled, blood red lips while she thumbed through an S & M magazine like she was searching for cookie recipes. When Jake stepped up to the cluttered countertop, she glanced up at him with red-rimmed, heavily made-up eyes and rasped, "Yeah, what can I do for ya big fella?" She reached up to scratch at a patch of scalp that showed through her thin, orange hair while looking up and down his body with a leer on her ravaged face.

Jake shuddered with revulsion, pulled two photographs from his overcoat and held them out to her. One showed a close-up of the dildo that had been used on the John Doe and the other was a picture of the ice pick, depicting the carved wooden handle of two nude figures intertwined around each other. The woman stared myopically at them, puckered up her lips and frowned in concentration.

The old bat looks like she's ready to kiss the damned things! Jake thought as he watched her face twist into what he hoped might be recognition.

While she continued to stare at the ice pick picture, he asked, "Well? Do you carry anything like these here?" He knew his words came out sounding harsh and impatient but after two weeks of having to track down and investigate these dingy 'specialty' shops, he'd finally had enough.

The woman peered up at him from under her thick, clumped eyelashes, obviously trying to look coy. "Yeah, I seen both of those before. But that one is something we don't get much call for." She pointed at the ice pick with a finger yellowed by tobacco stains.

Jake felt his heart thump against his ribcage. "Where? Do you stock them here?" He tried to sound friendly and noncommittal but his words came out guttural and anxious sounding.

"Sure sweetie. Follow me." She rose, glanced to make sure he was behind her, twitched her skinny butt and led him to a back shelf packed with items that appeared to be foreign imports. Most of them were heavily carved wooden items with an obvious oriental motif. All of them were blatantly sexual in nature.

Jake approached the items with trepidation, embarrassed at the graphic carvings they depicted but hoping his luck was finally turning. When he came close to the shelf, the overwhelming odor of camphor, sandalwood and dust brought tears to his eyes. He sneezed and pulled a crumpled handkerchief out of his shirt pocket to wipe his nose. He jumped when the faint odor of mint assaulted his nostrils. The handkerchief he held was the same one Glock had reacted so strongly toward; the cloth with the killer's lipstick smeared on it. Jake sniffed at it again, delicately, like a gentleman imbibing in snuff. Then he leaned down toward the shelf of oddities and systematically sniffed each item in turn.

On the bottom shelf, half hidden by a stained ceramic statuette of two women entwined like snakes, the unmistakable smell of mint wafted up to his waiting nose. Jake poked the statuette aside and gently pulled a garishly painted box outward. The box, crudely and cheaply painted in primary colors, was narrow and long. A picture of a hand carved icepick was depicted on the top. Jake picked it up, opened it and held it in his hand, smelling the overwhelming aroma of mint as it escaped from the box.

“Well, that sure ain’t no dildo, lover. I wouldn’t want to be your girlfriend tonight if that’s your idea of a love toy,” the old woman cackled next to his arm while she peered at the icepick then his face with amusement.

Jake scowled down at her but the look didn’t seem to faze her in the least. “That dildo you want is right there...” She pointed a crooked finger at a stack of clear plastic boxes sitting on the next set of shelves to his left. “...and they ain’t that good neither. Now, if you really want a good time, the ones next to ‘em are a lot better; more powerful, if you get my drift.” She cackled again and dug a knife-sharp elbow into his side.

Jake could feel the hot flush of blood creep up his neck and color his face while he struggled to retain a professional demeanor. “Uh, yeah, thanks,” was all he could manage without stuttering. He grabbed one of the dildo boxes and quickly moved back toward the counter and the cash register. He dumped the icepick and dildo unceremoniously onto the counter, dug out his wallet and pulled a gold credit card out. He tossed it down as the old woman arrived on the other side. “Charge it to that,” Jake mumbled.

She cackled again shook her head and picked up the card while he shoved his purchases into one of the plain brown paper bags stacked on the countertop. She handed

him the credit slip to sign, propped her elbows on the countertop and stared at him while he signed it. “You ever go out lover? Maybe see a flick or a nudie show? I love them things.” She grinned up at him.

Jake ignored her, finished his signature and handed her part back. She tucked it into the cash register while he gathered up the bag. Before he had a chance to flee, she had grabbed a sale flyer from a stack next to a scented oil display, scribbled her name and number on the back and had it thrust into his face. “Don’t forget this lover. It’s a discount for some great stuff. And, there’s even some special stuff here you can get cheap too, if you catch my meanin’.”

To save himself an argument or a scene, Jake grabbed the paper, stuffed it into his coat pocket and ran for his life.

1:00 P.M.

Seawater, fish and the faint smell of saltwater taffy, combined with the hot acid of anger twisting her stomach into knots, hit Marti with an overpowering urge to vomit or run or both. William’s handsome face, calm and in total control, in spite of the heated argument they’d been having, added to her frustration and a sense of impotency.

“Why the hell are you harassing me William?” she snapped before taking a sip of tepid water while maneuvering to cover up her feeling of helplessness in the face of his abnormal calm. She slammed the glass back down on the small café table and willed her face not to betray her feelings. “I told you before, many times, I’m through with private

practice. I want to work at law enforcement. What part of that don't you understand?"

She made an effort to pour every ounce of sarcasm into the question as she could, perversely determined to shake his control.

He calmly scanned the crowds strolling by their outdoor table, the ships anchored at the dock and the small shops lining Fisherman's Wharf while quietly ignoring her tone of voice and the question. His profile was something straight out of a magazine. His graying hair, still thick and luxurious, was cut and styled to perfection. His clothes were immaculate and chosen to emphasize his still athletic body and coloring. His features, chiseled and firm for a middle-aged man, showed little sign of age or damage.

Marti wondered, not for the first time, *Does he ever look human?*

She also knew him well enough to know his silence was deliberately designed to unsettle her, to remove any sense of control over him she had, while, at the same time, showing her how much he had over her and the situation. Marti hated him at that moment and the feeling shook her harder than his cold, calculating behavior ever could.

Finally, he turned to face her and his blue eyes, normally bright and animated, were now flat and cold, like the face that housed them. "You lower yourself my dear. I've told you the practice is growing and you are a big part of that growth. The influential ladies of society like you and that is important to me and to my future career. I cannot let you do this to yourself and *your* career without at least trying to convince you otherwise, now can I?"

His condescending voice barely carried across the table but it sounded like a bellowing roar of challenge to Marti. She crumpled up the linen napkin she was holding and held it like a weapon while she spoke. "Look, I agreed to have this lunch with you on

one condition. I told you I wouldn't discuss this again, and I won't. End of conversation."

She rose, tossed the ruined napkin on the table and grabbed her shoulder bag. "So, if that's the only reason you wanted to talk to me, this lunch is over." Marti pushed her chair back and moved toward the sidewalk exit.

"You'll be sorry for this Marti. You mark my words," he replied, his words following her as she made her way toward the parking lot and her car.

3:00 P.M.

"The bastard didn't even wait until I ate to hit me with his bullshit again," Marti complained with her mouth full of pizza. "I was so mad I couldn't eat after that and, if you hadn't called me to meet you here for dinner, I probably would have gone to bed hungry *and* pissed off!" she added after swallowing.

"Why did he bother? You've told him over and over again you were leaving and why. Hell, you actually did leave, packed up your office and left. Why is he still trying to get you to stay there? It makes no sense," Jake asked while rubbing a napkin down the front of his white shirt in a vain effort to remove the pizza sauce stains forming there. He was glad the small pizza parlor next to Golden Gate Park was empty. He hated to eat with strangers staring at him, when he could eat at all these days.

"I don't know," Marti sighed as she sat back, satisfied and full for the first time in 24 hours. "All I know is I'm glad to be out of there. I've been packing up stuff for two

days now and, finally, I can leave this damned place with a clear mind. I feel free and that, all by itself, makes it worth it.” She smiled at Jake.

Jake took a long drink of iced tea before carefully asking, “Marti, are you sure you want to move to Santa Rosa? That night...”

Marti sat up straighter. “Look Jake, before you go any further, get this straight right now. I am not moving up there to get closer to you. I’m moving up there because I want out of the city and because I want to work on this case. When it’s finished, I’ll figure out where I want to end up but, for the time being, that’s where I want to be. Okay?”

He stared down at his glass. “Well, I wanted you to know that I...”

“Oh, shit, Jake! Get over it, will you? I’m your friend and friends help each other. Now get past it and let’s get on with the job,” she blurted out with a small flash of irritation in her eyes. “Are you going to be so damned arrogant from here on out? You think the only thing a woman is after is you,” she snorted with derision. She laughed, softening the criticism.

Jake relaxed and looked up. “You’re right. It is arrogant and vain of me, isn’t it?” He laughed. “Okay, partner, then work, it is. Here’s what we have.” He pushed the empty pizza box aside and hefted his briefcase onto the table before pulling out a handful of file folders. “Quigley got these from different towns between here and Santa Rosa. Our boy has been busy this last year and I’m hoping this new stuff will help you work out more on him for us.” Jake placed a file in front of her empty plate.

Marti picked it up and quickly flipped through its contents. “How many?” she asked while closing the file and replacing it on the table.

“One for each major holiday, dating from Halloween 1998 to this latest one, with one exception,” Jake answered. “Christmas Eve of last year is missing.” He waited to see what she’d make of that piece of information.

Marti hesitated before asking, “Geographical mapping?”

“He started here in the city by killing the homosexual on Halloween of 1998. He moved up a notch to Sausalito for Thanksgiving and New Years, and then he jumped to Marin for Valentine’s Day and Easter. After that one, he took some time off before moving up to Novato for July fourth. He then took another long break before hitting Petaluma on Halloween before he decided to move on to Santa Rosa and stay there, doing Thanksgiving there. What does that tell you?”

Marti shrugged. “It means little to me but I can guarantee you, it means something to him. There’s a reason he kills the way he does, as well as where and when.”

Exasperated, Jake grabbed the file and stuffed it back into his briefcase. “I was hoping you could get us back on track. I’ve read enough to know these types of killers leave something of themselves behind, even if you can’t see it. You’re a shrink. I thought you’d be able to see it.”

She took a sip of her tea and replied, “I didn’t say I couldn’t,” with a smirk in her voice.

“Don’t play games Marti. We don’t have time for this and you know it. New Year’s Eve is coming up way too fast to suit me and I don’t have one damned suspect.” Jake sat back and crossed his arms across his chest, waiting for her to deliver.

With a solemn look, Marti set her glass down and leaned forward, counting her points off on her fingers. “First, he did not miss that holiday. Knowing how he thinks, I’d

guess he botched the job and, for some reason, the victim didn't report it. Second, where in the geographical pattern did that gap appear? That's where you start looking. Third, we know he probably started killing before San Francisco but where? If we can find his starting point, that first kill, then we'll be way ahead in figuring out who he is."

"Quigley is handling that. He has a friend with an inside track on the Net. She's searching all of the California Law Enforcement data files for any of our boy's trademarks. She'll be delivering her printouts to him tonight," Jake replied with a note of excitement.

"Okay, that's a big leap forward. Once we have that information, we can triangulate his movements and his starting point. Remember the film 'Silence of the Lambs'? Lector told Clarisse Starling something that is probably the best piece of advice I've ever heard about getting to know a serial killer. He said, 'Start from the beginning.' Do you know what that means?"

Jake frowned. "It means to start looking for him at his first kill. So?"

Marti smiled. "That first kill would have been made within his comfort zone; somewhere he feels safe, somewhere he knows well. Chances are, he also personally knew his victim too. This guy is too organized to choose a random victim and ambush her. He spent some time honing his craft, so to speak. That means he plans, he stalks and he knows his victim in some way or another. That first time will tell us more about him than he wants us to know. Now, he's clever enough and experienced enough to hide his true identity from us. He wasn't that experienced or clever when he first started."

Jake felt his heart leap at her words. "Yes, damn it, he wouldn't know how to cover his tracks yet." Jake leaned forward, grabbed Marti's face with both hands and

kissed her soundly on her startled lips. “You are a genius, an absolute genius. I don’t know what I’d do without you now.”

Marti leaned back and picked up her glass of tea again with a tiny smile on her mouth and her eyes shining. “I intend to make sure you don’t have to find out the answer to that question, Jacob Daniels.”

He was absorbed with his thoughts and didn’t hear her before he stated, “Finally, we have some real information to go on.”

“I have another piece of news for you too. I interviewed the old folks who live across from the alley where Ms. McLeod was found and they…”

“Who? Ms. McLeod, who’s she?” Jake’s head came up and when what she was saying sunk in.

“The victim in the alley on Christmas Day. Her name is Aimee McLeod,” Marti responded with confusion on her face. “You didn’t know?”

“No, I didn’t. Who told you she’d been ID’d?” Thunderous lines of anger were forming on Jake’s face while he waited for her answer.

“William, earlier today at the Wharf. He said… Oh, God! How did he know?” The look of horror that flooded over Marti’s face washed all the color from her skin, eyes and lips.

Jake gently took her wrist in his hand and steadied her. “Tell me exactly what he said Marti, word for word.”

“He said the papers reported that Aimee McLeod had been killed on Christmas Eve and that she was the victim of a serial killer. He wanted to remind me how dangerous

doing this kind of work is. He wanted to scare me so I'd stay with his practice. He said it in such an offhand way..." Her eyes were wide with shock.

"It wasn't reported in the papers. In fact, I just found out about her name about fifteen minutes before I met you here. Cam called me when *he* tracked her down on a tip from a call he got this morning. There hasn't been any time for a newspaper or anybody else to find out about it, much less get it published. I think I need to have a talk with Doctor Billy Bob Nelson," Jake stated while checking his watch. "It's too late to catch him now."

"No, Jake, you can't think he had anything to do with all this, do you?" Marti asked, even more shocked at the notion of a colleague being a suspect.

"You know as well as I do, it's possible for anybody to be a killer. Anybody." Jake stood and retrieved his coat from the back of his chair. He slipped it on and grabbed his briefcase. "I'm going to get a room here tonight and go see the good doctor first thing in the morning. I planned on hitting some more of the adult stores anyway so I might as well get an early start."

Impulsively, Marti blurted out, "Why don't you stay at my place tonight?"

Jake paused and thought about it before he answered, "If you think it won't be too much trouble..."

"Of course, it won't be too much trouble. Besides, I want to go over those files with you tonight, if you don't mind." Marti smiled up at him, with no hint of tension in her body or voice.

Jake relaxed then smiled back at her. “Hell, I don’t mind at all. I usually can’t sleep so I often sit up going over this stuff. It’ll be nice to have someone to talk to about it. “

Marti stood and slipped on her leather jacket, hefted the matching bag onto her shoulder and took one last sip of tea before stepping away from the table. “Good. Let’s go then. We can hit those files at my place and order up something if we get hungry later.” She walked toward the door with Jake right behind her, protesting, “But we just ate!”

6:00 P.M.

They were almost through the case files when Marti swore, “Holy shit!” and sat back into the chair where she sat cross-legged and comfortable in jeans, sweater and heavy socks.

Jake, lying comfortably stretched out on the couch with a file in front of his face, looked up and asked, “What? Did you find something?”

“Diana Brandmeyer. One of the victims was a woman named Diana Brandmeyer. I’ve met her,” Marti replied in a hoarse voice. “She was one of William’s patients. I’ve seen her at the office many times but she stopped coming to see him. I never thought anything of it; it happens all the time. She was the woman killed in Sausalito,” Marti whispered.

Jake swung his legs off the couch and sat up. “Do any of the other names ring any bells?”

“None. But...” she picked up the last three files and opened them, one by one, checking for names. She abruptly stopped at the second file. “This one, Liz Delisi. I’ve heard her name before too.” Marti opened the last file with a shaking hand. “No, I don’t know this one.” She raised her eyes to stare into Jake’s. “Two of them were patients of William’s.”

Jake put the file he held down on the table. “That’s two too many. Do you know if he’d be home tonight? Did he say anything to you about where he’d be?”

“No, he didn’t but Lana usually drags him all over the city for parties and charities so they’re rarely home,” Marti replied.

Jake reached over and pulled a cell phone out of his coat pocket. He punched in a series of numbers and waited for the connection to go through. “Janice? How are ya babe? Okay, okay. Would you page Ferguson for me? I have something I need to talk to him about tonight.”

He paused, listening to Janice, Ferguson’s secretary, tell him that Jake’s boss was out of town for the weekend and could not be reached. She asked if he wanted to talk to anybody else.

“Who’s covering the bases then?” Jake asked.

Janice told him a name and Jake flinched. “That’s okay, Jan, I’ll call him on Monday then. Thanks.” Jake hung up and frowned.

“What’s Nelson’s home number?” Jake asked.

Marti gave it to him and watched while he dialed it. After several rings, Jake hit the ‘end’ button and put the phone in his pocket.

“Well? What are you going to do Jake?” Marti asked anxiously while clenching her hands in her lap.

Jake slipped on his loafers then stood while putting his coat on. “I’m going over to Nelson’s office. Maybe he’s there and if he isn’t, I’m going in there anyway.”

Marti uncrossed her legs and stood. “I’m going with you.” When Jake frowned at her, she added, “I still have my key and I know where the files are kept. Besides, if anybody comes in, I have a right to be there, you don’t.” Her tone was resolute and stubborn.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

December 30th
7:30 P.M.

Marti flipped on the light switch and two oversized white lamps on each side of the leather sofa came on, drenching her office in soft, pink light. Jake flinched and almost barked at her to turn them off. When she grinned up at him, reminding him she had a legal right to be here, he relaxed a bit, but not much. Marti pushed aside two large cardboard boxes of books and sat down behind her desk. She opened the top drawer and felt around inside until she pulled her hand out, holding a crystal teardrop key ring with two brass keys dangling from its brass hoop.

“The file cabinets,” she answered Jake’s questioning look and rose with the crystal capturing light from the lamps and throwing it back to sparkle around the room’s walls.

A bang from the hallway outside her office sent Jake to stand beside the closed door, tense and alert. Marti laughed. “Jake, it’s okay, I have a legal right to be here. We don’t have to hide for pity’s sake. Besides, it’s just the elevators. They do that all the time.”

Jake shot her a disgusted look and whispered, “Jeez, Marti, if you’re going to do this kind of work then you have to start getting a little more paranoid or you won’t last long.” He opened the door a crack and peeked out. Slowly, he opened the door wider until his head was free and he could scan both right and left down the hallway. His shoulders and arms relaxed when he couldn’t sense or see anyone nearby.

Marti stood behind him and stepped back when he pulled his head back inside her office. She poked him in the back and asked, “What the hell did you mean by that crack? Why should I be paranoid when I’m here on a legitimate errand?”

Jake quietly closed the door and turned to face her. “Because, you dope, if Nelson is the killer and he for one minute thinks we suspect him, do you think he’s going to politely hand us a cup of coffee and want to chat before letting us go? And, if he’s not the killer, then the real one might be watching and following you anyway, just waiting for his chance. Remember the writing on my door? I’m not fool enough to think my being with you would stop this bastard and you shouldn’t be either. Doesn’t it strike you as strange that the elevator is moving when the office building is closed and locked for the night?” He snorted before shaking his head and opening the door again. “Come on, let’s go take a look at those files. I want to get out of here as quick as I can.”

“You are paranoid.,” she replied sarcastically. Marti slipped past him and walked confidently to the file room with the crystal key ring ready in her hand. She opened the door of the tiny room and flipped on the overhead light, revealing a full wall of filing cabinets and shelves, a large work desk with a comfortable chair sitting behind it and a smattering of artificial plants and cheap pictures.

Jake followed her while inspecting the windowless cubicle with the practiced eye of an agent. *Someone works in here on a regular basis. Nelson must have a file clerk. Make sure to find out the name and address, just in case. Probably someone who works for peanuts. Look at those horrible pictures on the wall. K-mart taste. One door leading to the boss’s office and a huge copy machine tucked into the far corner.*

When Marti unlocked the first file drawer and drew it out, the noise brought Jake back to the task at hand. He stepped up behind her and scanned the names on the file tabs while she flipped through them until she found Diana Brandmeyer's file and pulled it out. She handed it over to him before continuing her search for Liz Delisi's file.

Jake sat down at the desk and opened the file. He scanned the handwritten reports and frowned. "I can't understand a word of this stuff," he whispered.

Marti placed the second file in front of him before reaching out and turning Diana's around to read it. "That's because you aren't a shrink, my dear Holmes," she replied while reading the top sheet. "It says here she was diagnosed with moderate depression. William gave her a prescription for Valium and continued to see her until September, when she stopped coming."

"What about the other one?" Jake asked, opening Delisi's file.

Marti read the top sheet and said, "Same thing. Something mild with follow-up visits then she stopped coming." She raised her eyes from the paper and asked, "Is it possible this just might be a coincidence, Jake?"

"In my work, they don't happen. I don't believe in coincidence anyway. I think the good doctor is mixed up in this up to his neck. At least we know he personally knew two of the victims. Do you have that list of names we made from Quigley's files? We need to check those out against the patient files; that will give us an idea of how deep into it he is."

Marti pulled a folded piece of paper out of the pocket of her jeans and unfolded it. "Okay, I'll do that. What are you going to do?" she smirked at him.

He stood and stretched. "I'm going to check out this floor. If that elevator stopped on this floor, then somebody had to push the button. I want to know who is here with us at this time of the night." Jake moved to the door, stopped with his hand on the knob and added, "Lock this door and don't open it to anybody but me."

Before Marti could respond, Jake cautiously stepped out into the hall and shut the door behind him. When he heard the click of the lock, he glanced to the right, where Marti's office and two more between it and where he stood, beckoned with closed doors. To the left, Nelson's executive office took up the rest of the building space to the end of the hallway. Across the hall was a bank of three private elevators, open and empty. To the right of them, was a utility closet, the standard his and hers restrooms and the door leading to a stairwell. He moved toward Marti's old office, determined to check each one in turn, starting with hers.

Jake's loafers sunk into thick, plush gray carpet, deadening his footfalls when he approached the first closed door, Marti's office at the end of the hall. *This is like playing 'Let's Make a Deal.'* Pick a door, any door, and win a surprise gift, he thought then almost laughed at the absurd thought and image it brought under the circumstances. He pulled the .38 he always carried out of the holster tucked under his left armpit and held it ready.

He turned the knob, pushed open the door and quickly stepped to the side when it swung wide, revealing the room, still lit and empty. Jake took a deep breath and stepped inside. The room was as they'd left it with no places to hide an intruder. Jake turned, flipped off the master light switch, stepped back out into the hall and closed the door.

The second office was locked but the third, next to the file room, was open. Jake used the same procedure to enter the unfamiliar and dark room, but, once inside, he crouched, alert and aware that he had no idea of the room's layout. He cautiously moved along the wall, lightly feeling for a light switch as he went and hoping that if the visitor was here, he was just as unsure of himself as Jake felt. Without warning, his hand hit a table, almost knocking over a lamp sitting upon it. Jake grabbed blindly for it, steadied it then felt along its smooth ceramic top for a switch. He found it and turned it on. The room was abruptly flooded with bright light, momentarily blinding him. He hit the floor, instinctively turning his body into the smallest possible target and gripping his .38, ready to shoot if necessary. The office, smaller than Marti's with less furniture and no drapes, had the feel of abandonment Jake knew clung to places long uninhabited. He forced his breathing and heart rate to slow back to a normal rhythm after scanning the room and finding no reason for alarm.

Shit, maybe I am just paranoid here, Jake thought while he rose and holstered his gun, self-conscious of how dramatic his behavior appeared. *Marti's right, this is ridiculous. I've become a sad excuse for an aged James Bond,* he mused as he opened the door, finally found the wall switch and turned off the lamp then stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Jake headed toward the file room, shaking his head at himself and feeling like a fool. When he reached the bank of elevators, the whoosh of a closing door and the sound of metal striking metal behind him sent Jake into an instant panic.

The utility room. Shit, the bastard hid on me. Dammit, Jake, where the fuck is your training now? The thoughts ran through his mind at lightning speed, along with the

certainty that he was a dead man. Jake spun, pulled his gun and dropped in one motion, hoping he had enough of a surprise element in his actions to survive the bullet he could feel speeding toward his body.

When the impact came, Jake felt a screaming pain on the side of his head before the comfort of unconsciousness overtook him. In the last split second he had of thinking awareness, his one thought was, *Marti*, before he blacked out.

9:30 P.M.

Blood. Everywhere. The walls dripped, the carpet soaked, her body mangled into something that no longer resembled a woman. Escape. Run. Leave her, save yourself. Oh, God, no, I can't but I have to. I have to get help. Bleeding to death. Blackness. Can't think straight. Can't fight back. Rage. Humiliation. Despair.

Marti. Her voice. Where are you? I have to save you. Jake groaned when Marti's hand pushed against his side and he realized he was really hearing her.

"Jake! Wake up Jake. We have to get out of here," she shouted into his ear with panic in her voice.

Jake groaned again and rolled over onto his side. He forced his eyes to open and struggled to bring Marti's face into focus. She hovered above him with a mist of smoky air swirling around her head and lending a big-eyed waif look to the illusion of her face floating free from a body. "What happened?" he whispered in a hoarse voice before coughing on the thick air.

“Someone hit you and set the hallway on fire against the file room door. By the time I broke the door leading into William’s office, everything was ablaze and it was all I could do to get to you and drag you in here,” she replied, alternating between searching his face and glancing nervously behind her.

Jake slowly sat up, clenching his head with one hand and bracing his body with the other. The feel of cold tiles under his fingers, sent a jolt of surprise through his mind. He looked around and asked, “Where the hell are we?”

Marti grabbed his arm and began to pull him into a standing position. “We’re inside the stairwell. The hall in front of the elevators is an inferno. We have got to get out of here Jake. This place is on fire. Let’s go!”

She tugged at his arm, forcing him to stand. He staggered, caught the rail of the staircase and steadied himself. “I’m okay. Get moving.” He’d caught her urgency and the smell of smoke thickening around them was becoming unbreathable.

Marti propped her shoulder under his arm and helped him move down the stairs as fast as they could move. When they made it to the lobby, she looked up at his face and said, “Thank God we were only three floors up,” before she pushed the glass doors open and a rush of cold night air hit them.

The sound of emergency vehicles approaching gave Jake a welcome sense of security. He stepped up to his car at the curb and sat down on the hood, leaning against the windshield for support. He gingerly felt his scalp with shaking fingers. “How bad is it?” he asked Marti, who was watching for the fire truck to arrive.

She stepped over, put a finger under his chin and lifted his head while leaning close to inspect the area just above his right ear. “Somebody bashed you pretty good, I’d

say. It's bleeding but not too much. You might have a concussion though," she commented while pulling his handkerchief out of his coat pocket then dabbing at the blood.

"Concussion? You mean he hit me? I thought I'd been shot," he grumbled, almost with disappointment, before he flinched at her touch and added, "Ow, take it easy there."

She ignored his protest and continued to mop up what she could. "Stop being such a baby. Men and cops, some tough guys," she muttered. "Somebody tried to kill us Jake." She stopped dabbing at his head and dropped her hands, reacting to the aftershock of that realization.

Jake took her hand and squeezed it. "Yep, they did. Cheer up. That means we're hitting a nerve; we're close and whoever it is doesn't want us to get any closer." Jake watched a yellow fire truck pull up behind his car. "Worse, the bastard tried to keep us from finding those files." He grinned up at her. "But, we got the information before he could stop us. Now, we know old Billy boy is mixed up in this. And, I'd make a big bet to any bookie in town that he's the one who conked me and set fire to his own building too. The son of a bitch," Jake added for good measure.

Marti pressed the blood soaked cloth to the side of his head and held it there. "I think you're right. What are you going to do about it?"

Jake reached up and took the handkerchief from her hand and tossed it into the back floorboard of his car. "Catch him, what else? But, first, we need to be able to prove all this. That means we have to hook up these murders with his whereabouts and find whatever evidence we can to sink his ass."

Marti sighed and sat next to him on the car hood. She stared at the jumble of firemen and equipment heading toward the building. The fire was spreading to the top floors now and the blaze that lit up the San Francisco night sky had a sick, festive air about it. “Holiday. It looks like a mega-display of light, doesn’t it?” she murmured while the flames brightened and the glass windows to the offices began to explode.

By the time the firemen were scrambling for hoses and hooking them up to hydrants, the entire third floor of the building was hopelessly lost. A big man in fire gear told Jake and Marti to move their car if they wanted to save it. Jake crawled into the passenger seat while Marti sat in the driver’s, started the engine and pulled away from the curb.

“So much for public servants protecting injured citizens,” he muttered, fingering the sore spot above his ear and flinching.

“I’ll get you to a hospital and get you X-rayed but I doubt that thick skull was damaged at all,” Marti replied, grinning idiotically out the windshield as she drove at breakneck speed.

‘No, no hospital. I’m fine. Let’s go back to your place. I need a drink, a shower and a soft place to slip into my well-deserved coma, in that order,’ Jake muttered.

“Jake, you know...”

“Can it Marti. Your place or I go back to mine. No argument and no discussion.”

Ignoring his warning, Marti snapped, “Okay but we have some serious discussion coming in the morning.” Then she clamped her mouth shut and drove.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

December 31st
9:00 A.M.

Jake stood inside a phone booth with the receiver to his ear, waiting for Nelson's maid to return. He'd slipped out of Marti's early, grabbed a Styrofoam cup full of brown stomach acid and a half dozen stale donuts from the corner store and returned to Nelson's building, hoping the man might show up, if for no other reason than to inspect the damage. When 9 o'clock rolled around and Nelson didn't show, Jake trotted across the street and placed a call to the doctor's home. The maid answered and Jake asked to speak to Nelson. She told him the doctor was still asleep. Jake insisted she go wake him up, using the excuse of the fire to get the man on the line.

The maid's heavy Spanish accent wafted across the line, informing Jake that the doctor was not at home. She said he hadn't returned last night and neither had Mrs. Nelson. Jake hung up, frustrated and angry. "Damn it, Nelson, where are you hiding?" he growled, certain the man was the one who had set fire to his building last night before running for it.

Jake grabbed the phone off the hook and dialed a new number. "Come on Brian. I need you now. Pick up the damned phone," he berated the phone while listening to that monotonous ringing sound drone on and on and knowing he probably wouldn't get an answer again. Jake slammed the phone onto the hook and left the booth, heading back to his car.

10:45 A.M.

“Her name is Stephanie Benton. She did report the assault but, before anything could be done about it, she disappeared and the DA’s office dropped the case. Tigger had a hell of a time finding this one,” Quigley reported, with a smirk on his face and a gleam of eager pride shining underneath it.

“So, she’s our mysterious New Year’s Eve victim. Did your girlfriend happen to get the woman’s address or place of employment?” Jake asked while scanning the piece of paper Quigley had presented him with the moment he stepped from his car in front of his apartment.

Quigley pointed at the paper. “Yep, it’s all there. The lady was a television personality. From what Tigg could dig up, she had family down south and left right after she got out of the hospital to go home. I don’t blame her. Take a look at the pictures the city cops took of her right after the attack.”

Jake pulled an envelope of Polaroid prints out of the file, spilled the pictures onto the coffee table then picked one off the top. The picture showed a slim blonde woman with a mangled face and so many bruises and slashes on her body that she was unrecognizable. He studied it, put it back down and picked up another photo that caught his attention. This one was an obvious glamour shot of the woman before the attack. She had long, platinum blonde hair and a face most models or actresses paid millions to get artificially. “Damn,” Jake whistled, comparing the two pictures and feeling revulsion at the difference.

“Yeah, I know. I had the same reaction,” Quigley replied.

“Are you going to track her down or is Cam? I still haven’t heard from Brian,” Jake asked while continuing to stare at the pictures while his stomach tied into knots.

“I will. Cam is looking into where that doctor might have gone. Once he got your call, he left the Red Rib like a shot. Left me with the bill too,” Quigley grumbled.

“The guy’s eager,” Jake responded. “Did he say where he was going?”

“Nope, just that he knew just who to ask to find out stuff like that. Then he was out the door and gone. Without paying his damned lunch bill, I might add.”

Jake snorted and shook his head. “I get the message already.” Jake dug a twenty out of his wallet and tossed it across to Quigley’s waiting hands.

“Right,” Quigley said as he stood and put on his overcoat. “I’m off to track down this Miss Benton then. I’ll call when I find her.” Quigley opened the door and stepped out into the hall. He stopped and added, “And, I will find her,” before closing the door.

Glock appeared out from under the couch and rubbed up against Jake’s legs, meowing with every sweep of his tail. Jake glanced down at the cat. “Right you are, sport. Where to go from here?”

Jake rose and headed to his bedroom, intent on taking a shower and changing into fresh clothes. When he stood naked in the bathroom with one hand testing the water until it got hot enough, the phone rang. He took a deep breath, shut the water off and padded into the living room. Glock eyed him suspiciously while Jake picked up the phone and said, “Daniels here, what do you want?” in a voice that dripped with irritation.

“That’s a fine way to answer the phone,” Marti complained at the other end.

“Sorry Marti but I was just about to step into the shower and...”

“...and you’re standing there naked in a cold apartment. And, the cold is doing things to parts of you that irritate you to be made aware of, right?” Her bantering tone brought a smile to his lips, in spite of a heightening of his irritation at knowing she was right.

“Well, you haven’t seen me at my best yet,” he returned the banter.

“Oh, yes, I have,” she responded with a husky voice suddenly rich with sexual desire.

Jake blushed. “What’s up kiddo?” he asked, deflecting the desire he was beginning to feel in response to her voice.

Marti’s giggle on the other end sent his stirring body further up the scale of need before her words plummeted it back down to zero. “I got up this morning fully intending to tell you what I started to say at the pizza place; about the interviews. Well, when I found the place empty, I got distracted with other things and I just now remembered again. I thought you should know so I called.”

“I completely forgot. What did you find out?” he asked, all irritation gone with acute interest taking its place.

“That old couple, Mr. and Mrs. Kolowski, remember them? They live in the second story apartment across the street from the alley where the latest Jane Doe was found. Anyway, when I sat down with Mrs. K, and really questioned her, she remembered something I think is significant. She told me that the hooker who was sitting on the doorstep down the street was exceptionally tall,” Marti said, in a rush of words.

Before Jake could comment, she continued, “Well, I know that, from their apartment, the perspective is squirrely, at the very least. So, I walked down to that

doorstep and sat down. Mrs. K watched me. When I went back, she told me that the woman she saw looked much taller than I did while sitting in the same place. Remember I told you the person who wrote on your door was very tall? I think that hooker may have been our killer in disguise. What do you think?" Marti ended in a breathless voice.

Jake took a moment to absorb what Marti was saying before he commented. "I think you may have something there. It never occurred to me that he might use a disguise, or that it might actually be a woman," he added, surprised at the thought but not discounting it out of hand.

"Do you have something to write on that's handy?" Marti asked.

Jake glanced at the mess of papers and debris scattered over the counter but couldn't find a pen or pencil. He reached into the pocket of the suit coat he'd hung on the back of a barstool and felt around for the pen he usually kept there. He pulled it out, along with the flyer from the Brass Ass. When he had it flattened on a cleared spot of the counter and the pen ready, he said, "Okay, what do you want me to write?"

"Two things: first, get an artist to Mrs. K and have her do an artist's sketch of that hooker. Second, we need a timeline. In the file you have for this killing, you do have time stamps or entries on events, don't you?"

"We do for as much as we know but there are always guesses and gaps. Why do you need these things?" Jake asked, genuinely intrigued with Marti's line of thinking while scribbling the items down and wondering where it was going.

"I'll tell you when I get there tonight. I'm driving down to take a look at a house I'm thinking of renting. I have an appointment for four so I'll come by your place earlier than that, if it's okay with you."

“Sure. Come around 1 o’clock and I’ll take you to the Rib for lunch,” Jake replied with a knot of anticipation forming in his lower abdomen.

“Okay Jake. See you then,” Marti responded before hanging up.

Jake hung up the phone and picked up the sheet of paper. He scowled at the old lady’s name and phone number from the Brass Ass before re-reading the two items Marti had dictated. He picked the phone up again and put in a call the Bureau’s switchboard in the city. When a female voice answered, he requested and got, the name and number of a sketch artist. Jake wrote the information below Marti’s list before he hit the disconnect button and dialed the number. The phone rang twice before an answering machine kicked in with its tinny-voiced recording. While he listened to the inane recording and waiting to leave his message at the beep, Jake played with the flyer, bored and distracted. When he flipped it over and casually scanned the list of sale items, his hand froze on the phone. At the bottom of the flyer, with a big red graphic of a kiss beside it, was the name, manufacturer and price of a special lipstick; one that contained mint.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

December 31st
6:15 P.M.

“I thought you said Marti would be here to celebrate New Year’s Eve with you,” Sue said while refilling Jake’s coffee cup.

“So did I,” he explained before picking up the cup and taking a cautious sip. “She called and said she was running late and couldn’t stop. She was looking at a rental house and probably got caught up in the color scheme or the wallpaper. You know how women are,” he joked. “So, I’ll be spending the evening going over case files, by myself, and eating a sandwich for my dinner. Which reminds me, why were you closed last night? I came by around six but your place was locked up. That’s not like you, Sue,” Jake teased.

An uncharacteristic blush stole up her neck and flooded into her cheeks. “We...I mean the chief and I, we had an appointment,” she replied with a nervous tic moving at the corner of her mouth.

Jake leaned both elbows on the table, cocked his head and plastered a conspiratorial smile on his face. “And?”

She stammered, “Ah, hell, Jake, I can’t tell you. It’s too personal. Besides Russell and Amanda would kill me if I told you.”

“Russell? You and the chief with Russell and his girlfriend? Now, there’s a story and a half, I’ll bet,” he teased.

A look of fear flitted across her features. “Russell and Amanda...” Sue began before the bell on the front door stopped her.

Russell, bundled up to his nose like an evil henchman and Amanda, dressed in functional clothing that would make a Nazi proud, strode into the Red Rib and stopped dead in their tracks when they heard their names spoken. Russell eyed Jake with distaste, took Amanda's arm and ushered her to a booth far in the back of the café.

Jake laughed. "Well, you'll have to tell me the dirt later Sue." He checked his watch. "I still have several hours of work to do tonight. He stood, reclaimed his coat and moved to the door. "Night all," he shouted before going out the door.

9:00 P.M.

Tigger's Tiger Den, on the south side of town, boasted the biggest beers and big-busted women in town, both at a cheap price. Jake sauntered inside the dark, smoke-filled bar with an attitude of watchful pleasure. It had been many years since he'd been in a place where nobody knew you, cared to know you or cared about anything besides booze and broads.

Jake made his way through a clutter of tiny tables, each packed with four men and the occasional woman, past the stage where a leggy brunette was jerking and writhing around a steel pole in a g-string so tiny it was nonexistent. He made his way toward the bar, where Cameron perched on a barstool, totally transfixed by the dancer, and Quigley was in a heated discussion with a giant of a man who was trying to tend bar and talk at the same time. When Jake sidled up between them, Quigley ignored him and kept up his arguments with the bartender, whose arms and neck were covered with tattoos under a

tight white T-shirt and had a crooked nose that resembled a twisted mound of sausage.

Cameron reluctantly tore his gaze away from the woman and acknowledged Jake with a smile and a nod.

Jake poked Quigley in the side. “Why the hell did you want me to meet you here? We could’ve gone to the Stumble if you wanted a drink. It would have been a damn sight quieter and a lot cheaper too,” Jake shouted into Quigley’s ear, trying to overcome the deafening music.

Quigley turned away from the bear of a man behind the counter, glared at Jake and replied, “You see that sonofabitch there? He refuses to believe I’m who I say I am,” Quigley shouted, exasperated and completely ignoring Jake’s question.

“What’s his name?” Jake shouted back.

“Cletus. His sister owns this place so he thinks he’s God here,” Quigley snorted. “She gave him something for me but he won’t take my word that I’m the one she left the stuff for. Either that or he just hates cops, even ex-cops.”

Jake leaned across the bar and waved at Cletus, who was studiously staring toward the stage. “Hey, Cletus! Come here. I’m gonna get laryngitis yelling like this.”

The big man turned his head to glare at Jake. Colored lights danced over his brilliant red hair and beard and, when the light shifted, his eyes flashed red as they fixed on Jake. Jake froze at the image. “Holy shit,” he whispered.

Cam leaned around Jake to stare at Cletus then Jake. “What? Holy shit what?” he asked glancing between the two.

“The red hair, the red eyes,” Jake murmured.

“What?” Cameron yelled.

Jake grabbed him by the arm and pulled him close. “The red hair and eyes. Look at him. It’s the neon light that does it. Those damned cheap lights along the street.” Jake slapped the bar. “Damn! I’m slow these days.”

Cameron pulled away and took another look; a good long look. “Holy shit!” he exclaimed with his eyes wide and staring hard at Cletus.

Cletus ambled over with a scowl on his wide face. He leaned both hands on the bar and thrust his face into Cameron’s. “What the fuck you lookin’ at dickhead?” he asked, while spraying saliva into the terrified Aussie’s face.

Cam’s face blanched at the violence in the big man’s eyes. “Uh, Jake, I gotta go talk to a friend of mine.” He nodded at the leggy, dark-haired stripper who had finished her routine and now stood by the stage, glaring at him with an impatient gleam in her eyes.

Jake nodded at Cam, watched him beat a hasty retreat to the brunette’s side before turning back to Cletus and pulling out his FBI identification. Jake grinned and pushed it into the man’s nose. “Cletus, I presume?” he asked with a deep, authoritative voice.

Cletus backed up and his expression rapidly changed from belligerent to chagrined. “Yeah, that’s me.” Then he rapidly shifted to defensive. “What about it?”

“You see this man here?” Jake twitched his head toward Quigley, who sat quietly watching Cletus with a smirk on his lips. “He’s an agent of mine. He came here to get something your sister left for him. Now, the question is, are you going to give it to him or are you going to make me use this thing to get it?” Jake pulled the flap of his coat open, showing the .38 tucked under his armpit.

Cletus blanched, turned faster than Jake thought he could with his massive weight and size, squatted in front of the cash register and pulled a large manila envelope from a shelf. He rose and offered it to Quigley without a word.

Quigley shot the man his full-blown rendition of a shit-eating grin and said, “Well, thank you Cletus. I appreciate it.”

Cletus’ face, suffused with angry blood, stiffened as he said, “Tigg said to tell y’all to call her after midnight if you want anything else.” Then he turned and beat a hasty retreat to the end of the bar, where he made a show of washing a mound of dirty glasses in even dirtier gray water.

Jake leaned close to Quigley, tapped the envelope with a finger and asked, “Is this why you had us meet you here?”

Quigley downed his drink before answering, “Yeah, Tigg said the information she dug up would answer a lot of questions for us. Problem is, she also said she couldn’t supply all of it until later.”

Cam ambled over, a big grin on his face and an arm draped loosely around the shoulders of the stripper. She hugged a short silk kimono around her body in an attempt to cover full breasts bare except for pasties glued to the nipples and the tiny G-string she’d danced in. He long legs had no trouble keeping up with Cam while they walked to the bar. Cam stopped in front of Jake and Quigley and stood well back from the bar and Cletus’ back while he introduced the woman. “This is Moni Draper. I think you need to talk with her Jake. What she has to say is even more interesting than what she has to show up on that stage.” He winked and the woman elbowed him in the ribs.

She shrugged off Cam's arm and stepped up to Jake, let the kimono slide open, and plastering her barely clad breasts against his arms while she whispered in his ear. "You may not remember me Agent Daniels but I was the cop in the meeting you had with the chief and Russell the other morning. Wait! Don't react; we're being watched. Act as if I'm propositioning you." She made a show of rubbing up against him even more while pasting a seductive, full-lipped smile on her face.

Jake grinned at her while reaching around her waist to encircle it with his arms. He nuzzled her earlobe while murmuring, "Make it quick."

She pulled back to stare into his eyes while she put both arms around his neck. Nose to nose, she mumbled back, "The chief is on the take. The whole department knows it. I'm undercover here to find out how and why. We want him out as much as you do. He's mixed up with some kind of strange sex club that has houses from the city to here. That's all we know. We need to know more before we can move. This is the place most likely to give us that information. What are you doing here?" She reached up and ran her hands through his hair while gyrating her pelvis against his.

Jake let his hands slide down from her waist to her buttocks, massaging them while he spoke, "Information. The owner is a friend and is giving us help with the murders so lay off her. If we find out anything we'll share it with you." He grinned into her face and tightened his grip on her rear until she grunted.

She smiled, leaned her head to the side and bit his earlobe while murmuring, "Fair enough."

When Jake flinched at the bite, she broke from his grasp, stepped back and put both fists on her hips while glaring at him. "You dirty-minded bastard," she shouted. He

hand came up and slapped Jake with a resounding 'whack'. She added, "I may work as a stripper but I'm not a whore," before spinning around and stalking toward the door behind the stage.

Jake massaged the red mark on his cheek and shouted at her retreating back, "Maybe not but you don't know what you're missing." He laughed when her steps faltered before she made her way to the dressing room door, opened it and went through without a backward glance.

"Dumb cunt missed her chance," Quigley said, loud enough for the patrons staring at them to burst into laughter and return to their drinks and the blonde beginning her dance routine on the stage.

Cam burst out laughing with them. "Well you horny blokes. You ready to go now that you've seen the show?"

Quigley nodded, crooked a finger at Jake and Cameron and walked toward the exit at a fast clip. Once outside in the crisp night air, he pulled a cigarette out of a crumpled pack in his shirt pocket and lit up, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs.

Cameron barked with laughter. "A deep breath in that place and you'd have your fix but you come outside to get it? Man, you are one strange bloke."

Quigley eyed Cam askance and retorted, "Believe it or not, *mate*, I hate joints like that. I couldn't wait to get out of there." He grinned, flashing his gold teeth, and took another deep drag on his cigarette. "Although the entertainment tonight was unique."

"Why didn't you just get that damned thing and meet us somewhere then? I don't want to stand out here in the cold looking at it," Jake snapped, pointing at the envelope Quigley clutched in his hand. "That information could catch us a killer tonight."

Quigley tossed the cigarette butt into the gutter before saying, “I live two buildings down. We can go there and look it over.”

“What the hell is it?” Cam asked, looking confused.

“The missing link,” Quigley responded, cryptically, before he started walking away.

10:30 P.M.

“Finally!” Jake shouted as he punched the off button on his cell phone. “We finally got a damned break.” He grabbed the stained piece of paper he used to write the information on and leaned back in the chair he sat in, grinning from ear to ear while reading it again.

Quigley stood in the tiny kitchenette of his boardinghouse room, holding a bottle of whiskey with one hand and clutching three tumblers with the other. He turned from the sink and asked, “You got something good boss?”

“You bet I do,” Jake replied. “That was Genevieve Scott, a friend and fellow agent. She managed to track down company information for the place that makes our boy’s special mint lipstick. What she told me confirms a few things.” Jake grinned. “Hey, anything that helps right now is enough to plumb tickle me shitless my friend,” he added when Cam shot him a quizzical look from Quigley’s lumpy sleeper sofa.

Quigley brought the glasses and bottle into the small main room and placed them on a table whose legs were held on with silver duct tape. He swept a pile of computer

magazines and newspapers off a big, faded armchair and eased down into its sagging springs with a sigh. "Even after all this time of not being a cop, I still feel that surge of pleasure every time I get to sit in a comfortable chair and get my weight off these feet." He lifted his feet into the air to illustrate then chuckled at the holes and worn spots where his toes poked through the stockings. "I think I'm wearing the same socks I did ten years ago too."

Cam took the glass Quigley had set in front of him, drank it down, refilled it then shifted on the sofa, trying to find a comfortable lump, and asked, "Right, so what did she say? And when do we get to see this mysterious missing link you promised us?" He glanced from Jake to Quigley with eyebrows raised and a look of exasperation on his face.

Jake tilted the note toward the only lamp in the room, a cracked, cheap and gaudy thing, with a dim bulb illuminating Quigley's room. He read, "The company that makes the lipstick is called Mint Julep Industries. It's based out of Atlanta and is family owned. In fact, the Bramford family has owned it for over fifty years now. But, the really important part is this company boasts it's the *only one* to manufacture mint lipstick in the United States. The real clincher is, it has only been distributed in Georgia until last Christmas when it became available in California. Our boy didn't get his supply here. He must have started in Georgia." Jake glanced up from the paper to inspect Cam and Quigley's reaction to the news.

Quigley downed half the tumbler of Whiskey he held and frowned. "Georgia, huh? You want me to get Tigg to do a search there? See if we can find any unsolved murders that match this guy's signature?"

Cam slammed back the entire glass of whiskey before asking, “Can she handle it? I use a computer in my spare time too and I know its not as easy as it looks; especially hacking illegally into secure servers the way she is.” A snorting laugh exploded from him in response to the nervous tic Quigley had suddenly developed under his left eye. Cam leaned over and punched Quigley on the knee. “Don’t worry about it mate. We ain’t going to nick you for doing what we asked. Are we J.D?” he turned to grin at Jake.

“Don’t worry about your parole status Quigley. It goes no further than us.” Jake took the glass from Cam’s hand and added, “And I think you’ve had enough of that.”

“Ah, shit Jake. I don’t get to enjoy myself that much these days. You Yanks are too uptight for any real fun; not like us Aussies. Even the bloody nude dancers aren’t nude,” he complained before his attention diverted to Quigley picking up the envelope and opening it. “Your lady friend must have found something. What did she find?” Cam’s expression of childlike excitement and anticipation was comically skewed with slurred speech and unfocused eyes.

“She couldn’t find any cases in the rest of the state that have our boy’s earmarks on them. Either he changed his ways or he did start in San Francisco, in this state anyway.” Quigley said with a frown on his face and a finger rubbing back and forth over his unshaven cheek.

“Ah, bloody hell,” Cam exclaimed and fell limply back against the couch cushion in disgust.

“No, no, that’s good news. That means he must have arrived in the city, set up house and started his killing spree from there. If he drove through the state to get there,

some kind of trail would show up.” Jake shifted his eyes toward the floor and fell into deep thought, contemplating where this piece of information could lead him.

Cam had his arms folded over his belly, body relaxed into the corner of the couch and staring at Jake. “Well, he must have bloody well flown in then.”

“It’s a good assumption, I’d say,” Quigley replied. “So, we check incoming flights from Atlanta for the time frame before the first killing. With a little luck, we’ll get a roster of passengers we can run checks on and, hopefully, find less than a thousand or so who might be our killer.”

“And, we check out this company. We can cross check against its personnel info for any names that might match up with the flight records,” Jake added. “It’s a long shot but it’s the most promising lead we’ve gotten in months so don’t bitch about it too much.”

“I’m not bitching. Are you bitching, Quig?” Cam asked with a look of innocence on his face.

Jake threw him a stern look before adding, “We also need to find out the whereabouts of the good doctor. He still isn’t home and that worries me. If he’s the one who bashed me and set fire to his building, then he’s our best bet right now. I’d hate to think he was under our noses all this time and I didn’t see it,” Jake exclaimed while rising to slip on his shoes. “Cam, you follow up on the doctor. Find out if he has any other homes or vacation spots or anywhere else he could’ve fled to. I...” Jake stopped and stared down at Cam’s limp body, sprawled on the sofa and snoring softly. “Ah, shit. He’s out for the night I think,” Jake said, glancing at Quigley with an apology in his voice.

Quigley waved the apology away with a flip of his hand. “Don’t worry about it. He can crash here tonight and I’ll send him on his way in the morning.”

Jake hesitated a split second then said, “Quigley, I want to apologize to you for the way I treated you in the Stumble Inn. I...”

“Don’t bother Jake. I know how it is. Truth is, I deserved it and more. I’m just grateful you let me in on this.” Quigley took a deep breath and shifted his gaze back to Cam before adding, “I have some atoning to do and this case is my way of getting it, in spades.” His brown eyes shifted back to Jake with an embarrassed look of gratitude in them. “Thanks.” He held out his hand.

Jake took it, feeling like he’d just made another friend and glad the man was working out after all. He turned toward the door, slipped on his coat and said, “We have a lot of things to do tomorrow. Get some sleep and give me a call when you wake up.” He walked to the door, opened it and stepped out into a hallway decorated with peeling paint and pools of garbage tucked under the staircase leading down to the street. “And, thank Tigg for me too Quigley. I appreciate what she’s doing for us.” He smiled at Quigley’s grin of pleasure. “Nite.” He turned and went down the stairs, glad to have something solid to go on and worried about Brian at the same time. When Quigley’s door closed behind him, Jake made a mental note to call again the following morning and order the young agent back on the job.

I know he's out there, killing again tonight. But, this is the last holiday spree he's going to have before I nail him. Brian would never forgive me if I don't let him in on this collar, he thought with a surge of euphoria running through his gut. No, Brian would definitely want to get this guy. And we are so damned close now. The last holiday my

friend; the very last for you.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

January 1st
12:15 A.M.

Every front window of the house was ablaze with light, giving the manicured lawn and tall pine trees it faced a look of false gaiety. Doctor Nelson's two-story vacation house was built from oversized logs, with a simple, rustic look that belied the amount of square footage it covered, and the huge amount of money it must have cost to build. Even under a moonless night Cam could see this 'cabin' was a showplace for the rich. Two expensive cars, a black BMW and a white Porsche convertible, were parked inside a carport attached to the right side of the house.

A gentle breeze swept the smell of lake water around Cam's warm body. He shivered while mentally swearing at himself for believing Lake Tahoe in the summer would be warm at night and wishing he'd brought a jacket to cover his shorts and thin shirt. The rocking of a large cabin cruiser anchored to the private dock suddenly disturbed the peaceful quiet of the area with the sound of a fiberglass hull hitting the mooring posts. It was a dull thump of a noise that sounded deafening in contrast to the absolute quiet surrounding the house.

Cam slid out from behind a large boulder embedded in the sandy scrub along the waterline and moved silently toward the darkest side of the house. He moved swiftly to the left, where only one window showed a dim light. Crouching beneath it, Cam cautiously raised his head to peek inside. He peered into a kitchen the size of the average person's living room. Solid wood cabinets covered most of the walls. A large ceramic tile

work center in the middle of the room boasted a staggering array of copper pots and pans hanging above it from brass hooks. The sink, restaurant-sized stove, glass front refrigerator and matching freezer, both large enough to stock food for months, were all polished stainless steel. A small light over the stove glowed dimly, emphasizing the silky gloss of the wood and metal.

Cam whistled. *This bloke's got more money wrapped up in his kitchen than I make in ten years*, he thought while deftly working his pocketknife under the window latch. When the latch broke, he mentally added, *Too bad these rich folk don't spend as much on their security*. He stifled a chuckle as he slid in through the window, onto a countertop and down to the floor. *Ah, bloody hell! Now he's got proof of breaking and entering. So much for catching him without a hitch*. The thought wiped the grin off his face when the image of himself being jailed for bypassing the legal procedures came out at the man's trial. *To hell with it. Just catch the bloke and take the lumps after*, he decided with a mental shrug.

A radio playing somewhere upstairs was the only sound Cam could hear. He strained his ears, puzzled by the lack of human sounds. *Maybe Nelson and the Mrs. are bonking in the bedroom. I can catch him with his pants down*, he thought with a wicked grin spreading over his face, restoring his good humor.

Moving low and quiet, Cam made his way toward the doorway between the kitchen and the combination living/dining room. *Bloody hell! It's a convention hall*, he thought, marveling at the immense open room of wood, Native American rugs, pottery and leather furniture. *Nobody downstairs, unless they're both in the loo*.

He glanced to his left, let his gaze trail up the bare wooden staircase and squinted into the darkness at the top, alert to any sign of light, movement or sound. When none appeared, Cam moved slowly up the stairs, careful to place his feet along the edges where the runners weren't likely to squeak under his weight. When he reached the top, he quickly scanned the upper floor for any sign of people and for a hiding place should one appear. Two closed wooden doors faced the balcony overlooking the living room and one at each end faced the hallway, forming a U shape. None had a light showing under or any sound of movement within. Cam cautiously and lightly stepped to the door nearest the top and pressed his ear to the rough wood. Hoping the occupants were asleep and unaware of his presence, he opened the door and stepped inside, leaving the door open in order to take advantage of the light from downstairs. He faced a plain, wooden double bed with its covers still made up and nobody in sight. Cam breathed a small sigh of relief and turned back to the hallway, with his heart pounding blood through his body and brain to a hard rock beat.

Wiping sweaty hands along the sides of the khaki shorts he wore, Cam stepped up to the next door in line and opened it a crack. This time, he merely peered inside and scanned its interior. It was a clone of the first room, with the exception of lacy covers and drapes as opposed to the other's decidedly masculine theme of outdoorsy prints. He quietly shut the door and moved to the next room.

His hands and face were covered by nervous perspiration and his breathing came in shallow, open-mouthed gasps. *Bloody hell! I'll never get used to this kind of stuff*, he thought while he turned the knob on the door and peeked inside. Bunk beds and a toy box

tucked into the small room were a letdown after the imaginary buildup in Cam's mind. *A child's room. That leaves the master bedroom.*

Cam stood in the hallway, facing the last door. He could tell from its location that it covered the entire living room area below, matching it in size. He stepped up to the door, listened to the sound of the radio playing soft, pop music inside, and hesitated, mentally steeling himself for the confrontation he knew was about to happen. He also lowered his body and turned slightly to the side, instinctively forming a smaller target. He reached for the knob, slowly turned it and eased the door open, while staying well to the side of the opening.

Every light in the room was blazing. The bed was rumpled, with the cover tossed haphazardly on the floor. Men and women's clothing littered the thick green carpet from the doorway to the bed. The radio was playing the popular song from the movie 'Titanic', *My Heart Will Go On*, one Cam was already sick of hearing. He tuned it out of his head but left the radio on. There were two glasses, half full of red wine, sitting on the nightstand. A set of French doors were open to the cool night air and a pair of filmy white curtains billowed inside with every gust of wind. The faint scent of perfume permeated the room.

Cam cautiously stepped inside while scanning every corner, piece of furniture and the closed closet doors that lined an entire wall. Nothing moved, made noise or reacted to his entrance. He eyed the closet doors with suspicion and stepped further inside. To the right, an open doorway led into a large bathroom gleaming with white fixtures and an oversized turbo tub. Cam moved sideways toward the bathroom, alternating between watching the closets and the room he approached. He stepped to the side of the bathroom

doorway and pushed the door completely open. *Nothing*. The room was spotless, dry, with fresh towels hanging on the wall, but no people in sight.

The closet. They must have heard me coming and hid in the closet. Either that or they slipped out the French doors and over the balcony. He listened intently to the night sounds outside the open doors for anything that might indicate someone running or a car engine starting. *Nothing*. Cam stepped up to the closet doors, held his gun loosely in front of his body and softly demanded, “Okay, you two, come on out. I’m the police. No use getting yourselves shot.”

Nothing. A frown appeared on Cam’s face. *What the bloody hell is going on here?*

He threw the closet doors open, one by one. They were all empty of all but a few hangers, the occasional blouse or shirt hanging on the rack and a few pairs of hiking boots and tennis shoes. Cam spun around to face the balcony doors. He held the gun rigidly in front of his belly and walked slowly toward the rippling drapes, smelling the lake water tang in the air every time they billowed out toward him. He stepped out on the tiny balcony and looked down at the front lawn. There was no humanly possible way a middle-aged man and woman could’ve made it down there from the top story without a ladder or help.

Cam’s gun arm dropped to his side but he didn’t holster the pistol. He moved swiftly to the bedroom door and stepped out in the hallway, peering down over the rail then up at the ceiling, searching for the telltale outline of a dropdown attic stair. He didn’t find one, nor did he see or hear anything moving around downstairs. *Where the hell did they go?* he wondered while moving back down the stairs into the living room.

He moved around the perimeter of the living room, stopping only long enough to check out the tiny half bathroom tucked under the stairs. Cam moved to the large French doors facing the back of the house. He flipped a switch next to the door on the right and the backyard lit up with an almost blinding clarity. Several floodlights lined the back of the house and lit a small grassy area that ended at the edge of a stand of Ponderosa pine trees and untouched forest. Cam opened one door and stepped out into the yard. His head was immediately surrounded by swarms of hungry mosquitoes that were drawn to the lights. He reached back inside and flipped the floods off. The mosquitoes remained while Cam made his way, hugging the wall, toward the carport to his right. He edged his way toward the corner of the house while silently swearing at the insects and waving his free hand in front of his face to clear them. When he turned the corner into the carport, he quickly ascertained that the two cars were still there. He stepped over to each one in turn and felt the hood for heat. Both were cold to the touch.

Disgusted with the effort and time he'd expended in getting this far, only to find nothing but an empty house and two cold cars, Cam swore, "Bloody hell! They must have left. Maybe they went into town to do a bit of gambling at the pokies." The idea struck him as possible so he decided to hang around and catch them when they came home; hopefully, drunk and unable to put up much of a fight.

Cam tucked his gun into the waistband of his shorts and walked to the front door, tested it, found it open, smiled and shook his head at silly American rich people before stepping back into the cavernous living room. He decided to cover all his bases and moved back into the kitchen, searching for a door leading down into a basement. When he didn't find one, he relaxed completely for the first time in hours. He leaned against the

tiled workbench and tried to work out what his next move would be if the Nelson's didn't show. His wandering gaze fastened on the glass front refrigerator, seven feet high and four feet wide, that snuggled between an equally large six burner stove and a metal fronted appliance Cam assumed was the matching freezer unit. Suddenly, he noticed his mouth was parched with a dry, salty taste that was vaguely unpleasant. He dug into his shorts pocket and pulled out a handful of change. He fingered the metal pieces around on his palm. "Friggin' Yank money. And they say our money is hard to figure out," he murmured while separating the largest coins from the smallest. He chose several quarters and half dollar pieces and carefully stacked them on the workbench. "At least they can't say I robbed them," he muttered with a smile. He moved to the refrigerator, opened the door and peeked inside, searching for a beer or a soft drink as a poor substitute if the Nelsons didn't stock any.

He pulled a green bottle of beer out of a rack full of them and closed the door with a satisfied nod of his head. He popped the top off effortlessly and resumed his casual seat against the bench. Cam downed half the bottle and let out a rumbling belch with a sigh of pleasure close behind it. "Ah, Fosters, now that's a decent beer for a change. Maybe these rich blokes aren't so thick after all," he commented before downing the rest of the bottle and tossing it into a tall garbage bin.

Something stopped Cam in his tracks when he moved to get another beer. He froze, tilted his head and listened, puzzled at what it was that had captured his attention without registering fully. Just when he decided his hearing was playing tricks on him and had opened the refrigerator, grabbed another bottle of beer and was ready to settle down and enjoy this one, it came again; a scratching sound from the roof.

Cam set the beer carefully on the tiles, grabbed his gun and moved quickly to the living room then the back doors to the dark yard. His heart began to pound in anticipation while his mind was screaming at him for the oversight of checking everything before dropping his guard. *Stupid thick bugger*, he swore at himself as he made his way along the wall to his right, back toward the cars, where he expected to find the Nelsons dropping down from the roof and into a car for a getaway.

He waited between the two vehicles, listening to the scratches and scrambling on the roof as the sounds moved closer to his position. *I've got you now you slimy bastard*, Cam thought while he waited with his gun raised and his gaze scanning the roofline.

Suddenly, two large raccoons dropped down onto the lawn in front of the carport, turned to snarl at him while simultaneously moving steadily toward Cam's left, toward the side of the carport. Cam jumped, suppressed an overpowering urge to shoot then watched the two large animals with curiosity. They moved toward a large trash can, sat up on hind legs, pushed it open then deftly took the lid off the top before rummaging around in the garbage.

Shit, Cam swore, trying to steady his nerves and slow the wild hammering of his heart. *Damn wild animals*. He glared at the raccoons. *What the hell are those things?* he wondered, fleetingly, while moving back toward the front door and away from the wildlife.

When he stepped back into the living room and threw the bolt on the front door, Cam took a deep, cleansing breath of air while being aware, and disturbed by it, that he was shaky, unnerved, sweating like a rookie and that his stomach was tied into knots. "Right. There's a lesson in this Cam, you friggin' dickhead. Check *everything* and do it

before you let your guard down.” He glared at his image in a mirror hanging in the entryway. He took another deep breath, swore again at the white face and sweaty forehead that was his face and turned, determined to thoroughly search every square inch of the house before he retrieved his beer.

After the living room, Cam moved back into the kitchen, already certain the top floor was clean and unoccupied. He grabbed the beer off the tiles, took a swig and glared around the room. With a sense of absurdity, and to reassure himself that he’d literally checked everything, he opened the pantry door. A plastic bin full of file folders was tucked back into the space. Cam pulled it out and scanned the names on the files: Adams, Benton, Bramford and stopped cold when he came to the name of Denton, Brian.

Cam opened the file and scanned the handwritten notes Doctor Nelson had written while treating Brian for something Cam wished he didn’t now know: homosexuality and impotence. “Goddammit, Brian. This is more than I wanted to know about you, mate.” Cam put the file back into the bin with a feeling of disgust and sympathy mixing inside his mind. Without giving it a second thought, Cam picked the bin up and carried it outside. He carefully placed it in the bottom of the small boat he’d rented to get to the place and covered it with a fishing net and gear before returning to the house.

At least this night’s work hasn’t been completely a bust, he thought while returning to the kitchen, with the image of another beer in his mind.

After throwing the rest of his change onto the tile of the workbench, he relieved the refrigerator of another beer and opened it with a feeling of accomplishment. Noticing the pantry door still open, he stepped over and shut it. *What the hell,* he thought while trying to keep his mind clear from the beer and eyeing the stove and the freezer. *Let’s be*

really thorough here, he added with a giddy sense of playfulness. He opened the oven door, chuckled inside the empty space, closed it then opened the freezer door.

A woman's body knelt inside. Her face was turned toward the door as if waiting for whoever would open it. Her frozen eyes stared into Cam's. He shuddered when it registered what he was seeing. Cam swiftly fell into a professional frame of mind, analyzing what he was seeing. But, he knew he was going to have a lot of explaining to do when he called it in to the locals: jurisdiction, breaking and entering, destruction of private property, illegal search; the litany went on inside his head while he flinched as each item lashed at his mind.

Cam pulled a crumpled photograph out of his pants pocket and stared at it. He recognized Lana Nelson, in spite of the mutilations to her face and nude body.

"Shit," he swore and finished off the beer before he headed to the far wall and picked up the phone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

January 1st
6:15 A.M.

Lana Nelson's frozen corpse was the headline on the front page of the Santa Rosa Times morning edition. It read, HOLIDAY KILLER BRINGS IN THE NEW YEAR WITH A BANG, emphasizing that the victim had been shot in the head before being placed inside a freezer. The sensationalized article declared Lana another victim of the Holiday Killer and cited Jake and his team as being responsible for allowing the northern California monster to run loose for so long. The reporter speculated that the killer was so confident in not being caught that he had taken a vacation and hit the Nelson's Tahoe home as a part of his recreational program.

Jake sat rigidly in his favorite chair, bare-chested, barefoot, sipping hot coffee, and chewing on a toasted English muffin without tasting either. Glock was asleep inside the turtle bowl but occasionally opened one eye to glare at Jake when the news story he was reading elicited a verbal response. It was usually in the form of, "Bullshit!"

When a knock at the door dragged his attention from the story, Jake rose, threw the newspaper on the floor in disgust and went to open it. Cam stood in the hallway with a mixed expression of anxiety, defiance, pride and guilt washing over his features. Jake waved him in, slammed the door then turned to face Cam with a glare. "Tell me what happened," he demanded while Cam sat down on the couch without removing his coat.

Cam told him and ended by saying, “Just as soon as I could, I beat it out of there and called you.” He shrugged as if to say, ‘What else could I do?’ and stared up at Jake with the air of a man waiting for the axe to fall.

Jake flopped back down into his chair, threw his legs over the arm and leaned back with both arms crossed over his chest. “So, you think the doc killed her and did a runner?”

Cam shrugged again, this time out of his coat, before answering. “Who else can it be? She was in their house, his car was there and the local security clowns said both the doctor and the Mrs. were seen driving onto the grounds. The missus arrived about an hour after the doctor. He had plenty of time to work it out before she got there.”

“It doesn’t wash Cam. My gut says it’s wrong.” Jake picked up what was left of his coffee, scowled at Glock, who was hiding under the table finishing off the muffin, then back up to Cam. “Go grab yourself a cup of coffee. Quigley and Marti will be here soon.” He rose and added, “I have to change anyway.” He glanced down at the pair of faded black sweatpants he liked to wear around the house then headed down the hallway.

When Jake returned, Glock was curled up in Cam’s lap licking his paws and ignoring his owner. Cam was trying to look comfortable while avoiding the cat and trying to drink his coffee. Before Jake could refill his cup or sit down, the phone rang. He grabbed it and said, “Agent Daniels,” before he froze in place.

By the time Jake hung up the phone without saying another word, Cam was standing beside him, alerted to the fact that Jake had just heard bad news. “What was it?” he asked while instinctively placing his forgotten cup on the cluttered countertop.

“Brian is missing. We’ve got to go to the city.” Jake snapped the receiver back up and dialed Marti’s number.

8:00 A.M.

When Quigley arrived at Jake’s apartment, he found a hastily scrawled note tacked to the door. *Brian in trouble. Cam and I going to check it out. Jake*

Red flags and alarm bells went off in Quigley’s mind. Bits and pieces of information, conversation and intuition combined inside him at that moment. He turned to look toward Toyboy’s apartment with a speculative look on his face. He nodded to himself and moved down the hallway.

8:15 A.M.

When Jake and Cam reached the old Victorian house where Brian’s parents lived, they were aware that something big happened there. The lovely old restored home was swarming with police officers, forensic technicians, news reporters and two ambulances with their lights still flashing. “Oh, shit,” Jake swore when he saw the scene.

Jake parked his car down the block, well out of the way of the black and whites and emergency vehicles lining the street, and walked up to one of the officers manning the crime scene tape and holding the news people out. He flashed his badge, Cam did the same, and the officer nodded at them to pass while physically holding back an over eager reporter who had a mike thrust into Jake’s face and screaming questions.

Agent Gary Ferguson, Jake's immediate superior and a long time friend, met Jake and Cam on the porch. He reached out a hand when they came up the steps.

Jake shook it. "Thanks for calling me Gary. What happened here?" Ferguson stared down at Jake with pain in his blue eyes. He ran a long-fingered hand through his well-barbered white mane of hair and hesitated before answering Jake's question.

When he finally responded, Jake understood why Gary was so hesitant to tell him. "Brian's family was executed, from the looks of it. They've been in there for several days. He's....we're looking for Brian now." Gary searched Jake's face and added, "Look, I know you two are partners and friends but it looks like he was here and he may have been involved in their deaths. I'm sorry Jake."

Jake looked Gary in the eye and asked, "You think he did this?" Before Ferguson could reply to the statement, Jake snapped, "I want to see it for myself."

Gary shrugged and, without further comment, led them inside the house, amid officers and technicians who were busily going about the job of collecting evidence and photos of the crime scene. Ferguson ended up in the living room where three bodies were propped up on the couch and a matching chair as if they were watching TV together. Mr. and Mrs. Denton and their maid, Angela, had been dead for more than a few days. The smell and condition of their bodies confirmed it. Jake and Cam covered their noses before stepping further into the room.

Ferguson dabbed Vicks under his nose and followed them.

An agent was talking with the forensics team around the bodies. Jake strolled to the agent's side and nodded at him. The agent smiled up at Jake with genuine warmth.

Hi Jake. How ya been?"

"Hello Kevin," Jake said while he maneuvered closer to the couch and began to study it. "I've been better."

"Sorry to hear that Jake." The agent fingered a new badge hanging from his waistband. "Well, at least I can say things are good for me. I'm now second in command in the downtown office."

Jake smiled at the man. "I'm glad for you Kevin." The smile evaporated when Jake turned his attention to the bodies. "What's the story here?"

Kevin stared down at the posed bodies. "As you can see, they've been dead for several days now, that's obvious. It looks like they were executed; a bullet to the head in each case. The maid's granddaughter found them when she came for a visit." He indicated a white-faced woman in her thirties huddled in the dining room with a policewoman questioning her. "She said her grandmother invited her down for the holidays. When nobody answered the door she became worried and broke the front door window to get inside. She found them like this."

"As you can see, there's no evidence of struggle here. They knew their killer enough to let him in and sit still while he put a bullet in their heads," Gary stated.

"That doesn't mean it was Brian who did it," Kevin retorted.

Gary shot him a withering look. "In all my years with the bureau I've seen many killings like this and it's usually a family member. Right now, Brian's my prime suspect, whether you agree with me or not Agent Zachary."

“Why do you think he had anything to do with this, other than a guess on your part?” Jake asked while noting the poses, the wounds and the lack of damage to the room, indicating no struggle took place during the attacks.

Ferguson turned to Jake with a look of suppressed irritation. “I told you. Brian is missing Jake. We haven't been able to locate him. Since you reported he was on extended leave to be with his father in the hospital, we naturally wonder why the old man is here.” Ferguson nodded at the elderly man leaning against his wife on the couch. “And, why Brian isn't.” He paused before adding, “He’s the prime suspect on this one Jake. I have no choice but to find him and question him.”

“Hell, Gary. We’re only here because the local cops know these are Brian’s folks. What makes you think they’ll let you just bull in and take over?” Kevin asked with a hint of sarcasm.

“True, this isn’t the Bureau’s case but I’m trying to get the suits downtown to give it to us because it’s one of our own involved here. It’s the least I can do for one of own, even if he did this himself.” He limply waved a hand at the grisly scene and watched Jake’s reaction at the same time.

“What a load of bullshit,” Kevin blurted before turning around and moving off to talk to the M.E. who just arrived.

Gary glared at Kevin’s back then turned a penetrating gaze on Jake. “If there’s anything you can tell us that’ll help to get this cleared up then you better spill it Jake. For your own good.”

Jake ran a finger over his moustache. He glanced at Ferguson's face, trying to gauge the man's willingness to help or cover his ass with the boys in Virginia, something

Jake knew Gary was apt to do. "All I know is that Brian left unexpectedly in the middle of the night and he left a phone message to a friend saying he was called by his family to come here. He said his father was dying and in the hospital and that he didn't know when he'd be able to return."

Jake watched Ferguson's face go from friendly and open to closed and professionally unreadable. "I tried to call him a couple of times but, obviously, there was no answer. If you check their answering machine, you'll find my messages."

Cam stepped up to the armchair where the elderly housekeeper sat nodding into her chest. "How long have they been dead?"

Ferguson responded with, "The M.E. guesses at about two weeks or so. He'll let me know when he has a better estimated later. Why?" Ferguson's eyes gleamed with interest as he stared at Cam, waiting for an answer.

Jake answered, "Brian disappeared on the fourth, sixteen days ago, that's why. It's possible he got here, was taken somewhere else, for whatever reason, so he'd be the one the cops suspected for this. I take it the local cops have an APB out on him?"

Ferguson nodded.

"Let me know if you come up with anything, will you? We have to get back to Santa Rosa but, if you need any help at all with this one, any, call and we'll be here. Thanks again Gary," Jake said and turned to leave.

"Sure thing Jake. And, if you hear from him, call me, okay? I don't like it when one of my people is in this deep a pile of shit." Ferguson was grinning. "I got used to being in it working with you but sometimes it gets too deep, you know?"

Jake flashed him a grin in return. "Yeah, I know."

Jake slapped Kevin on the back as he made his way to the front door. “Later Kev,” he said when Kevin turned and flashed him a thumbs up.

Jake and Cam walked through the teeming crowd, inside and outside the house, and finally reached Jake's car amid a flurry of cameras and microphones. Jake ignored them, fired up the engine and pulled away from the curb. His mind was boiling with unanswered questions, worries and doubts but, primarily, he had a tight knot in the middle of his gut that told him that Brian was dead. *And I didn't know it. I didn't stop it,* he thought over and over again, like a merry-go-round gone amok, while he drove north to Santa Rosa.

8:30 A.M.

Quigley moved cautiously among piles of toys, boxes overflowing with papers and pictures, plastic trash bags full of clothes and mountains of newspapers, magazines and books. Other than a narrow pathway that zigzagged through and around the heaps, every square inch of Toyboy Tilley's spare bedroom was covered, six feet high, with assorted piles of junk. As far as Quigley could see, there was no rhyme or reason behind, or for, any of it.

Damned shit isn't even worth collecting, he thought while poking through a box of plastic toys unfit for a toddler.

With disgust, he walked out of the room, glanced in Toyboy's bedroom, with its garish purple velvet trappings and ornately curved brass bed, and returned to the living

room. He had earlier searched the room but failed to turn up anything of interest, except an old family album filled with pictures, certificates, newspaper clippings, various handwritten notes, and an engraved invitation to a New Year's Day fancy costume ball being held in the city that evening.. He picked up the album, opened the outside door a crack, peered out into the hall then locked the door and swiftly made his way out of the building to his car.

To hell with legal procedures, we need a break here. And....there's something fishy about this guy and I'm gonna find out what it is, he thought when he slid behind the wheel of his battered old Ford four-door.

CHAPTER TWENTY

January 1st
10:45 A.M.

"Where the hell have you been? I've been trying to get a hold of you for two hours now," Jake bellowed into his cell phone. "We've been turning the city and this town upside down looking for Brian. We could've used your help."

Marti and Cam could hear Quigley's deep, calm voice coming from the instrument. "I'm chasing some leads Boss. I got some info about that weird guy who lives in your building. I gave it to Tigg and she's following up on some interesting stuff for you. Also, I contacted the mother of the missing victim, Stephanie Benton. I'm on my way to her house in Sausalito now. I'm sure I can charm the old lady into telling me where her daughter is if I put my mind to it."

Jake calmed almost instantly. "Did you hear about Brian?"

"Yeah, I heard. Any luck finding him?"

"Not yet. What bothers me is that old Murphy's Law saying cops live by. I think it's working here, to the Holiday Killer's advantage. Just when we get a break, something like this happens to stop us, bog us down or lead us down another path. It can't be a coincidence."

"You never know bud. Well, I've arrived. Are we gonna meet up later tonight and swap info?" Quigley asked, with the added sound of car horns honking coming through the phone line.

"Meet us at the Stumble at seven. We'll talk then," Jake responded before hitting the disconnect button.

"Funny he should mention Toyboy, huh? By the way, why did you want us to come along when you talk to him about Brian? I would think he'd be far more willing to talk openly with just you there Jake," Marti commented while gazing out at a thickening fog that made the day seem much darker and later than it was.

"Cam isn't coming, you are. I wanted you along so you can give me a take on whether or not Toyboy is concealing something about Brian from me. I think he's hiding Brian and, if he is, then I want to know where. I have to get to Brian first, talk some sense into him and get him to turn himself in to the city police before this gets out of hand," Jake responded.

"If I'm not coming with you guys, where am I going?" Cam leaned over the back of Jake's seat and asked.

"You're going to my place and check out those files you found at Doctor Nelson's. Any name, place, date, quirk or anything at all, you find that might be a lead, you write down and keep. Pull the file if it seems like something might be there. Cross check the victim's names to the files, cross check the dates and places they lived to the killings, check everything and anything," Jake commanded.

"Yes sir!" Cam barked before settling back into his seat with a smile. "At least you took us out to lunch before throwing us back into the salt mines," he added with a touch of sarcastic humor.

Jake snorted and parked his car at the curb in front his building. Within minutes, he and Marti were knocking on Toyboy's door while Cam entered Jake's apartment with a scowl and growl about 'not being a bloody secretary.'

Toyboy answered the door wearing a flowing gold lame caftan, huge gold hoops in each ear, gold contacts in his eyes and golden slippers, right out of the Arabian Nights, on his feet. He grinned at Jake and Marti and gushed, "Oh, two of my very favorite people in the whole world have come to visit me." Toyboy opened the door wide and beckoned them inside. "Well, come in, come in, my dears. I'll put the tea on and we'll have a nice talk. It's about time you came to see me, " he admonished while moving through his elaborately decorated apartment toward the kitchen.

Jake and Marti moved to an antique couch of carved mahogany covered with an ornate rose patterned tapestry material. Marti admired its beauty while Jake merely sat down on it, focusing on registering and memorizing every detail of the room. A collection of antique frames with family photos was scattered on the wall behind the couch, a large bookcase facing the couch contained a variety of items: books, CDs, framed photos, ceramic figurines and potted plants in hand-painted containers. There was no sign of a television set or a radio. Track lighting over the collage of photos behind Jake's head was the only source of light in the living room while a table at each end of the couch was home to miniature, well sculpted waterfalls with real water bubbling inside them. Jake watched the tiny cascades and sprays with fascination and admiration. Nervous and unsure how to proceed, he stood and inspected the photos on the wall. He picked out a picture of a tall, distinguished man with a full head of dark red hair, a stern face, and dressed in a judge's robe. He leaned close to the picture and asked, "Is this older man in the judge's robe your dad?"

Toyboy poked his head out of the kitchen and peered at the photos. "No, that's a relative living in the city. There is a strong family resemblance though, isn't there?" He

ducked back into the kitchen and added, “He’s the one who brought me here and I’m so grateful to him for it too. I’d never have met Brian if I hadn’t come.”

Jake scanned the rest of the photos, turned and sat back down, clasping his hands in agitation while he waited for Toyboy to return.

Marti picked a magazine up off the coffee table and casually flipped through it as if she didn’t know what to do in the interim before Toyboy returned.

When Jake heard a cabinet door close with a bang, he leaned over to peer inside Toyboy's tiny kitchen, spying the man busily working at the far counter with his back to them. Jake watched Toyboy’s back go rigid when he dropped the emotional bombshell he’d prepared. "Toyboy, I have some bad news about Brian. He’s missing or dead. We're here because I thought I better tell you myself."

Toyboy slowly turned, holding a steaming ceramic teapot in one hand and a tray of cookies in the other. His face registered shock, sadness and his golden eyes suddenly had tears dripping from them. “No, it can’t be Jake. When? How?”

Jake inspected Toyboy’s face in minute detail while he answered, “He left here on the twenty-sixth, the night he called you, and he hasn’t been seen since. Today, I got a call from my boss in the city. Brian’s folks and their housekeeper were all murdered at least a week ago. For all we know, Brian is dead too. The problem is, we can’t find him to know for sure.” Jake paused, waiting for any reaction to surface that would give the man away.

Marti leaned her forearms onto her thighs and met Toyboy’s gaze directly when she added in a soft, compassionate voice, “Toyboy, if you know where he’s at, please tell us. If he’s hiding for some reason, or if he’s involved in his parent’s deaths, we need to

let him know that his friends are behind him. We want to help him.” Her eyes pleaded with him to help. “Please,” she whispered.

Toyboy hung his head with tears dripping down his cheeks, taking the heavy makeup with them as they moved toward his chin. His body seemed to go limp with defeat. He turned and put the tray and teapot on the counter before turning back to face Marti and Jake with an open, anguished look. “I don’t know where he’s at. I swear. If I did, I’d save him myself. I love him.” He broke out in choked sobs, standing in the doorway with a pathetic air of helplessness that touched Jake with pity.

Marti rose, unconsciously prepared to console the crying man. Jake rose beside her and restrained her with a firm left hand on her arm. “Thanks Toyboy. I’ll call you if we find him.” He turned to Marti and nodded covertly toward the door. “We should go now.”

She stopped her silent resistance to his restraint and moved to the door behind Jake. Jake opened it and turned back, as if he’d forgotten something and wanted to get it out before he left. “I know you’re upset but can I ask for your help?”

Toyboy wiped his face on the sleeve of his expensive caftan before he responded, “If it’s to help find Brian, I’ll do anything Jake. Just ask.” He faced Jake with his makeup smeared and his features ravaged.

“Would you go to the gay community in the city today and ask around; see if anybody knows anything about Brian? They’d talk to you but they won’t to Cam or me. It would really help us Toyboy.”

“Sure, Jake. Anything. I’ll go and I won’t come back until I’ve asked everybody I know,” he said with a determined tone in his voice.

"Thanks. See you when you get back then. Just come by my place and let me know if you find anything. If I'm not home, leave me a note and I'll call you." Jake smiled at him and closed the door.

In the hallway, he faced Marti and held a finger to his lips then pointed to his door. She walked to his door, opened it, walked in to surprise Cam sitting on the couch munching potato chips with Glock on his lap and a mound of files piled in front of him on the table. Jake stepped through the door and closed it. He moved toward his chair but Marti beat him to it, forcing him to sit beside Cam on the couch.

She leaned forward and whispered, "Okay, what is going on here? Why did you want to leave so fast?" Her face was alive with curiosity.

Jake unexpectedly bolted off the couch and began to pace the small area behind the chair. "Jesus. Didn't you see it?"

Marti turned in her seat while Cam quietly watched Jake. "What? See what?"

"One of the pictures on the wall behind the couch was of Brian, dressed in a woman's lingerie with bright red lipstick on his mouth," he uttered in disbelief.

"Is that why you asked him to get lost; so you can search his apartment?" she asked, shocked and blinking her eyes rapidly in response.

Cam leaned forward, placing the stack of files he'd held back onto the table. "Yes, that's what we'd do," he murmured to himself.

Jake stared at both of them, silently begging them to prove him wrong when he blurted out, "My God, I think Brian is the Holiday killer and Toyboy is hiding him somewhere."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*January 1
2:30 P.M.*

Quigley's car was moving at breakneck speed as it traveled north on Highway 101 towards Santa Rosa, but he was swearing at the car, urging it to give him more speed. He frequently glanced at his rear view and side mirrors, praying a local Highway Patrolman wouldn't spot him and hit the red lights.

Holy shit! What the hell am I going to do with this? Jesus, I cannot face this again. Not again. Not a woman, he thought while his car's speedometer hit 100 mph.

When he reached the outskirts of town, Quigley slowed down to 55, hoping he could catch her before there was more bloodshed.

2:45 P.M.

Russell's body hit the side of the wall with a dull thud. The morgue office walls shook with the impact, displacing several framed certificates and licenses Russell proudly displayed. He slid down into a sitting position but continued to glare up at Jake with a maniacal rage in his eyes. "It's not that easy Jake. You're gonna have to kill me and, if you do, I'll still have my revenge on you. You'll go to prison and we both know what will happen to you there, don't we?" he whispered through bloodied lips too swollen to speak clearly.

Jake grabbed a handful of Russell's ripped shirt and yanked him to his feet. Blood from Russell's nose sprayed across his shirt, creating a dappled purple and blue pattern that made Marti sick to look at. Jake's face was inches from Russell's when he snarled, "You sick fuck. You knew! You knew it all along and you covered it up. I saw the picture of Brian at Toyboy's. It was right there along side the one of you, your dyke girlfriend, the Chief and Sue. You're all in this together, aren't you?" He shook Russell until his arm felt weak with the effort. "Tell me you sonofabitch! Where is Brian? I'll kill you if you don't tell me."

Marti screamed when Jake slammed Russell against the wall again and raised his arm over the man's bent neck. "Jake! No!"

Jake's arm began to descend at the same moment Marti launched herself at him. She hit his side with enough force to rock him back on his heels before she fell back against the far wall from the impact. Jake turned to watch her, feeling remote, disconnected and unemotionally observing her hip as it hit the filing cabinet. Before slumping down to the floor her head cracked against the cabinet as well.. Then his mind snapped, restoring sanity. "Marti! Oh shit," he groaned when he bent over her and gently inspected her head for any cuts, lumps or blood. "Oh, God, forgive me Marti. I didn't mean it. Please..."

Her eyes fluttered open then widened in shock. "Behind you..."

Jake began to turn. A scalpel swiftly descended toward his neck. He dove sideways but the razor sharp blade slit a long groove into his upper left arm as it came down. Jake landed hard onto his hip, rolled and came up quickly to his feet while clutching his bleeding arm.

Amanda's white face, unkempt black and red hair, and bloodshot eyes stared down at Marti with the dull, stupid look of a trapped animal. She held the scalpel casually in her hand, almost carelessly. She tilted her head, studying Marti like a beast would inspect a strange object in its path. "He tried to kill me, you know. He locked me in the house. He knows how much I hate that house. It scares me," Amanda muttered with her eyes unfocused, seeing some horror inside her mind instead of Jake and Marti in the room with her.

Marti forced herself to smile up at the girl. "Let me help you Amanda. He should never have done that to you. Let me help." She slowly moved, steadying her body against the filing cabinet while moving her legs to hold her weight. She kept a soothing tone in her voice. "You're hurt. It's okay. You don't have to be afraid anymore. I'm here to help you."

Jake moved closer to the girl, ready to pounce and disarm her. Amanda turned to him when she noticed the movement. "He hurt me. He tried to kill me. The house is full of dead people and I didn't want to stay there but he locked me in there. I couldn't get out until the mint man said I could. You see..." she waved the scalpel around in a lazy 'O' until it rested against her throat like a person would rest a fingertip on their chin. "...he owns the place. He owns me but he scares me, you know?" A rivulet of blood began to slide down the side of her neck as the scalpel dug deeper into her flesh.

Jake slowly reached out a hand to her. "Amanda, give me the knife and I'll protect you from him. I promise, you won't be hurt anymore."

Marti slid up the length of the cabinet, prepared to help Jake if need be. "He's telling the truth Amanda. Jake will protect you, you know that."

Amanda's face transformed from dull and limp into a twisted mask of rage and fear. "No! Men don't protect you. They hurt you. They use you," she screamed and slashed out at Jake's outstretched hand with the blade.

Marti moved in a flash and hit the girl's side with a flying tackle. The scalpel flew from Amanda's hand and skittered across the room before coming to rest against a leg of Russell's desk. Jake helped Marti up off the woman's body and reached down to take Amanda's arm in order to help her up too. She was out cold. He turned to Marti with a guilty look on his face. "Are you okay? I'm sorry..."

She grabbed his arm, tore the shirt apart over the wound and inspected it. "Forget it Jake. This needs stitches." Marti swiftly moved to a small, glass-fronted cupboard, broke the glass and grabbed a syringe and a small bottle. She filled the syringe, moved to Amanda's inert body, squatted and injected the girl. "We won't have to worry about her coming back for more. At least not for another six hours or so," she said while tossing the needle into the trash.

Jake glanced at Russell's unconscious body, still slumped against the wall next to the door. "What about him?"

Marti moved to take a look, lifted Russell's eyelids, checked his pulse and inspected the back of his head. She stood and pronounced, "He'll live. We better tie him up though."

Jake used his right hand to pull a set of cuffs out of his back pocket and toss them to her. "You'll have to do it. I can't." He held up his still bleeding arm and clutched it harder, trying to stem the blood.

When Marti had Russell in place and cuffed to a leg of his heavy desk, she returned to the cupboard, took gauze, scissors and another syringe and bottle out and arrayed them on the desk blotter. "Come here," she ordered. "You can't go around like that; bleeding all over the place. And I know you well enough to know you won't go to the hospital so I have to do it myself."

Jake sat on the desk, held out his arm and waited for her to start. She started with the injection of antibiotics, followed by a pressure bandage and a gauze wrap. She stepped back to admire her work. "Not bad. I'm no physician but that ain't bad work." She patted him on the shoulder. "At least you won't bleed to death." She took a deep breath and added, "Right. What now? Where do we go from here?"

"Amanda said she was locked inside a house with dead people. We need to find out where that house is. Brian may be there."

"Do you really believe Russell, the chief and Brian, with their 'ladies', were part of some sick S&M club here?" she asked in disbelief.

"Yes, I do. I saw pictures of all them, separately and together, in Toyboy's house. They were dressed up in lingerie, strange outfits and black leather. He must have thought anyone seeing them would think they were costumes and not the real thing but I think they were real. And, I think they owned this house she was locked inside and used it for their fun and games. I also think that's where Brian is hiding out. Can you bring her around so we can ask her?"

"No way. I gave her enough to keep her out for hours," Marti replied while inspecting the girl who showed all the signs of having been beaten, starved and without water for several days. "Poor thing. She *was* used. I feel sorry for her. For a plain Jane

like her, Russell must have looked like a prime catch to her. She got more than she bargained for, I think."

"Yeah, well, let's leave them here, call 911 and let them scrape them up and glue them back together again. We'll sort out Russell and his twisted ways later. Right now, we have a house to find. Where's your coat?" Jake scanned the room. "Over there by the filing cabinet."

Marti rose from the desk, grimaced when she put her weight on her right leg and limped over to pick up her jacket beside the cabinet. When she had it in hand and was in the process of straightening up, she froze, staring at the wall behind the cabinet. "There's a hole back there Jake." She pointed to the wall.

Jake slid off the desk and placed his hands on top of the metal cabinet, peering down behind it. "Yes, there is. Get back." He moved it away from the wall and Marti stepped in behind it. She squatted, flinching with the pain in her hip, pushed her hand inside the hole and pulled out a thick manila envelope. She stepped away from the wall and opened it. Inside was a thick handwritten report of all the evidence and forensic information about the victims that Russell had denied Jake in the investigation.

Jake scanned the pages and commented with disgust in his voice, "The bastard's not only a sick monster, he's a vicious one too."

Marti slipped her coat on and helped him put his back on as well. "Where do we start to look for this house? I haven't a clue what to look for. Do you?" she asked.

"For now..." Jake stalked over to Russell's limp body, stuck his right hand into each pocket in turn and pulled a keyring out of the pants pocket. "...we start with these." He dangled the keys. "And, we go ask Sue. I think she'll tell us all about it."

3:00 P.M.

Quigley stared at the Devil's head carved on the top of the trunk with a mixture of revulsion, fascination and sick dread rolling around inside his stomach. He shifted his eyes from the carving, still aware that the carved eyes of the demon were still locked on his face as he bent over the box and pried off the flimsy brass lock.

The trunk had an upper tray filled with mementos: locks of hair, tied with ribbon, small, framed baby pictures, bundles of letters and a velvet box filled with a gold charm bracelet, assorted charms with their o-rings pulled apart and a jumble of expensive hair combs. Quigley scanned through all of it, searching for anything that would tell him what he wanted to know.

He lifted the top tray out and went through the contents of the bottom part as methodically as he had the top.

Suddenly sick to his stomach, he clutched a handful of newspaper clippings, doctor reports, computer readouts and various handwritten sheets of notes. *It's all here*, he thought while he randomly read bits and pieces of what he held.

Lying at the bottom of the trunk, a thick blue roll of heavy paper beckoned to him. Quigley tucked the documents into his coat pocket and picked the roll up with shaking hands. He untied and unrolled the papers only to almost drop them when he saw what he held.

"Blueprints. This is the killing place," he muttered while he grabbed his notebook and pen and jotted down the address.

3:15 P.M.

"Where the hell could she be?" Jake growled while he pressed his face against the glass of the Red Rib and inspected the interior. "She never closes this place this early."

"Well, she has today Jake. Maybe we should try her house. Maybe she's sick today or out of town shopping," Marti responded from the passenger seat of Jake's car.

Jake pulled his cell phone out of his coat pocket and dialed the chief's home number. "We'll see," he muttered while he listened to the ringing on the line.

After several rings, and no answer, Jake punched the off button and stuffed the phone back into his pocket. He fingered his moustache in agitation. "Maybe the police station," he muttered and pulled the phone back to dial. When the dispatcher reported that the chief hadn't checked in yet, Quigley gave it up.

He got back into the car and leaned back in the seat, feeling tired, defeated and out of time. "Where the hell is that house?" he asked rhetorically.

"Can we get Quigley's girlfriend to do a computer search for any houses owned by the chief, Russell, Brian or Toyboy?" Marti asked.

Jake turned to her with a wide grin. "You are a genius, an absolute genius," he exclaimed. He pulled the phone out of his pocket once again and punched in the number

for directory assistance. "Give me the number of Tigger's Tiger Den please," he instructed the operator, still grinning.

3:30 P.M.

Cam was just about as angry as he could get. He kicked the stack of file folders with his stocking feet before collapsing back onto his couch. "Bloody fuckin' files. 'I'm not a secretary,' I says. 'Does no good to argue,' he says. 'Check the files anyway.' 'I want to search too,' I says. 'No good for anything else right now,' he says. Bloody hell," he muttered, staring at the files like they were living things responsible for his being holed up inside his apartment with them.

Cam leaned over the arm of the couch and flipped open the door of the tiny, apartment-sized refrigerator he used as a lamp table. He eyed the contents with distaste. A dried piece of cheese, a cellophane package of bread with one slice left, a jar of Vegemite and a rotting tomato were all he could see inside by way of food. He retrieved the bottle of Vegemite, opened it, wiped a finger around inside, and stuck his finger in his mouth then tossed the empty bottle beside the trashcan. He snorted, grabbed the last bottle of four X beer and slammed the door shut.

"Bloody place is a mess too. No food, no beer and no entertainment either," he snapped, glaring at the television set he never got fixed.

He took a swig of the beer, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, set it down on the table, where it instantly began to form a matching water ring to those already

decorating the top, and snatched up the next file. "The sooner I get this done, the faster I get out of here," he grumbled while scanning the top sheet.

He almost dropped the file when the name inside registered in his conscious mind. "Holy sheep shit!" he exclaimed while studying the sheets of paper that outlined a person's intimate details and secrets. He flipped the pages, eagerly absorbing the information in the file.

Aware of the mounting excitement growing within him, Cam put the file beside him and snapped up the next one. This time, he did drop it. He picked it back up, placed it with the other and quickly scanned the remaining four files. The last three files joined the other two on the couch.

With a sense of urgency, Cam pulled on his shoes then frantically searched his apartment for a clean shirt to put on. When he had a shirt on, had replaced his tie and properly belted his slacks, he ran a hand through his hair, glanced at his image in the wall mirror, grinned at his rugged face staring back at him and said, "This is your big break mate. Jake will give you an award for this."

His long overcoat hung by the front door. He trotted to it, put it on, grabbed the files off the couch, scowled at the phone he'd never had connected and rushed out the door, slamming it behind him.

3:45 P.M.

Quigley searched among the junk in the back floorboard of his car. "Damn good thing I come prepared," he said when his hand landed on a huge pair of bolt cutters. "Lately, I'm turning into a friggin' cat burglar so I might as well get good at it," he commented with a cheery note as he used the cutters to chew through a heavy safety lock on the metal door.

It took him the better part of an hour to finally get through the tough, expensive lock. When he finally pulled the heavy door open, Quigley felt a bad moment of cop's intuition that told him he may not want to see what was inside. He swallowed the stomach acid flooding into his throat, viciously shoved the fear back down into his sphincter and stepped inside.

It was pitch black inside the bomb shelter and his stomach instantly tied into a knot at the idea of how many places an ambush could be set inside one. Quigley was certain he could remember its layout from the blueprints now lying on the front seat of his car. He stepped inside. *So much for being prepared*, he mentally swore when he realized he didn't bring a flashlight. He stopped in the entrance, able to see part of the room by the thin, winter light streaming through the doorway. A mental image of the layout appeared behind his eyes. *A main room, a small toilet to the left, storage space behind that, both with doors facing inside the room. A large living area attached to the back with one door leading into it. Shelves on the right; should be stocked with supplies. Go for it*, he thought, stepping out of the light and into the darkness to search the shelves with his fingers. A large flashlight was sitting on the end of the first shelf. Quigley picked it up and found the on switch, flooding the room with light.

The room was compact and overflowing with supplies, as Quigley suspected it would be. He stepped around a stack of crates sitting in the middle of the room and moved to the door on the back wall, a metal door like the first, but unlocked. His gut twisted with nervousness while he pulled the only weapon he had from his pocket, a switchblade. The door opened soundlessly, swinging open to reveal a larger room than the one he stood inside. Only a patch of light on the floor showed anything of what the room contained but Quigley could sense its size. He also sensed that he wasn't alone in the room; someone was in there, waiting for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*January 1
3.30 PM*

Cam drove around the town, pushing the speed limit and checking all the places he could think of where Jake and Marti may have gone. “Damn,” he swore. “Where the bloody hell are they?” His mumbling complaints were useless and he knew it. *But*, he thought, *it makes me feel better, even if there’s nobody here to listen, so to hell with it.*

He pulled up in front of Jake’s apartment and hopped out, hoping Jake had returned home for some reason. When he stepped inside the hall, Toyboy’s door abruptly opened, banging on the hallway wall in the process. He staggered out of his apartment with blood splattered over the front of his blue silk shirt, wild-eyed and groping toward Cam with a plea on his face. “Help me. Please. She tried to kill me.” He slumped to the floor.

When Cam rushed to the wounded man’s side and knelt down beside him, feeling for a pulse and finding one, Toyboy looked up into his face and whispered, “She ran out the back way, into the garden. I’m okay, go after her.”

Cam felt unsure about leaving the man in this condition. “You stay here. I’ll be right back.”

He ran into the apartment, through the kitchen and out the back door that opened into a walled garden. Cam quickly scanned the garden for any sign of movement and found none. The back gate stood open. He quickly moved to it and checked the back

alleyway. It was empty on both ends with traffic flowing on the streets visible from the gate.

“Shit,” he swore. Cam returned to the garden, closed the gate and made his way back to apartment where Toyboy sat slumped on the couch, inspecting his chest under the shirt.

Cam stood looking down at him. “How bad is it?”

Toyboy, pale and shaken, dropped the front of his shirt, sighed and slumped back into the cushion before answering, “It’s just a scratch. Did you see her?”

“No. She must have got away.” Cam gingerly sat down on the edge of the couch and asked, “What happened? What woman attacked you? And why?”

Toyboy responded in a tired voice, “I came home to change for tonight’s New Year’s Ball in the city and, when I went into my bedroom, this woman stepped out from behind the door and attacked me with a knife. I don’t know who she was. She was bundled up in some kind of heavy black coat, had dark glasses on and had long, black hair. I managed to fight her off and she ran out the back door. That’s when I came out here, hoping to find Jake home. That’s all I know.” He slumped even further back into the couch cushion, drained from the effort of relating that much. He fingered the blood seeping through his shirt and turned even paler than the heavy makeup he wore. “Am I going to die?” he whispered with a choked sob.

Cam reached out to inspect the wound under the shirt. When Toyboy recoiled, Cam shrugged and commented, “From the look of how much blood that’s there, I’d say you’ll be okay.” He scanned the room for a telephone while he added, “We do have to

call the local police about this though. Where's your phone?" Cam asked in a professional tone.

Toyboy's body instantly came forward and a hand shot out to grasp Cam's arm. "No, please, no policemen. I trust Jake but the local ones...." He cast his eyes downward before finishing the sentence. "...they don't treat gays so nice here, you know? No police. Please Cam?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean about the local cops," Cam said while politely pulling his arm away from Toyboy's grasp and standing up. "Okay. If you're sure you're okay, I'll let it go. But, you need to change your locks and see to that cut. Okay?" He moved toward the open doorway.

Toyboy did not rise to see him out. A wan smile appeared on his face when he looked up to Cam with gratitude. "Thank you Cam. You're a nice man."

Cam stepped out into the hall and replied, "No worries."

Cam walked down the hall, aware that Toyboy had shut the door quickly behind him. The whole incident had his adrenaline running and he felt like a trapped tiger with no prey to attack. He knocked on Jake's door, got no answer, and left the building with a scowl on his face, mumbling Aussie swear words all the way.

Everything is out of whack lately. Some weird shit happening here and it ain't all the Holiday Killer's doing either, he thought while he climbed into his car and pulled away from the curb. Now, where the hell is Jake?

5:00 P.M.

Quigley covered the man's tortured body with a badly stained blanket he found in the corner of the room. The man didn't open his eyes, flinch, or react in any way. He was laying in a fetal position on a dirty mattress, naked, covered with bruises, cuts, some scabbing and others fresh, and twisted limbs that looked like the bones they contained were broken. Quigley gently reached down to touch the man's neck, searching for a pulse. It was thready and weak. The feel of the man's clammy, cold skin told Quigley he was in shock and, without some kind of medical help soon, the man would die. He withdrew his hand and took a deep breath, preparing to find a phone and call it in.

The man's eyes fluttered open and stared at Quigley. In a hoarse voice, straining to be heard, he whispered, "Connie brought me here. She killed my wife. She tortured me to..." he choked, coughed and gasped for breath.

Quigley instinctively reached out to steady the man with a hand on his shoulder. He could feel the weakened muscles underneath the blanket quiver with the effort the man was making to regain control of his body and his voice. "Take it easy Doctor Nelson. Save your strength. I'll call an ambulance and get you out of here. Then you can tell me all about it."

The man's breathing steadied. He ignored Quigley's words and returned to what he wanted to say, rushing the words like he knew it would be his only chance to tell it. "...she wanted to know the real names of my patients. She wants to kill one of them. You must find her, stop her. She's dangerous. Golden flowers. The city. Please..."

Quigley restrained him with a hand against his shoulder, stopping the man from rising off the mattress. “Whoa there fella. Take it easy. There’s plenty of time to talk after we get you some help.”

The doctor pushed against Quigley’s hand, struggling to rise, to speak. “No, you don’t understand. She found out about the blackmail. I...I used my patients and she used me. We had an affair, my wife followed us to the cabin. Connie drugged me, killed her, got me to tell her about him, about...” Nelson’s breath finally gave out. He collapsed onto the mattress, gasping for breath with every muscle in his body quivering.

“Jesus,” Quigley said while fumbling for the cell phone he’d left in the car. When he remembered where it was at, he swore, “Shit. You stay put doctor. I’ll be right back.”

Doctor Nelson tried one last time. “Kill him tonight. Black and white. Golden Gate. Flowers...”

The effort finally took its toll and William Nelson passed out. His breathing was rough and erratic and his color was pasty and thin. Quigley rose, ran out of the room and out to his car. He grabbed the cell phone hooked into the dashboard and hit 911 with sharp, jabbing actions.

The poor son of a bitch is hallucinating. But, I knew the bitch was the one. Now we have proof, he thought with a mixed feeling of satisfaction and horror at the notion that a woman could have tortured and killed so many people, including what was left of Doctor Nelson.

When he gave the emergency operator all the details she needed to dispatch an ambulance and the police to the site, Quigley punched in Jake’s cell phone number and waited.

5:15 P.M.

"It took us fifteen minutes to get here and another hour and forty-five minutes before Cletus would let us into your office," Jake bellowed at the tiny redhead sitting behind a carved wooden desk with long, elegantly curved legs under it. The desk had no drawers or panels to mar its simple beauty. Nor did it have anything to keep the visitors sitting in chairs in front of it from admiring the view of the woman's legs underneath it either.

Tigger Wagner raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow at Jake's rude outburst, lowered the lids over her startlingly green eyes, crossed a bare leg over the other, pushing her green silk kimono apart far enough to make him feel uneasy, and said, "I was working. My brother has strict orders to keep everyone out when I'm on my computer. He *never* disobeys me," she purred.

Marti shot Jake a warning look, leaned forward out of the guest chair she sat in and looked Tigger in the eye. "Ms. Wagner, please, bear with us. We're under a lot of strain here. One of our agents is missing and may be in great danger. Quigley told us you can do anything on a computer and we need your help. Can you find this house for us?"

Tigger laughed, a deep, throaty laugh for such a tiny woman, and said, "Sure, honey. In fact, I already found it for you. I did it while you were cooling your heels outside. It's out in the boonies, about fifteen minutes outside of town. It's also owned by a very rich man who owns many such houses up and down this state. Very impressive

business he has going there; sex clubs in the country.” She shot Marti a conspiratorial look and Jake a teasing one before winking an eye at him and returning her amused gaze on Marti. “I just enjoy getting a rise out of the guys who think they can push me around, is all. But you, you’re okay. *You* call me *Ms. Wagner* and I like that.” Tigger handed a printout to Marti while flashing her a smile that shouted ‘sisterhood’.

Marti took the paper, the silent offer of friendship, and smiled back. “Thank you, Ms. Wagner.”

Tigger leaned back in her high-backed leather computer chair and grinned. It took ten years off her forty-year old face. “Tigg to you Marti.” She held out a hand. “Friends?”

Marti took it. “Friends,” she stated and rose, preparing to leave the office. She glanced down at the address on the printout and said, “I know this place. It was on next door to a house I was thinking of renting.”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t take it then, huh?” Tigger laughed. “After what you told me about this place, I wouldn’t even feel comfortable living next door to those kind of sickos, chief or no chief,” she added in a more somber tone of voice.

“You can say that again,” Marti responded and stepped to the door to leave.

Jake moved to the office door and opened it for her. Marti shot Tigger one last smile and left. Before Jake moved to follow her, he faced Tigger and shot her a crooked grin. “There was no disrespect intended Ms. Wagner. Please accept my apologies.” He executed a perfect mock bow and left the room with the grin widening as he went.

While Jake moved down the hallway, he could Tigger’s deep, throaty laugh and an answering retort, “None taken good lookin’. Come have breakfast with me and Quig sometime.”

When this is over, I'll take you up on that offer, he thought when he caught up with Marti at the exit to the club. *When we have that maniac caught and I have a decent appetite again.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

January 1
6:00 P.M.

Number eighteen, Mockingbird Lane was the address of a house with no personality at all, except for its remote location in the middle of the countryside. Built during the boom years of the post war era, usually boasting of several bedrooms and bathrooms, it was a sprawling, disorganized conglomeration of architectural styles that added up to a zero on the taste scale.

Jake pulled into the long gravel drive off the main road and marveled at how such ugly people could use such an ugly house in such an ugly way and not be noticed by anybody else in the process. He parked his car outside the three-car garage and shut off the motor. Without warning, he suddenly felt reluctant to go inside, to know what happened inside this monstrosity, to face the loss of another friend. His gut told him Brian was here, hiding, and that nothing between them would be the same after this moment.

Marti sat watching him, waiting patiently for him to move and feeling reluctant to move herself. "There's no lights on in there Jake. He's sure to have seen us drive up and recognize your car. Do you think he'll give himself up if he knows its you?" Her face was pale and wan with strain and an unknown expression Jake couldn't interpret.

He squeezed her hand, turned and opened the car door. When he stepped outside into the night air, he stared at the house but spoke to her. "I don't know but let's find out. One way or another, this has to end tonight."

Marti got out of the car and joined him on the walk to the house. The front of the house, and all along the walkway, was thickly planted with flowering bushes, lending the night air a rich, fragrant scent reminiscent of tropical plants. Frogs croaked among the thick leaves and fireflies flitted between them. The misty musk of Magnolia floated around their heads while they moved toward the door. Marti inhaled it with pleasure. “Magnolias. How odd,” she commented when they approached the plain wooden door.

“Not so odd when you consider that this entire case seems to reek of southern details,” Jake said while knocking on the door and inspecting the front bay window with interest. “The place feels deserted,” he added in a mumble when he knocked a second time.

An odd, dead feel emanated from the house, like it had been left some time ago. Nothing stirred; no light of any kind shone from any of its many windows and no sound penetrated the small, claustrophobic porch. Marti shivered, looking up at the dark windows then behind into the thick shrubbery at their backs. “This place is creepy,” she commented while briskly rubbing her arms through a heavy coat.

Jake tried the door handle and, much to his surprise, found it open. He pushed the door until it hit something, stopping it. Jake whispered, “Stay behind me Marti. I don’t like the feel of this.”

She stepped behind him without argument.

Jake stepped inside a small foyer with open rooms to the right and left and a staircase leading to the second story directly in front of them. On both sides of the staircase a small hall led back further into the house. Jake stepped to the right and peered into a large living room. He found a light switch next to the door and flicked it up. The

room flooded with soft light from several lamps scattered around the room. Stunned by how mundane it looked, Jake stared around the room in silence before saying, “It looks like the home of some middle-class family.”

Marti stood on tiptoe and looked into the room over his shoulder. “That’s what makes this place so damned creepy; it’s not what it appears to be.”

Jake turned and inspected the foyer in greater detail now that a light threw it into clearer view. It was an average house with a nondescript look; wood and tile, bland colors and no decorations that made it stand out in any way. He moved to the opposite room, found the light switch, and turned it on. “The dining room and kitchen. Nothing special here either,” he said, already turning away toward the stairs.

He motioned for Marti to follow and moved down a short hallway on the left of the stairs. It led to a bathroom and a storage area under the stairs that contained a vacuum cleaner and broom. The right hall led to a recreation room on the rear side of the house. A pool table and a bar dominated the room. Everything was in place and clean, as if waiting for its owners to return.

“Maybe we got the wrong house,” Marti said while moving slowly around the room and peering out into a backyard with a pool and barbecue. “This can’t be where Brian has been staying; it looks like there hasn’t been anyone here for awhile.”

“There’s still the upstairs,” Jake responded while moving back down the hall toward the staircase.

Marti found a light switch at the base of the stairs and turned it on. They moved confidently up the stairs and onto a small balconied hallway. Two doors faced them and one at each end faced inward. “This feels familiar somehow,” Jake whispered while

moving toward the left-hand door. He slipped his gun out of its holster, ready to shoot if necessary. He gripped the door knob and shouted, "Brian, it's Jake. We know you're in here. Come on out. We want to help." Jake knew he'd just broken a cardinal rule of police procedure; never let the bad guy know where you're at, keep the element of surprise, and always prepare for the worst.

This is my friend, damn it. I don't want to shoot him. Come on Brian, come out for God's sake and let's be done with all this, Jake thought while he slowly twisted the knob until he felt the catch release.

He flung the door open and leaped inside, moving to the side with his gun held up and moving from side to side. At the same moment, Marti reached her hand around the doorframe, fumbling for a switch, found one and turned the overhead light on. Jake blinked, forcing his vision to compensate for the abrupt change as quickly as possible. "God damn it, Marti, don't do that again. I couldn't see..." Jake stopped and let the realization sink in, in spite of his mind's unwillingness to accept the evidence of his eyes. It only took a split second to register what was in front of him and to wish he hadn't come inside after all. The chief's flaccid body lay on a bare bed, spread-eagled, nude, with a bloodstained strip of white satin tied in a bow around his neck. The chief's rotund body was covered with bruises and cuts, as if he'd been in a gang fight and was outnumbered. His bloodshot eyes bulged, sightlessly staring up at a mirror over the bed.

Marti stepped into the room, stopped and gasped with a hand over her mouth and her eyes wide with shock. She froze in place, watching Jake approach the body while putting his gun into a coat pocket. "He was strangled," she choked.

Jake inspected the man's body without emotion, stepped back and moved toward Marti while replying, "Yes, and not that long ago either. Rigor hasn't set in yet." He took her arm and pulled her out of the room. "I want you to go back to the car and lock yourself in. I'm going to check out the other rooms." He pushed her gently toward the stairs. "Go, and don't forget to lock the car doors." He watched her move down the stairs and out the front door before turning to the second bedroom.

This time, Jake turned the knob and slammed the door open while holding his body tightly against the side of the wall. He listened intently for any sound, rustle, footstep or indication that a killer lurked inside the room. After several seconds of patient waiting, Jake crouched down and cautiously moved into the room. Light from the hall poured through the doorway, making the details in the room easy to see. The room was a mirror image of the one that contained the chief's body. A big bed, thick carpet and a mirror on the wall. The only difference Jake could see were two pairs of large, metal rings embedded into the wall facing the bed. Dark splotches splattered across the yellow paint on the wall caught his eye. He moved closer and inspected them. "Blood," he murmured while backing away to take in the entire pattern. "This must be where Amanda was held." He frowned at the stains on the cuffs hanging loosely down the wall. "This damned house was used for more than sex," he spat before moving back out into the hall and toward the third room.

When Jake tried to turn the knob and found it locked, he slipped his gun back out of the coat pocket he'd kept it in. Eyeing the door with suspicion, he backed up, gathered himself and lunged against it with his right shoulder, hoping the slash in the left side wouldn't start bleeding again in the process. The door gave way with a loud crack when

the doorframe broke under his weight. Jake fell into the room and rolled, coming up on one knee with the gun held in front of him, and scanning the room from corner to corner as he moved.

Instinctively, he gagged when the odor of rotting flesh hit his nostrils with enough force to drive a man to his knees. Jake felt his testicles crawl up into his belly in reaction to the assault. He choked the bile back when it rose into his throat and took short shallow breaths while he searched the murky room for the source of the smell. His gaze didn't have to travel far. The room contained no furniture at all. But, chained to the far wall, two bodies hung limply in hand and ankle cuffs attached to rings similar to those in the last room.

Jake felt his head swim and his stomach knot up in revulsion at what his mind was trying to deny he was seeing. He vomited what was left of his meager dinner, groaned and went down on both knees, supporting himself on his hands. He stared at the sickly green carpet, trying to drive the image that was just burned into his mind back out. Brian and Sue Hartigan, side by side, hung like forgotten flyblown sides of meat on the wall. Both were covered with slashes, bruises and dried blood.

"Dear God," Jake moaned when he forced himself to look again.

He rose on shaky legs and bought enough time to gain back some control when he found the light switch and turned it on, flooding the room with harsh neon. Then Jack turned to face the gruesome sight on the wall again. His legs locked, unwilling to work. Jake forced them to move him toward the bodies, and stopped trying to control them when they would not approach any closer than three feet. Brian had a neat bullet hole in the side of his temple but Jake couldn't find a matching one on Sue's head. He reached

out toward her hair with images of Pat welling up from his nightmares. "I'll kill the fucker for this. To hell with the law; I'll kill him when I catch him," Jake said with a mixture of choked rage and agonized pain.

Jake felt for a pulse on her neck and found none. He did the same on Brian, knowing it was useless but following his training anyway. When he finished, Jake turned to the room and quickly moved around it, searching for any piece of evidence that might tell him who had done this. The room was bare of any furniture or personal belongings, not even the clothes Jake knew Brian, the chief and Sue had on when they arrived.

He left the room on steadier legs, and his stomach holding out, and moved with purpose toward the last bedroom. Without preamble, Jake threw the door open, stepped in and stopped in the doorway. He flipped on the overhead light, uncaring if the killer was lying in wait to ambush him. He felt beyond caring at that moment.

In contrast to the other sparsely furnished rooms, this one was filled with ornate furniture and a huge wall long closet with mirrored doors. The King sized bed was covered with a jumble of men's and lady's clothing. Shoes were strewn over the floor and underwear hung on the bedposts in wild abandon. Jake felt sicker than he did when he first saw the bodies of his friends. The furniture, drapes and wallpaper looked like something right out of Lady Chatterley; ornate, tasteless and bawdy. The closet, walls and ceiling were covered with mirrors.

Jake walked into the middle of the room, seeing his reflection in every surface, and took a closer look at the mound of clothing. He spotted the chief's uniform, Brian's basic black garments and assorted women's wear all mixed together. In the corner of the room, a large movie camera on a tripod was aimed at the bed. Jake opened the camera,

took out the cassette of film and slipped it into his pocket. Near the door, a long wall of mirrored closet doors ran down the length of the room. Jake stepped up to them and opened them one by one. A riot of color met his eyes when he had them all open. Packed tightly on the rod were costumes of every kind. "Damned place looks like a clubhouse for perverts," he murmured while fingering some of the coat-hangers aside to see them better.

Disgusted with what he'd found and in the room, and with the human carnage in the others, Jake turned on his heel and left. While he descended to the ground floor, aware that he had a lot of explaining to do when the local cops showed up and found their chief dead, Jake punched in the number for the police station. By the time he reached the car, the locals had enough of the story to have every unit they owned rolling toward the house and Jake wanted to be long gone before they got there.

Marti's pale face peered out of the car at him as he approached. *I must look like death warmed over*, he thought when he saw the look of anxiety and sick knowledge on her face. *No, that's how Brian looks*, he amended the thought, feeling his stomach roll over again. *The only one missing is Toyboy. That sonofabitch has a lot of talking to do when I get a hold of him. He's the one who got Brian mixed up with all of this in the first place and that queer bastard is going to pay for it one way or another.*

Jake watched Marti unlock the driver's door before he opened it and slid in behind the wheel. He avoided looking at her while he started the engine and slipped it into gear. He backed out of the driveway, turned around and headed toward the main road.

"What else did you find?" Marti whispered in a hoarse voice.

"He was there. Dead. And so was Sue Hartigan," Jake responded in a dead voice.

"Where are we going?" she asked with a waver in her voice that indicated she was afraid.

"To find the only member left of that sick club who can tell me who else had access to their little secret place; the person all of them have been protecting, keep hidden, the one who probably killed them."

"Do you think Toyboy..."

"No, I doubt he's capable of murder but I bet he knows who did, and I'm going to get it out of him if I have to kill him to get it," Jake interrupted her question.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

January 1

9:00 PM

Jake's cell phone rang inside his coat pocket before they could get very far. He held the steering wheel with his left hand and used his right to fumble it out of the pocket before handing it to Marti. "You answer it Marti. I have some heavy thinking to do before we get to Toyboy's place."

She took the phone and hit the 'on' button then pressed it to her ear. "Hello. Marti Joyner here," she said, trying to sound as professional as possible just in case it was Jake's boss.

To her surprise, the voice on the other end was Quigley's. She sat with the phone glued to her ear, unable to move, while she listened to him tell her where he was at and what he'd found there. When Quigley finished his report, Marti responded with, "Doctor Nelson? William?" she asked with disbelief in her voice.

Jake glanced over at her and scowled. "Who is it?"

She ignored his question and continued to listen for a few more moments before she closed the connection. Then she turned her face toward Jake and said, "That was Quigley. He broke into Connie Braxton's apartment and found some kind of blueprints for a bomb shelter. He went there and found William locked inside a back room. He'd been tortured and was near death. Quigley called the cops and an ambulance. He wants us to come there. He has information he tells me is vital to catching the real killer." Her voice and demeanor were deadpan, numb, and bland in tone. Her face was pale and drawn.

Without commenting on what she'd just told him, Jake threw the Cougar into a fast turn and hit the accelerator. His hands gripped the wheel until his knuckles turned white and his face stared ahead at the city streets as they whizzed by, faster and faster.

This whole fucking day is a nightmare of death, he thought while he turned into the gravel lot where Quigley's car sat parked outside a metal building.

When Jake's car skidded to a halt in the gravel beside his car, Quigley stepped out of the building and moved toward Jake and Marti as they opened the car doors and stepped out. He met them before they reached the door of the building. "An ambulance just left with Nelson but the cops haven't showed yet." He glanced at his watch. "What the hell is taking them so long?" he asked rhetorically.

"They had a call from us. I'll bet they're on their way to the old house instead of here," Jake answered. He nodded at the building. "You went through everything there already? Was there anything worth taking a look at myself?"

"Old house? What old house?" Quigley asked with a puzzled look on his face.

"In a minute. You told Marti you have new information that will help us catch the guy. What is it?" Jake asked, ignoring Quigley's question and his puzzled look.

Quigley shrugged. "The doc told me Connie Braxton was one of his patients. He got involved with her and, after he set his building on fire, he took her up to Tahoe with him. She drugged him and killed his wife, Lana, who followed them up there. Connie brought him down here, tortured him and forced him to reveal the name of one of his patients. Seems she's convinced this guy was responsible for the killings and she's after him. Nelson told me she's going to kill him tonight in the city. Why she wants to kill this guy or is killing herself is still a mystery. That's just about all he could manage before he

blacked out. Seems Connie is at least responsible for some of the deaths lately. I thought you'd want to know that. She's in this up to her neck. There's a connection, we just have to find it."

Marti touched his arm, reminding him she stood beside him. "Who is she going to kill? Where in the city?"

Quigley looked down at her and answered, "Nelson didn't tell me. We need his records but they were all burned, weren't they?" he concluded with frustration coloring the question.

Jake scowled at Quigley. "Why the hell couldn't you just tell us all this on the phone? We were on our way to Toyboy's place to question him about the old house. I'm losing valuable time standing around here jawing when I can be catching a killer."

Quigley's face suffused with anger. "Look, you told me you wanted to be in on everything I found, everything I do. Personally, that's what you said. That's what I'm doing here, following your orders. And what the hell is this about an old house?" His fists were clenched at his sides while he glared eye-to-eye with Jake. "Don't you think you should return the favor and tell *me* what the hell is going on for a change?"

Jake snapped, "I don't have time for this. If there's nothing here to see, I'm going." He turned and started for the car.

Marti shouted at his retreating figure, "Hold up, damn you Jake! He's right. You're acting like this whole case, including Brian's death, is your concern alone. It isn't."

Jake froze in place, staring straight ahead at the car with his back to them. He turned slowly to face Quigley and Marti. His mouth was compressed into a thin, white line, his eyes flashed blue thunder, and his body was tense and ready to pounce.

When Marti and Quigley, standing side-by-side, defiantly stared back at him, their faces set in anger and stubbornness, Jake forced his body to relax. "“Okay, you’re right. We’re supposed to work as a team here.” He moved woodenly back to face them. “Marti, you tell him what we found at the house and I’ll go take a look at this shelter, just in case.” Jake moved to the shelter and stepped inside, leaving Quigley and Marti just as angry as they started.

Quigley watched Jake disappear into the building before he glanced down at Marti. “That son of a bitch is taking all this personal, isn’t he?” He sighed.

Marti stared at the door where Jake had disappeared. “Yes, he is. Way too personal to be objective or cautious,” she whispered while her face transformed from anger into a pained, worried frown.

At that moment, Cam’s standard issue government car came barreling into the lot like he was fleeing from demons. The car slid in beside Jake’s and Cam threw the door open, leapt out and trotted to Quigley and Marti, panting with adrenaline overload, “Where’s Jake? I have to talk to him.” He waved a handful of file folders in their faces while searching the area with his eyes. “He’s not going to bloody believe this.”

Quigley reached out and gripped Cam’s shoulder. Cam flinched when the big man dug his fingertips into his flesh. Quigley dug them in deeper until he had Cam’s undivided attention. “Calm down. Tell us what you found. Jake’s inside and he’ll be out soon. Calm down, dammit.”

Cam moved away from Quigley's grip and started toward the building, ignoring the words. "Jake! You gotta see this mate," he shouted while he headed toward the door.

Jake almost collided with him when he came out of the building. "What the hell are you shouting about?"

Cam thrust the files into Jake's face and jabbered, "These files. These were at the doctor's place in Tahoe, remember? I went through them like you said. This is bloody strange mate..."

Jake took the files and, while opening and looking through the first one, said, "Get a grip on yourself Cam," with a deep, authoritative voice.

Cam stammered, "Sorry mate. I got excited. We got 'em. We finally got 'em Jake."

Quigley and Marti had moved up beside them. Marti patted Cam on the arm. "Calm down Cam. We've all found out some new information today. We have to absorb it all."

A glimmer of rage shown through Jake's face when he lifted it to make eye contact with the others. They were waiting to hear what the files contained. "It would seem the good doctor told the truth. He was blackmailing his patients and these five in particular." He held the files up. "Connie Braxton, diagnosed with maniac depression, Brian Denton, diagnosed with suicidal tendencies because of his homosexuality, Wayne Bramson, wealthy son of Edgar Bramson, owner of the cosmetics company in Atlanta. And, surprise, surprise, this company is the one that manufactures the mint lipstick our killer likes to use. The last two of the good doctor's patients are Russell Frasier, being treated for violent sexual tendencies, and Amanda Scott for her propensity for being a

victim of any kind to anybody.” Jake sighed with disgust. “My God, I thought they were all at least marginally normal. I must be losing my touch to have missed these five.”

“Who’s Wayne Bramson?” Quigley asked while glancing at the files Jake handed to him.

“He’s our Holiday Killer, I’d say,” Marti responded while looking over Quigley’s arm at the file. “Violent behavior, obsessive but violent attachment to his mother, southern born...” She looked up at Jake. “It’s all here Jake; every bit of it.”

“Yes, but who the hell is he now? And where is he?” Jake growled with frustration.

“He’s attending some big party in the city and Connie is going there to kill him,” Quigley said in response.

“How the hell do you know that?” Cam asked, surprise on his face.

“The doctor told me before he blacked out. He said Connie was using him to get this man’s name. She intends to kill him and, after what I saw in her house earlier, I’m inclined to agree with him.”

“What did you find in her house?” Marti asked, looking up at him.

“I found a small trunk full of newspaper clippings about every killing since the beginning of last year. I also found computer printouts, photos, business records and a mountain of other documents relating to this case. Too much for me to go through right then. And, when I found the blueprints to this place...” He nodded at the shelter. “...my gut told me I’d found our killer.” He frowned. “At least one of our killers anyway. She’s been working on finding this killer for a very long time, I’d say,” Quigley replied.

Cam's face was pale as he asked, "But why? Why is this bloke so important to her; enough that she's willing to kill?"

"We don't know Cam but we better find her and this man, and fast," Jake stated. He turned to Quigley with urgency in his voice. "Did the doctor say where in the city?"

Quigley's face screwed up in concentration before clearing. "Yes! He mumbled Golden Gate flowers. I thought he was hallucinating but I think he was trying to tell me the park; Golden Gate Park, the botanical gardens."

Cam snapped his fingers. "That's right! Toyboy told me there's some fancy costume ball for charity going on there tonight. That must be it."

"Yes, and it says here that Wayne Bramson owns an apartment overlooking the park and that he's the chairman of the Gay Rights organization in the city. I'd venture to say that this man will be there in the limelight and Connie will be there to greet him with open arms."

Marti checked her watch. "What time is this thing supposed to start?" She searched the three men's faces, waiting for an answer. None replied. "Do we even have some kind of description for this Wayne guy? How are we going to find him there? This thing is bound to attract thousands."

Jake handed her the man's file. "All I can see in there is his age; 42 years old. That doesn't give us much to go on."

"Surely the man will be easy to find if he's hosting this shindig," Quigley replied.

Jake didn't answer; he pulled his cell phone out and dialed a number instead. When it connected he said, "Gen, can you find a description and the address for a man named Wayne Bramson? He lives in San Francisco and chairs for the Gay Rights

organization. Sure. Okay.” He hung up and met three pairs of eyes watching him expectantly. “She’ll call when she gets it. In the meantime, I’d suggest we take one car and get our asses to the city as fast as we can.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

January 1
11:30 P.M.

Every street for blocks around Golden Gate Park was bumper to bumper with parked cars; some legally, most illegally. Jake made the circuit around the huge, gaily lit, city park looking for a place, any place, to park the Cougar. His hands clutched the wheel with a death grip that became increasingly tighter and tighter as each minute ticked by.

Marti, Cam and Quigley all craned their heads out the windows, searching for any clear spot to park. Crowds of costumed merry-makers walked in groups along the sidewalks and overflowing onto the streets, clogging them with wall to wall people, and making the going even slower and more frustrating. Many were drunk and, in spite of the winter cold, half-naked, dancing and singing with mindless abandon.

When the car reached one of the main entrances to the park again, Jake spat out, “Damn it to hell!” and jerked the wheel to the right, pushing through the milling crowd of revelers at a dangerous speed, and onto the wide walkway leading into the park. Many of the people crowded around the car swore, hit the top and hood with closed fists and threw bottles of liquor at them as the Cougar passed.

“Jake, what the hell are you doing?” Marti screamed when a bottle thrown at the windshield shattered against it, leaving a wide star-shaped web of cracks behind in the process.

A high pitched, howling wail flooded through the car, adding to the general roar of the crowd outside. Marti swiveled around in her seat and peered down through the break between the bucket seats. She craned her head to see the floorboard between Cam’s

feet, where the howling was loudest. “Glock?” she asked, lifting an inquiring eyebrow at Cam.

At the mention of his name, the cat popped his head out from under the driver’s seat and glared up at Cam. Immediately, he ducked back under the seat but his eyes shown large and round.

Cam bent at the waist and peered into the dark space under the seat in front of him. “Yep, the moggy’s here. How the bloody hell did he get in here without us noticing?”

“He’s a Houdini,” Jake grumbled while keeping his eyes on the milling crowd swarming around the car as he continued to push through their midst. When a man dressed as a pirate slashed a huge sword at the car’s hood, imprinting a dent in the top, Jake forgot about Glock and concentrated on getting the car through the crowd as quickly as he could. “Asshole,” he snarled when the pirate tried to slash the canvas top as the car passed him on the right.

“Jesus,” Quigley, leaning out the side window, swore when a pedestrian elbowed him in the nose and he threw his body back inside the car, colliding with Cam in the back seat.

“You bloody fuckers, clear the way. Police!” Cam shouted while he hung halfway out of the window waving his badge.

“We don’t have time for this shit,” Jake bellowed while honking the horn and maneuvering the car around knots of people who stared, white-faced and shocked, at the car bearing down on them.

When the crowd thinned, moving off to the left toward a mass of people gathered around a huge stage, Jake suddenly saw a huge concrete fountain only a few feet from the front of the car. He slammed on the brakes, stopping the car's forward motion only inches from the lip of the fountain. He threw the driver's door open and leapt out. "Let's move," he shouted over the roar of the crowd and the loud rock music that threatened to deafen him, even from several yards away.

Cam and Quigley crawled over the back seat and squeezed out the door behind Jake while Marti stepped out of the passenger door. Instantly, people milling around, talking, laughing, and pushing toward the stage off in the distance surrounded the car. A few began to climb up on the hood and the top, craning their necks to see over the crowd.

Marti was pressed up against the closed car door, edging down its polished side, and trying to make her way toward the three men who were battling to remain in place beside the opposite side of the car. "Jake!" she screamed when three men dressed in black and white mime outfits grabbed her arms and began dragging her toward the milling crowd around the stage.

A strong hand appeared through the tangle of human bodies and gripped Marti's wrist, yanking her back toward the car. The three men who had grabbed her kept moving toward the music, oblivious to the loss of their temporary captive. Jake spoke into Marti's ear. "Stay close or we'll lose each other in this crowd."

Cam and Quigley pressed against them, front and back, and the four made their way steadily toward the staging area. The sounds of microphone feedback squealed through the air as they struggled through a thick wall of people and approached the right side of the stage. Stairs leading down into a curtained area behind the stage wound down

from the platform. Jake searched the area for some kind of security, police or private, but found none. “With this size a crowd, you’d think they would’ve assigned some cops to patrol,” he murmured.

Quigley replied from the rear, “Not likely. The local cops usually stay out of these kinds of things. We’ll get no help here.”

Jake pulled Marti along, making his way toward the curtain as a man dressed in a Louis XIV costume appeared from behind the curtains and held his hands up, trying to capture the restless crowd’s attention. “May I have your attention please?” the announcer bellowed into the microphone. The crowd ignored his plea and he went on. “I want to thank all of you for showing up tonight and supporting our effort to make California a free and safe place for us to live. Your donations will insure continuing research in our fight against Aids. And, now, without further ado, let the show begin!” He swept his arm dramatically behind him where the curtain was lifting, revealing a chorus line of muscular dancers dressed in cancan outfits stood with arms linked, ready to kick into action when the music began.

At the entrance to the area behind the stage, Jake paused and instructed Cam and Quigley. “Each one of you take a building...” he nodded at the administration buildings on each side of the stage. “...and see if you can locate either Bramford or Connie. If you find him, tell him nothing, just hold him somewhere and call me. If you find Connie, same thing. Either way, I want them found, searched for weapons and securely held until I can get there and question them. We’ll search back here. And be careful, they’re both dangerous.”

Quigley leaned toward Jake and whispered, “Jake, do you carry a backup piece?”

Without hesitation, Jake reached down and slid a small caliber pistol from a holster strapped to his ankle. He handed it to Quigley without comment. Quigley took it surreptitiously and slid it into his pocket. Jake spun and disappeared through the curtain, holding on to and dragging Marti with him.

When they entered the area behind the stage, Jake felt the claustrophobic reaction of being thrust inside a crowded room stop him in his tracks. A large area, curtained around its perimeter, was filled with so many people that they could hardly move. All were rushing about, talking, laughing, dressing or undressing, and none of them took any notice of Jake or Marti as they stood staring at this wild array of humanity. Jake forced his gaze up into the clear night sky in order to dispel the false reaction. He shook his head to clear it of all but the focus he needed to find Connie and the elusive Mr. Bramson.

Marti squeezed his hand, bringing his attention back to the wild cavalcade before them. “There’s Connie,” she whispered while pointing across the crowd to a small knot of television cameras and microphones set up next to a tiny stage at the back.

Connie Braxton, dressed as Peter Pan, stood talking with a man dressed as Captain Hook. They both clutched microphones attached to black boxes held with a strap across their shoulders. She was gesturing wildly while talking to the man and her face was twisted with anger. The chorus line on stage were tromping hard on the boards to the strains of ‘Cabaret’, making it impossible for any voices to be heard backstage.

Jake and Marti started to make their way through the crowd toward the announcer. Along the way, they lost sight of her and picked up the pace, elbowing aside performers, dressers, and people dressed for the street, who were all talking at once. Halfway into the crowd, a long-fingered hand reached out and gripped Jake’s shoulder,

stopping him in mid-stride to turn and face an unfamiliar person standing behind him. Jake couldn't tell if the figure was male or female until a familiar voice shouted, "Jake, my love! You came! How simply delightful."

Toyboy stepped up, swishing the full skirts of a red and black tango dancer's outfit, and hugged Jake to his chest with enthusiasm. "I'm so glad you decided to come after all." Toyboy turned his heavily painted face toward Marti. "And you brought the delicious Marti too." His smile was genuinely happy and his black eyes sparkled with humor as they raked over Marti's rumpled blue blouse, khaki slacks and leather jacket. "Nice costume dear but what are you supposed to be?" he shouted over the thunder of applause coming from the crowd watching the show.

Jake pushed the man away with as much tact as he could muster under the circumstances, searched the crowd for Connie and replied, "We're here to find somebody Toy." When he could not locate Connie, he scowled, turned back to Toyboy and said, "Maybe you can help us. We're looking for Wayne Bramson, the chairperson for this show. Do you know him or know where we can find him?"

Toyboy pulled a black lace fan out of the full sleeve on his arm and fanned his face. "Why in the world would you want to find that old fart when you can have me darling? I was just getting ready to change into something more flattering. I'll hurry if you want." he fluttered his long black fake lashes with a smirk of a smile playing over his red lips.

"Dammit Toyboy, I don't have time for this shit. Where is Bramson? If you don't know then get the hell gone and let me get on with it," Jake snarled while continuing to scan the crowd for Connie.

‘There she is!’ Marti screeched while pointing toward the side wall of the canvas.
“She’s leaving.”

Jake and Marti left Toyboy standing there sputtering with questions and rushed toward the right side of the dressing area. They hit the curtain wall side by side and pushed through it, moving as fast as they could through the seething crowd. To their right, a band on stage had started playing an even louder rendition of ‘Dancing in the Street’ and the crowd around them began to gyrate in time to the music.

As they made their way toward the edges of the people pushing forward, Cam joined them, panting with exertion. “I just saw Russell. He was headed toward that big glass house monstrosity toward the middle of the woods.” His face was florid and his eyes shone with excitement.

Jake kept on pushing through the crowd with Marti and Cam trailing behind him. Several yards ahead and to the left, he could see the large glass house that contained tropical flowers. It rose above the crowd like a sentinel, watching the chaotic party of humans with a cold, hard eye of disdain. “Russell? I left him tied to a wall in the morgue. What the hell is he doing here?” he asked rhetorically while elbowing a man and woman with linked arms aside.

“Where’s Quigley?” Marti asked while clutching to Cam’s arm and trying to keep up with Jake.

Marti could feel Cam shrug when he replied, “I dunno. He went traipsing off the minute Jake told him to find that bloke, Bramson. I haven’t seen him since.”

By the time they reached the huge glass house doors to the conservatory, the crowds had thinned out enough where they could move freely again. Jake approached the

conservatory, with its steamed up glass panes and looming presence, with a wary air about him. He reached out and stopped Marti from approaching the doors. "If she's in there with Bramson then there's bound to be a showdown of some sort. I'd feel better if you stayed out here Marti. Cam and I will go inside."

"Like hell, I will," Marti protested.

11:46 P.M.

The Peter Pan outfit she wore blended into the thick ferns Connie hid behind. She stood very still, listening to the two men argue as they tried to remain unseen beside a fountain surrounded by thick shrubbery. The tall man in a black suit, the man she'd searched for a year to find, stood with his back to her. She couldn't see his face but his voice—that familiar and hated voice—told her she had finally found him and that, soon, she'd reach the only goal that had kept her alive for that year of searching. She wanted him dead and nothing was going to stop her now.

The man shouting at him was waving his arms around in agitation while his voice rose above the sound of the water falling into the fountain. "I tell you, they're here and they're searching for you. They know you own the house and they're bound to put two and two together now. That bitch Amanda told them just about everything before I took care of her. I stuffed the cunt into a freezer at the morgue. They won't find her any time soon." He laughed before sobering again to complain, "I just managed to get away myself

before the local cops got there. They know about me now and it won't be long before they know about you too. We have to leave the city. Now. There's no time to argue about it," Russell said while clutching the man's shirtfront.

Connie pulled an expensive chrome .44 out of the bag she carried slung on her shoulder. She also took a long strip of white satin, stained with old blood and yellowed with age, from the bag. She fingered the material as if it was a talisman while dropping the bag among the ferns before she stepped out into the open, leveling the gun at the two men who were still oblivious of her presence. When she spoke, it stunned them into silence. "It's too late for that, I'm afraid. I've searched for you for a year now and I won't be cheated of seeing you dead. But, first..."

Both men froze in place. For a moment, the only sound was the incessant trickle and spray of the fountain and a lone cricket playing its music among the ferns. Slowly, the tall man turned to face Connie. His snow-white hair, lined face and hard, blue eyes loomed in the dim light like a specter of empty white space.

Connie gasped and her gun hand wavered for a split second. "You're not the one. Where...who...how..."

Within that moment of indecision, Russell leapt for her and the tall man dove into the foliage with an agility that belied his white hair and lined face. Connie instinctively squeezed the trigger and the report of the large bore handgun rattled the glass panels in the conservatory like a tiny earthquake. In a nightmare of slow motion terror, Connie watched Russell's face disappear in an explosion of blood, flesh and bone, like the shattering of a ceramic doll. His body fell short of her, landing at her feet and settling there like an obedient dog cowing for attention.

A flash of light from the dense bush to the left of the fountain captured her attention until the dull impact of a bullet drove into her chest and threw her backward into the ferns where she'd hidden earlier. She clutched the gun with a death grip and lay on her back with her eyes closed and a dull, fiery rage welling inside what was left of her chest. She held onto the rage, pushing the blackness back with a will stronger than the pain, and she waited for him to come, as she knew he must.

Death must come full circle. Before midnight tonight, it must end, it must, she thought while she listened to the sound of footsteps approaching on the deep, sweet soil that wafted its reassuring scent into her bleeding nose. Then I can rest; I can sleep. Finally, it will be over; finally.

11:52 P.M.

Before the report of the first shot faded away, Jake was through the door of the glass house and running up the walkway, with Marti right behind him. Cam raced around the side of the building at Jake's barked command to cover the back. When the second shot rang out, Jake pushed Marti into the brush on the side of the bricked walkway and ducked down with his gun out and ready.

Another shot rang out, followed by the sound of glass shattering. Jake held his free hand out to Marti, who hunkered in the brush with eyes wide and frightened. "Stay there. Do not move," he instructed her before moving slowly forward.

"What the hell did you shoot at me for? You could have killed me you fool!" a high-pitched, effeminate voice rang off the glass panes. "Who is that dead guy? Oh, dear

me. So much blood. I think I'm going to faint." the quivering voice added after a moment of silence.

A deeper, older voice responded, "Drop the act Wayne. There's nobody here to hear you. He's dead and, if the woman isn't already, she soon will be, the meddling bitch."

Jake squatted behind a thick scrub of oleander bush and waited, trying to get a fix on what direction the voices were coming from. He was so focused on the shots and the direction they came from that it took a minute for the realization of who was speaking to sink into his conscious mind. Jake felt every fiber of his being shrink from that realization.

My God, no. It can't be him, he thought while the truth struggled against his overpowering desire to deny it access and reality.

When the truth won out, Jake stood, ready to face what he now knew to be the inevitable. He held his gun out in a steady hand while he stepped out into the middle of the walkway. He moved with all the robotic grace of an unfeeling machine toward the two men who were now speaking in conspiratorial undertones, the words too low for him to hear clearly. When he turned a bend in the walk and faced them, the last tenuous thread of doubt evaporated and his hand rose with the gun aimed squarely at the chest of his best friend.

"Hello Gary," he said to the tall man who faced him with a shocked, but confident, look of surprise on his face.

"Jake. So, it would seem you can solve a case after all. I was hoping you'd run true to form and drink yourself into a stupor on this one," Gary Ferguson replied with a

trace of superiority and sarcasm in his voice that Jake had heard before but had marked down to good humor and friendship.

“Not hardly,” Jake replied sarcastically in return. “This time, you underestimated me, didn’t you, you sonofabitch?”

Gary shifted his weight onto his left side and slid his right hand into his pocket. “It would seem so, old friend. You do know, don’t you, that you won’t walk out of here alive? Not this time, anyway. I thought you were dead that night in your house but you fooled me, didn’t you?”

Jake’s hand tightened on the pistol grip and his finger added more pressure against the trigger. “You? It was you that night? You killed my wife? Why?” He couldn’t control the anguish in his voice when the question burst out of his mouth.

“I’m surprised at you Jake. You are one dumb prick, you know?” Gary snickered and shot a glance of contemptuous amusement at his male companion. “The stupid bastard really hasn’t figured any of it out after all. You worried for nothing.”

“Why?” Jake bellowed.

Gary waved a long hand into the air as if wiping the words away with disdain. “Oh, why not? It won’t make any difference now anyway, will it Wayne?” he asked Toyboy, who stood next to him like a harlot leaning on her pimp’s every word.

“Not now. Within hours we’ll be out of this country with so much money even the U.S. government won’t be able to get us back.” Toyboy’s voice was deep and masculine. He pulled the wig of full white hair off his head and scratched his scalp under the red hair he’d kept hidden there. “Damn it feels good to be rid of that friggin’ thing,” he said while he tossed the wig into the bushes. “I was getting tired of that disgusting act anyway.”

“Why did you kill my wife and try to kill me Gary?” Jake’s voice was now steel, cold, hard, unrelenting steel.

“Because she knew about me. She knew my...er...tastes...when it came to sex. I made the mistake of thinking she shared my passions, you see. I told her about the chain of special houses I bought; the ones that cater to Senators and Congressmen with a taste for unusual fun and games. Men in power I could use. I told her about the plan I had with Wayne to steal my brother’s company, about how I planned on taking billions with me to a place where the government would welcome me as a valued partner against this weak and ineffectual system. I had a vision, you see. I could bring it all down then rebuild it the way it should be.”

Jake felt his blood run cold. Gary’s references to overthrowing the government didn’t faze him Jake’s mind snagged onto one thing in the man’s monologue; Pat. “She knew? How did she know?” He dreaded the answer but knew he had to hear it.

Gary laughed. “Oh, God, Jake. You are so predictable. She was my mistress, you dumb fuck.” The laugh cut off as abruptly as it started. “But, when she found out about me, the real me, she was determined to tell you, and I knew what you’d do with that information. I knew friendship or loyalty wouldn’t stop you. I knew you had to die and so did she. So, I broke into your house and used the MO of the serial killer you were stalking. I killed her but you lived. I have to admit, that was something of a disappointment.” He sighed.

“Oh, just kill the asshole and let’s get out of here,” Wayne whined while looking wistfully at the broken glass door leading out the side of the building.

“Now I’m beginning to see how it is. You’re Wayne Bramson, the son of the family that owns the cosmetics company in Atlanta.” Jake pointed the gun at Gary. “And you’re his infamous uncle. I’d guess you two have been working to steal the company’s money, haven’t you?” When Jake saw the gleam in Gary’s eyes, he knew he was right. “What I can’t figure out is why the killings? Why butcher all those women and draw attention to yourselves when all you wanted was the money?”

Gary nodded at Wayne and replied, “That’s this dumb fuck’s work. He likes to have a good time and that’s his idea of it. I tried to supply him with other ways by buying the houses but it wasn’t enough for his sick tastes.” He glared at Toyboy with disgust and loathing on his cultured face.

Wayne glared back at him. “What good does it do to have all that money if you can’t buy what you want with it? Even my father doesn’t have enough money for what I want.” He licked his lips and a feral look of bloodlust shone in his eyes. “Pain. It cleanses them, makes them pure again. They have to be pure, angelic, but they never are. They’re all just pussies with mouths and filth running through their veins. My mother, the whore, with her red lips and her ladylike manners, she’s the one I want to purify. But my father would never allow it even though she uses him like a rug, screwing her men right in front of him. God, how I hate that bitch!” His voice had risen to a hysterical pitch by the time he forced out the last few words.

“You see what I have to put up with?” Gary asked Jake with a knowing smile.

“Both of you are sick bastards,” Jake snarled, sick to his stomach and fighting an overpowering urge to put a bullet in their brains without a second thought.

“Yes, we are,” Gary roared while he pulled the gun out of his pocket; the one Jake had been waiting for.

Jake dove to the ground while he pulled the trigger and watched Gary’s shoulder jerk backward with the impact. At that moment, Wayne threw himself toward the broken door but, before he’d taken three steps, a slight figure in green launched itself from the ferns behind Jake and slammed into the man’s midsection with enough impact to throw him to the ground. At the same time, an orange and white bundle of irate energy also launched itself at the fleeing man’s face, targeting the bright red lipstick on his lips.

Marti burst from the walkway behind Jake, shouting, “Freeze,” like a police officer in the movies. She held a .38 Snubnose in front of her but never had a chance to use it. Gary’s gun flashed from the side of the fountain and she crumpled to the ground in a heap.

Jake roared, snatched the .38 off the ground next to Marti, pushed it into his pocket, ducked to the right, and searched for Gary behind the fountain. The leaves of the thick oleander bush behind the fountain still moved from Gary’s retreat through them. Jake stood and launched his body carelessly into the bush behind the fleeing man, mindlessly on fire with rage and the need to kill the man who’d stolen a part of his life. The thrashing of leaves ahead of him told him Gary was sticking to the cover of the foliage. He followed, thrusting his way through the broken branches and crushed flowers Gary left behind. Suddenly, the sound stopped but Jake did not. He threw himself through the last remaining bush and onto the walkway, just in time to see Gary’s retreating figure turn to the right around a bend. Jake was aware they were rapidly approaching the back

door to the massive glasshouse. He ran on, turned the corner, and spotted Gary approaching the door.

“Stop Gary. I’ll shoot you in the back if I have to,” Jake bellowed, freezing Gary in his tracks with his hand on the door handle.

Gary looked over his shoulder. His face was calm, confident and hard-eyed with disdain when he stared at Jake. “No you won’t Jake. You never had the guts to shoot a man who wasn’t aiming a gun back at you.” Gary held his gun loosely in his right hand but did not raise it. His eyes gleamed with confidence in his triumph while he continued to stare back at Jake and his hand began to turn the door handle. “You really are a pathetic asshole,” he added when the door handle clicked open and his right hand appeared under his left arm, holding a gun aimed at Jake’s belly.

Jake felt the bullet take him in the right thigh. Before he lost feeling in it and collapsed onto the ground, he took aim and fired. A neat, round hole appeared on Gary’s forehead a split second later. It matched the round-eyed look of surprise on his face as his body slumped gracefully to the ground.

Abruptly, the glass in the door shattered inward, followed by the elbow that had broken it. Quigley’s face peered through the broken glass at Jake, who had crouched and aimed, ready to fire again if necessary. Jake relaxed his grip on the gun and Quigley pushed the door open, moving Gary’s limp body off to the side with it. When Quigley stepped through the door and glanced down at the dead man, he said, “Holy shit. Couldn’t you have waited for me before you started the party?”

“What the hell took you so long and where is Cam? He was supposed to come through that door,” Jake snarled, lurching to his feet and clutching the bleeding hole in his leg.

Quigley stepped over to him, lifted Jake’s fingers, inspected the wound and pronounced, “You’ll live. It’s a long way from your heart,” before he asked, “I heard a lot of shooting going on in here. Who else is in here?”

“Oh shit, Marti’s been shot,” Jake groaned before turning back down the walkway and breaking into a shambling run.

Quigley caught up with him in two strides, threw his long arm around Jake’s waist and supported his body on the right side. “Where is she?” Quigley asked while they made their way back toward the fountain.

“Past the fountain; on the walkway,” Jake replied as they approached the middle of the conservatory and the fountain loomed in front of them.

A wail of pure terror wafted up from the ground next to the side door. Jake halted, forcing Quigley to stop with him. “Toyboy! He was in on this. He was the one killing the women. Somebody stopped him from going out the side door,” Jake gasped with effort and began to move off in that direction.

Side by side, Quigley struggling to support Jake while holding his gun ready, they came upon Toyboy standing over the prostrate form of Connie Braxton. She was on her back, wearing a Peter Pan costume, covering her mangled chest with one hand dripping with blood, protectively holding the limp form of Glock in the other, and staring with black hate up at Toyboy’s face as he spoke down to her. “Well, bitch. I should have made

sure you died that night. It was a mistake to leave you alive after all. Now, both you pussies are going to die,” he said with a sneer on his face.

“Shoot him!” Jake shouted at Quigley.

Startled, Toyboy looked up at the two men with a twisted, evil grin on his face. Before Quigley could aim and fire, Connie laid the cat down, pulled herself off the ground, slid the small costume dagger from its sheath at her hip and slashed upward toward Toyboy’s crotch, which was barely covered by the ruffles on his dress. Toyboy’s face changed from evil glee to surprised horror when his legs collapsed under him and he fell heavily to the grass, writhing in agony with his hands fumbling for the dagger now protruding from his groin

Quigley now had aim but was unsure what to aim at. He held the gun in front of him while continuing to support Jake with his left arm. When Toyboy fell to the earth, the gun followed his descent.

With a scream of blood-curdling, primal rage, Connie threw her bloodied body onto Toyboy, yanked the dagger from his genitals before straddling his chest, and plunging the dagger down into the man’s throat. A fountain of blood jetted into the air when she pulled the dagger out and thrust it again and again into Toyboy’s throat and face. His hands continued to frantically tear at her arms and hands, fighting for the dagger, his bubbling screams slowly fading.

The gun in Quigley’s hand sighted on Connie’s head but the hand holding it was shaking with a tremor that surprised Jake. Quigley murmured, “I can’t. I can’t kill a woman. Not again.” Quigley’s face was twisted with pain and the deadly lock of indecision that every police officer dreaded, knowing it would probably cost him his life.

Connie raised the dagger one last time, turned her head to stare at Jake and Quigley, with a sad, sweet smile on her lips. The stained white satin was tied around her wrist, a grisly counterpoint to the dripping danger she held. The moment froze for a fraction of a second; a tableaux of horror, revenge, blood, death and retribution.

Jake felt the last remnants of doubt disappear in his mind. He reached out a trembling hand, covered Quigley's gun hand with his own, and slowly forced the gun down. "Let it go. Just let it go," he whispered while making eye contact with Connie.

Quigley lowered the gun.

Jake staggered when he tried to put weight on his leg. He glanced down, surprised at the amount of blood soaking his pants.

"This, from the man who lives by the book?"

"Not anymore. I tossed it out. The book is just paper and ink. It's the people who wrote it that count."

"You just now figuring that out pard?"

"No, but this time I won't forget it."

Quigley shoved the gun into his waistband then put a supporting arm around Jake. "Yeah, I think you're right partner. Let her have him."

Quigley half lifted Jake and headed for the door.

Connie's maniacal laughter followed them as they made their way back to the fountain where Marti was shot.

"Where the hell is she?" Jake asked, scanning the area and noting the blood splattered over the tiles around the fountain.

"I got her Jake. She's out here," Cam shouted from the door.

“Guess the kid’s okay after all,” Jake murmured to Quigley. “I think he’s finally a professional.”

“After all this, hell man, I’m a professional,” Quigley replied with a deep chuckle.

When the sound of sirens penetrated the building’s glass walls, Cam disappeared back outside.

“Here we go again,” Jake sighed.

11:59:59

The dagger came down, one last time, embedding itself to the hilt in Toyboy’s eye and penetrating his brain. The last of Connie’s life’s blood pumped out of her weakening heart. She collapsed onto the grass beside her victim with a whimper.

Wayne Bramson, AKA Toyboy Tilley, AKA the Holiday Killer, ceased to exist and Stephanie Benton, AKA Connie Braxton, was at peace, at last.

“You knew about Pat and Gary, didn’t you?” Jake asked while peering down at Marti on the ambulance gurney across from the one he sat on.

She met his stare with a pained look in her eyes. “Yes, I did.” Her hands moved nervously over the white sheet covering her, sending the IV in her right hand jerking with every movement.

Jake reached out and grasped the hand without the IV. The other hand stopped moving, frozen in place on top of the sheet.

“Why didn’t you tell me? We grew up together, used to tell each other everything. We were...are...best friends. Why couldn’t you tell me?”

“Because you didn’t want to know. You hide from things Jake. You hide from emotions. And...”

“No, I guess I didn’t,” he murmured before turning his head to stare out the ambulance doors.

“Does it still hurt?”

Jake glanced down at her and smiled. “Not anymore. I took some very good advice and let it go...finally.”

“Because of what Gary told you about...her betraying you?” Marti whispered.

He turned to look out the back of the ambulance. “No, it was a long time coming Marti. I just hung onto it. “

Cam and Quigley were talking to the attendants at the rear of the second ambulance that held Connie and Russell’s bodies. A third was open, waiting for the bodies of Toyboy and Gary. Several uniformed policemen and agents in suits stood around the vehicles and moved around inside the conservatory. Kevin Zachary was coordinating the FBI team and shouting orders at technicians inside the building.

Cam was talking with the ever present reporters who pressed against the yellow tape around the site. Jake shook his head and turned to watch Quigley approach the ambulance with Glock cradled in his arms.

Jake took a deep breath, inhaling the fragrance and taste of the tropical flowers wafting in from the open conservatory doors. Then he let it out in a long, slow release. With one last look at the scrambling officers and agents, Jake turned his back on the activity outside and stared down at Marti.

Marti lowered her gaze when his returned to her face.

“What were you going to add? Tell me.”

“What?” She squirmed under the sheet.

“You said, ‘And...’ then stopped. What were you going to say?” The beginnings of a smile quirked his mouth into a curve.

She raised her gaze back to his face and saw understanding and affection there. “And ...I didn’t say anything because I care for you too much to see you hurt anymore,” she whispered.

Kevin made his way to the ambulance with a grin. “So, you got shot up. This’ll mean an award and probably a cushy desk job if you want it Jake.”

“I don’t think so Kev,” Jake replied. He shrugged his shoulders and held up empty palms when Kevin shot him a questioning look. “I don’t know what I’m going to do but I do know I want out. I’ve had enough. I want to sleep without nightmares for a change.”

Kevin nodded his head. “Yeah, I know what you mean.” He paused. “Well, if you change your mind, come see me Jake.”

“I’ll remember it but don’t bet on it Kev.” Jake smiled, feeling like the weight of the world just slid off his back.

Kevin waved then moved off to shout at more agents.

Jake sagged against the side of ambulance and closed his eyes.

“You okay Jake?” Marti asked.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. “Yes, I’m okay; more than okay, but I am tired, very, very tired.”

“It’s no wonder,” she replied while struggling to sit up on the gurney. “You don’t eat right, you drink like a fish, you probably don’t sleep and you drive yourself like a mule on the job.”

She sat up, braced her back against the wall and stared into Jake’s eyes.

“Somebody needs to whip you into shape.”

Jake groaned, pulled his bandaged leg up on the gurney he sat upon and started to lay down.

Quigley stuck his head inside and asked, “Hey! Jake! What do you want me to do with this cat of yours?”

Jake sat back up and groaned again.

Quigley glanced from Marti’s flushed face to Jake’s and bent down to whisper to Glock. “Cat, I think your boss may just be in deeper trouble here than he was before.” He glanced back up at Jake and grinned.

Jake shook his head in consternation at Quigley’s look of amusement. “Can you take care of him for a few days? The doc wants me in the hospital for a once over. He won’t let me out of it.”

“Sure Jake. No problem. I’ll take him to Tigger’s place, if that’s okay with you.”

Jake nodded his agreement.

“You tell her to take good care of that cat,” Marti demanded. “He’s a hero, as far as I’m concerned.”

Jake looked at her with confusion. “All he did was attack Toyboy’s face when he smelled the mint lipstick. What’s so heroic about that?”

“You were so busy playing John Wayne that you didn’t see it,” Marti retorted.

Ignoring the implied criticism, Jake asked, “So? What did I miss?” He glanced at Glock who lay contentedly licking the blood on Quigley’s jacket.

“When you left me...” Marti paused for emphasis. “Glock came running. Toyboy found me laying there and was going to finish me off. But, when Glock climbed on my chest, hissing, spitting and showing fangs, Toyboy ran like hell.” Marti smiled at Glock, who now had his eyes closed and was purring like a dysfunctional chainsaw. “He saved my life.”

Jake and Quigley stared at the cat then at each other.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Jake blurted. “He was fixed when I got him but it would seem he’s grown them back.”

All three sputtered then burst into laughter.

Glock stopped purring then opened his eyes and gave them all a haughty look before turning his head into Quigley’s chest and summarily falling asleep.

EPILOGUE

Quigley sat with his bare feet up on a hassock while Tigger stood at his back, kneading the muscles on his neck and shoulders. He held a cup of tea in one hand and a cigarette in the other with a grin of total contentment on his face as he faced Jake, Cam and Marti, who looked just as contented. “Ain’t she something?” he asked the others seated around the large living quarters he shared with Tigger behind her bar.

“You got me shot you sonofabitch!” Marti ignored Quigley and shouted at Jake’s smiling face. “You did that moronic movie routine and got me shot.” Her face was red with anger as she stared at him, ignoring the others who sat watching the argument with amusement. “Then you ran off and forgot about me!” she shouted, even louder.

“What moronic movie routine?” Jake asked in a calm voice. He stroked Glock’s head with a steady hand while the cat purred with a contentment that matched his own. He was aware that he was baiting Marti and enjoying every moment of it.

Marti tried to push herself out of the deep armchair but the cast on her right arm prevented her from accomplishing it. “You smug bastard. You know very well what I’m talking about.” She collapsed back into the chair. “You had them both in your gun sights and, instead of just shooting them, you stood there having a nice, friendly conversation until they got the drop on you. Only movie morons do that,” she snapped at him. “If you hadn’t done that, they’d never have had a chance to shoot me, or you, for that matter.”

When Jake laughed uproariously at her, Marti snapped, “Asshole,” and clammed up, glaring at him.

Cam leaned forward out of his armchair, babying his right side, where Toyboy had stabbed him behind the conservatory the night before. “Why did you wait Jake? It seems like a bloody thick thing to do to me too.”

Jake rearranged his heavily bandaged leg on the soft hassock in front of him and inspected the stitches on his left arm where Amanda’s blade had laid it open, knowing that it was obvious to all of them that he was stalling for time before answering Cam's question. By the time he raised his eyes to Marti’s expectant face, ready to answer, he knew what he was about to say was the right thing to tell them and the right thing to do

No lies. I will never lie to these people. We’ve been through too much together for that, he thought when he searched each of their faces, memorizing them, treasuring them and storing them away for those days when he needed to remind himself of the darker days of his past.

“I waited because I knew Gary had a gun in his pocket; he always does. Because I knew, sooner or later, he’d try to use it, and because I wanted him to try so I could kill him. I needed to kill him,” he said without a shred of remorse, regret, or guilt.

Jake watched the various reactions to his words. Marti frowned briefly before her expression was replaced with one of stubborn and resolute loyalty. Cam grinned and nodded while Quigley’s smile was wan and knowing. Tigger, standing behind Quigley’s chair, and Cletus, silently standing beside the door that led from Tigger’s living quarters into the bar, didn’t react at all. When Jake smiled, the mood in the room changed from one of tension and expectation to one of camaraderie and ease.

“And, I wanted some answers too,” he added with another smile.

“You mean you really didn’t figure it out before you got there?” Tigger asked while she handed Quigley a fresh cup of hot tea. “You just blindly went in there, not knowing who you were looking for, and found the killer anyway?” she asked in disbelief.

Quigley chuckled, a deep, booming sound in the small room. “Honey, in real life, cops rarely know what’s really going on. Hell, we’re lucky if we know anything at all. In this case, we got lucky and found enough to take us there in time to catch them all.”

Tigger slapped him playfully on the shoulder. “Oh come on now. I’m not buying this crap for an instant. You guys knew a lot, you just didn’t have time to compare notes is all.”

Marti held her coffee cup out to Cletus, who instantly, and with a smile, jumped to refill it for her. When he returned it, full and perfectly done with milk and sugar, Marti smiled up at the giant. Cletus shot her a beaming smile back and quietly returned to his post beside the door. Marti glanced at Jake and said, “I have some questions of my own. Maybe you can answer them now.”

Jake settled back into his chair and replied, “I’ll give it my best shot but Quigley is the one who found the keys to this whole mess, not me.”

Marti turned her gaze on Quigley. “Okay, you answer, Q. What happened to Connie Braxton, excuse me, Stephanie Benton, that made her into a killer? And why did she kill the Nelsons and that man in the park if it was Toyboy she really wanted? I don’t understand.”

Quigley’s brown face shown with satisfaction when he settled back against Tigger’s hands and answered, “Well, first, you know she was really Stephanie Benton, the lost victim we were looking for. Her mother told me she was some big shot TV

journalist before she was attacked on Christmas Eve a year ago. Her body survived the attack but her mind didn't. She spent almost a year in an institution, getting psychiatric care and plastic surgery to repair her face and body. Her mother said that when Stephanie finally got out last month, she wasn't the same girl who went inside a year ago. The old lady showed me a picture of Stephanie, before and after her stay in the hospital. I recognized Connie in the after picture. Her old boss at the station knew who she was and he gave her a job, no doubt thinking he was doing her a favor after what she'd been through. She used that job as a way to get more information about the Holiday Killer." He glanced meaningfully at Cam, who blushed but remained silent on that score.

"She must have spent that entire year in the hospital, studying her attacker, reading everything she could get her hands on about him and..." Marti paused then said, "...and her boss must have supplied her with inside information only a newscaster could dig up. She knew right where to go and where to look to find him when she got out. God, the rage, the hatred, the obsession..." Marti's face showed an abject compassion for the woman's ordeal, and for her death.

"That's not all though," Quigley waited until all eyes were on him before he told the rest of what he'd discovered.

"Stephanie was Brian's stepsister. I didn't catch the similarity in their names but it was there. She changed her name when she went to television."

Jake took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "So, chances are he was tracking his sister's killer on his own too. That's why he was killed; because he finally found out about Toyboy's scheme." He took another deep breath. "I'd like to think he died doing his job, anyway."

“I’m sure he did Jake,” Marti replied.

Quigley nodded in agreement then returned to his answers. “As for your second question, Marti, she killed the man in the park because she thought he was the killer. It’s a case of mistaken identity, I think. Of course, I’m just guessing but I think it was his general build and hair color but it was mostly his voice that got him killed.”

Marti stared at him. “I know about the hair but how did his voice get him killed?”

“Because he was from Georgia. His red hair and his voice were all she had to go by and when that poor bloke picked her up that night, thinking she was a prostitute no doubt, she thought she finally had him,” Cam blurted out.

“And you have to remember that she was probably obsessed with finding him. Just meeting a man with a southern voice and red hair would have been enough to send her over the edge,” Marti murmured as realization struck. “She probably lived only to find him; to kill him. The poor woman.”

“She killed the Nelsons for a different set of reasons though,” Quigley added. He sipped his tea before finishing the thought. “She somehow found out that Nelson was the doctor who treated the real killer. Who knows how? Maybe he wanted to impress her and bragged he knew the man’s real name. Anyway, as Connie, she decided to use the doctor to find out the man’s name. Probably upset by her mistake in the park, she moved more cautiously this time. She involved the doctor in an affair and slowly got information out of him about his patients. Unfortunately for the doctor, he withheld the one name she was after.”

“And, when Nelson decided to torch his building to hide his blackmail scheme, he made an even bigger mistake by calling Connie and asking her to run away with him.

That gave her the chance she'd been waiting for to get him in an isolated spot," Jake said, holding up his cup for a refill and frowning when Cletus glared at him then ignored him. He sighed and began to slosh the dregs of his cold coffee inside the cup while he listened to the conversation.

"Then why did she bring him all the way back here to that bomb shelter before she laid into him?" Tigger asked, still kneading Quigley's shoulders but with less energy than before.

"The wife showed up. Connie had to kill her and quickly make it seem like the Holiday Killer had struck again. She must have scared the shit out of Nelson when she got him into that shelter and he finally realized he'd been used instead of the other way around," Jake said with an undisguised note of satisfaction in his voice.

"Jesus, what a twisted mess," Cletus blurted out before turning red and going silent again.

"You got that part right mate. It'll take us months just to sort through all the files Doctor Nelson hid in his house, the stuff in Connie's apartment and what Russell hid in the morgue," Cam replied with disgust, no doubt remembering his stint as team secretary.

"Details. The whole thing was just a mass of tiny details," Jake said while staring down into his cup. He lifted his face and tilted his head. "Details, yes. What about the white satin bow Connie tied on the finger of the man in the park? What did that mean to her? And, what did those red lips mean to Wayne Bramson? The devil is in the details..." his voice trailed off when he began to see all the minute details that had contributed to the mountain of information they now held. He saw, with his inner eye, that part that intuitively embraces an abstract idea the logical mind rejects, that life was just details, a

mountain of tiny details, each contributing to the whole, and each inherently unimportant when segregated from it. His thoughts swirled in these deep waters while he mindlessly inspected the elusively shifting chocolate colored patterns in his coffee.

“The stained satin was part of the dress she wore the night she was attacked. The stains were her blood and...er...other things.” Tigger stumbled over whether or not to be blunt about such things in mixed company; something she’d never had to worry about before. She quickly regained her momentum and went on. “ She must have kept it to remind her, to shore up her hatred. I know I would. That’s in the police file Quig brought home. I bet the bow is that old classic thing of ‘remember’ that some people use. You know, tying a bow around a finger so they remember to do something?” Tigger asked, leaning against the back of Quigley’s chair but no longer massaging his neck or back.

“The red lips were some kind of symbol for Wayne’s mother. She is a southern socialite, with impeccable manners and sweet southern belle ways but, in private, if Wayne’s psychiatric records are telling the truth, his mother acted like a whore. Those red lips personified her for him. That, and I suspect, he was also symbolically saying, ‘kiss my ass’ too,” Jake said with the utmost seriousness.

"Well, it's a good thing that sick bastard liked to wear his bloody mint lipstick. Old Glock taught him a hard lesson when he threw himself at Toyboy's face and mauled his mouth. That moggy hates mint!" Cam laughed at the image of Glock chewing on the mint lipstick, berserk with rage at the odor, and Toyboy just as berserk, trying to dislodge the psycho cat from his face.

Jake patted Glock with affection. "He did stop Toyboy from escaping." Glock opened his yellow eye and peered up at Jake with a look of irritation before closing it again and resuming his nap. "My hero," Jake exclaimed and patted the cat again.

"You're starting to sound like me," Marti protested against Jake's feeble attempt at psychiatric diagnostics. "Hands off my profession Daniels." She tossed a throw pillow at him.

"Well, turn about is fair play when you start trying to act like Sergeant Friday with a gun and a badge," Jake flung back at her, along with the pillow. "Not to mention you did a bad job of it too. You got shot your first day on the job." He laughed.

"I have just two unanswered questions," Cam blurted out with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. He held up his hand and bent one finger down. "One, was there really a vampire or werewolf hooker on the stoop on Christmas Eve or not?"

Jake burst out laughing. "I think not Cam. Chances are the old lady in the apartment just saw a flash of neon in the woman's eyes that night. Vampires and werewolves!" he scoffed and laughed again.

"Wrong!" Marti shouted with satisfaction. "You're wrong Jake. The old lady did see red eyes that night." She tried to cross her arms in a smug pose for him but the cast kept her from accomplishing it. Smiling, she settled for a fist held up in triumph instead. Cletus grinned idiotically and held his fist up in support of her.

Jake swiveled around to stare at her. "What the hell are you spouting about now Marti? Don't tell me you believe in vampires and werewolves now?"

She grinned at him, showing all her teeth, like a wolf would grin to intimidate an adversary. "Nope. But, you've forgotten that Toyboy *always* color matched his contact

lenses to his clothes and that hooker was wearing a red dress!" she crowed, her grin widening even more when Jake scowled at her.

Jake groaned and turned a mock look of weary acceptance at the others, wordlessly beseeching them to support him. "Oh, boy. We'll never live this one down," he groaned again.

Tigger put her fist on her hip and asked, "Okay, what's the second question?" She lifted an elegantly shaped eyebrow and waited with a sly smile on her face.

Cam pointed at her with an accusing air. "You know what I'm going to ask, don't you?" He burst out laughing.

"I'll save you the trouble Cam. I won't tell you what my name is so forget about it." Quigley stubbed out one cigarette and lit another. Two golden teeth gleamed in his mouth when he spoke around a smile. "There's only three people in the world who know my real name and two of 'em are in this room. The other is my mama and she won't tell you either so forget about it."

Cam threw himself back into his chair and crossed his arms, wincing at the pain in his side. "Ah, bloody hell. It's eatin' me alive wanting to know." He smiled back at Quigley. "Well, I'll get it one way or another. Someday, Quig, someday," he threatened with a laugh before turning to Tigger. "Okay, then. What's your real name? At least tell me that much," he asked with a mock whine in his voice and a hound-dog look in his eyes.

Quigley glanced up at Tigg's face, a grin in place and a questioning eyebrow cocked.

She patted him on the head and rolled her eyes before taking a deep sigh of resignation. “Gladys. My name is Gladys May Weinmeyer but I hate the name so you better call me Tigger,” she threatened right back, wagging her finger at all of them.

A big belly laugh erupted from the direction of the door. When Jake turned his head to look at Cletus, the big man was once again stoically gazing off into nothingness. Jake shook his head in wonder at the relationship these two must have and glad that they were on Jake’s side instead of the wrong side of the law.

Suppressing a giggle herself, Marti issued her own challenge. “I’d like to know your name too, Quig. I’m with Cam. One day, we’ll figure it out. A challenge!” she crowed while Quigley beamed at her with affection.

“Fair enough. But, in the meantime, I say we all deserve a slap on the back and a six pack of beer. We make a damned awesome team,” Quigley shouted into the room while holding up his empty cup in salute.

“Forget the beer, I want champagne,” Marti joined in, laughing.

“Beer! Bring on the beer,” Cam shouted in response.

“Oh shit,” Jake groaned again, watching his dream team of super sleuths as they all tried to rise and salute each other. “What a bunch of lame ducks,” he said when he pushed an annoyed Glock off his lap and struggled to join them with a smile.

“You know, we do make a hell of a great team at that,” Quigley said before he got up. “We do at that,” he added and stood up to raise his cup, matching the others stance.

Jake lowered his cup and asked, “Our own consulting business maybe? An ‘A’ Team, Dream Team, New Avengers, the super sleuths of the new millennium?”

Marti downed the rest of her coffee and eased back down into her chair. "Why not? We proved we can do it. Besides, we each have some pretty spectacular skills if you ask me. Tigg's got the computer skills, I've got the profiling, Jake's got the FBI training, Quigley has the street cop smarts, Cam can charm the pants off any witness, male or female, and Cletus is an awesome bodyguard. Even Glock is a hero. What else do we need?"

The memory of Brian darkened Jake's good mood and temporarily erased the smile from his face. He remembered that Brian was at his house the night the killer wrote on his door. Even if Toyboy did it, Brian had to know. His friend had betrayed him. It hurt. Then he remembered Brian's relationship with Stephanie Benton and a new thought emerged, lightening the burden of loss.

He was investigating his sister's attack. That has to be it; it must be what got him killed.

The thought did make him feel better and the smile returned.

Unwilling to let the horrors of the past color his future again, Jake pushed Brian and Pat out of his mind, determined to remember them as they were in happier days. Jake also understood why those people in the room, even those who had been close to Brian, couldn't bring themselves to even mention his name. Not yet; maybe never, but Jake understood. He forced a smile and said, "Even if the only way we can solve crimes is to all get shot up in the process." Then his laugh came naturally. "I agree. I think we do have what it takes to be a top notch agency on our own."

Cam wrinkled his nose at the cup of tepid coffee he held before adding, "Me too. I say go for it."

“I thought you said you’re going back to Queensland next week?” Jake asked while settling back into the chair and lifting his leg back up on the hassock.

“I am but that shouldn’t stop you mate. You do make a great team and if I could stay, I’d be honored to be a part of the team. But, I gotta go back. Me visa’s expiring soon and my life is back there,” Cam replied with a touch of regret in his voice.

Quigley raised his cup one more time. “Then, here’s to the new dream team. There’s a new man in town and his name is Jake Daniels.” Quigley downed the rest of his coffee and grinned at Jake’s stunned face when he lowered the cup.

“Why not?” Jake asked, bemused by the idea. “Why the hell not?” He too raised his cup, downed the last of his cold coffee, and grinned at all of them in turn. His grin broadened when Cletus silently stole up next to the chair and filled his cup to the brim while whispering in his ear. “You may live to regret that decision, chum.” The big man’s eyes twinkled when Jake stared up at him.

Jake’s face split into a knowing smile when he answered, “I doubt that Cletus. I truly do,” and saluted his new business partners with a full cup of coffee.

THE END