

THE MAILMAN



PAUL
MUSGROVE

"Paul Musgrove's story-telling talent is considerable, his sense of humour appealing, and his writing skilful without being self-consciously clever."

Deborah Fisher, Tregolwyn Book Reviews

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Paul Musgrove



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For family who supported and friends who encouraged.
Thank you all.

About the author ...

Paul Musgrove was born in Vancouver B.C. and raised in a number of small British Columbia towns, most of which looked pretty much the same.

He has been a warehouseman, laborer, truck driver, fork lift operator, tree planter (for one entirely miserable day) and reporter for The Victoria Times (now the Times-Colonist) and The Vancouver Sun (duties included police stories, fires, floods, furies, municipal councils, and the science beat, not to mention visiting a number of small British Columbian towns, most of which looked pretty much the same).

At present he is a copy editor/makeup with The Vancouver Sun and lives in Vancouver's West End with his family,

In addition to *The Mailman*, he has also written *The Nailing Crew*, *The Cartoonist*, *Methuselah's Legacy* and *Buddy*.

The Mailman

**Near Lookout Point
Tippie, WA
Wednesday, July 1, 1998**

The shot missed Calvin Jenkins, but he heard a flat smack as the projectile struck fir bark about six inches from his right ear.

That fuckin' asshole Helprin!

Tried to shoot him right inna fuckin' head, man!

Jenkins had only a vague idea of the shot's origin and, without sticking his head around the tree and probably collecting one square between the horns, only an equally vague notion of where Helprin was *now*. The bastard would certainly have moved right after firing, but which way? The only thing certain was that Helprin had gotten above him on the steep mountain slope. And shooting down gave the bastard a definite advantage.

Feeling a sneeze coming on, Jenkins pinched his nostrils till his eyes watered. It didn't work. In a moment he was wracked by several huge, strangled chuffs. Despite holding his nose till his eyes bulged, sneezing made considerable noise. A fact that Helprin's mocking voice quickly made clear.

"Ohhh Caalvin ... I hear youuu," he sang.

The dense forest acted like sound distortion panels in a fun house.

Jesus, where was that bastard?

Trying not to even breathe hard because Helprin had ears like a fuckin' radar, Jenkins spread his legs

and braced his back on rough bark, holding his Kingman Spyder in a double-handed grip and resting the long, cold barrel against his cheek just the way Dirty Harry would do it. The Spyder was a beautiful weapon. Single-piece aluminum frame, M-16 grip, light, balanced and accurate.

“Ohhhhhh Caaall ... vinnnnn ...”

He just couldn't be sure where the voice was coming from. Maybe it was directly up-slope. Right where that little tree was growing on that rotten stump. The one with the huge bracket fungi all over it. Jenkins quickly stuck his Spyder around the trunk and fired a blind shot.

“I'm *hit!*” he heard Helprin scream, “Oh, *fuck!* Got me, man. Oh, Jesus, right inna fuckin' *guts!* Ohhhh ...”

Yeah, right.

Jenkins hadn't gotten *this* far in life by being *that* stupid.

He began a crab-walk down the steep slope, digging boot heels into forest detritus and carefully keeping the fir between himself and where he thought Helprin was. God help him if he were wrong. He had to find better cover. Here the tree trunks were fairly far apart and the dry forest floor, covered in a thick layer of dirt, rotted wood and evergreen needles, supported only an occasional berry bush. A lousy berry bush would never protect him from Helprin's unerring aim.

Fresh trickles of sweat ran down Jenkins' face and he wiped with his sleeve as he worked his way along, scraping on tree trunks, slipping and skidding on dead needles, praying his camouflage T-shirt and pants would conceal him. And knowing they wouldn't because there was no thick underbrush. His lungs were

burning and knees trembled with fatigue and fear. He knew there was very little time left. Above on the slope came the sharp crack of a dry branch breaking underfoot.

Helprin!

The fucker was closer than he'd thought. A lot closer!

Below, about thirty feet away through the trees, he saw the brilliant, sunlit green of what looked like a meadow on a small rock shelf projecting from the steep mountain side. He slipped around another tree, then hopped sideways down about ten feet of slope. Now he could see the trees thinning out ahead and, better, the luxuriant green of salal covering the open area.

Once he got into that shit, man, Helprin could fuck himself!

There was a sudden crackling of breaking branches, the soft thud of a body hitting the ground and a muffled curse from only a few feet away in the jungle of tree trunks. In peripheral vision, Jenkins saw a brand new Doc Martens poking from behind the tree he'd left just a few seconds before and realized that Helprin had been right on top of him. Probably aiming a fatal shot when he fell on his ass.

Abandoning all attempts at stealth, Jenkins took off, crashing and floundering towards the meadow without the slightest plan but keenly alert to suggestions from geography. Maybe he could cut across and take cover on the far side. If Helprin were stupid enough, he'd follow into the open and right into Jenkins' sights. He'd have the bastard. But Jenkins wasn't at all sanguine about pulling the trigger on Helprin. The swine had been in his sights about a half hour earlier. Had a

perfect shot right between Helprin's shoulder blades, but he'd deliberately fired wide.

Helprin was a nasty turd at the best of times and he'd be a good deal nastier if you shot him.

As he bounded through dense salal, Jenkins saw several boulders protruding from lush green foliage like tops of granite toadstools baking in summer heat. There was a particularly large one just about in the middle of the meadow, and that became his goal. He flailed and floundered, wrenching feet through tangled vines, pouring sweat and gulping clear mountain air in great, searing gasps. Behind him, he could hear Helprin thrashing through underbrush at the meadow's edge.

It was going to be close, man, really close. There was no time to go around the rock. He'd have to go over it. Jesus, was it ever going to be close!

He scrambled onto the rock, its sun-baked surface almost burning the palm of his left hand, holding his weapon in his right. His only real hope was to dive off on the far side and take cover, but he couldn't help himself. He just *had* to know where Helprin was. At the far edge, with safety just a few feet away, Jenkins spun, crouching and looking for a shot. Just in time to see Helprin, up to his ass in salal, raise his own Spyder and hear the bastard yell, "Die, you fucker!" even as he pulled the trigger.

The shot hit Jenkins full in the chest with numbing force. His boot slid on rock and he teetered for a moment, arms windmilling, then plummeted some six feet in to a dense bed of salal. Vines acted like a spring-loaded mattress, cushioning his fall so well he barely felt his back touch ground. He lay there as dust,

leaves and insects swirled, marveling that the fall hadn't hurt and looking at the large, bright red splatter on his chest.

No question, he was done for.

It was a kill for Helprin.

He stared into the blue vault. It was poetic to spend your last moments on earth gazing into the heavens. A warrior fallen in mortal combat. He fancied he could hear a chorus of angels in fleecy cotton clouds and almost wished he could remember that fuckin' poem he was supposed to have learned in school. Something about poppies in some fuckin' field. Deep inside his fatally damaged body, muscle tissue would be shredded and ruptured vessels would be spilling blood into his chest cavity.

There'd probably be shattered bone stickin' out all over the fuckin' place.

Soon he would feel his legs and arms grow cold. A tremendous lassitude would come over him. Then that white tunnel would form, just like in the movie *Ghost*. Yeah, he'd get the white tunnel, not them black fuckers comin' up outa the fuckin' ground. He concentrated on seeing sparkling white mist gathering above him.

Instead, there was a scraping of boots and Helprin towered against the azure sky.

"Got you, fucker," Helprin said, sneering in triumph and picking at a large zit on his chin. "I seen it."

"Yeah, fuck you, Helprin," Jenkins said.

It was okay to say 'fuck you' to Matt at times like this. Times when he'd just shot your ass again and was feeling pretty good about his inner child.

Jenkins took a handkerchief out and wiped the worst of it off his chest. Then he shoved his paint ball gun into

his makeshift holster and rolled over. He was on the point of getting to hands and knees when his gaze penetrated tangled, leafy ground cover.

He couldn't believe what was less than six inches from his nose.

It lay facing him, tipped to one side and half-buried, yellowed with age, spotted with moss and so infused with salal it seemed part of the living landscape.

Jenkins' eyes opened so wide they ached as they met gaping, empty eye sockets.

A human skull!

Jenkins' stomach suddenly turned to mush and he nearly peed himself. In fact, there *was* just a tiny spurt.

"Holy fuck!" he shouted, backing up on hands and knees. "*Holy fuck!*"

"What's wrong with *you*, you pussy?" Helprin asked, holstering his own gun. "I gotcha again. Big fuckin' deal. I always getcha. I'm the fuckin' best there *is*, man."

Actually he wasn't sure of *that* one. The paint ball guns were a recent acquisition from a sporting goods shop in Seattle, and the two hadn't had a lot of experience with them. It didn't look like they'd get much, either, because they were quickly running out of paint balls and CO₂ bottles. It hadn't been a very selective shopping excursion, since a store guy or some fuckin' thing showed up right in the middle of it. They'd been forced to just grab whatever came to hand before leaving at a high rate of speed through the storage room window. Helprin had paint balls and gas bottles on his wish list for the next nocturnal shopping trip, but he wasn't sanguine about finding any. There

certainly hadn't been any in the prior three stores they'd visited.

"There's a fuckin' skull down here, man!" Jenkins squeaked.

"Oh, yeah, *right*," Helprin sneered. "C'mon, let's go again. I'll give ya a head start. Count to a hunnert."

"No, I'm fuckin' *serious*, man," Jenkins squeaked, still peering into gaping eye sockets, though from a slightly greater distance, "There's a fuckin' *skeleton* down here."

Helprin brushed a greasy strand of dirty blond hair from his eyes and picked at the zit. This Jenkins kid was a really crazy shit, sometimes. What the fuck kind of trick was *this*?

"Okay, I'm comin' down," he said at last, "But this better not be a fuckin' trick. You fuckin' shoot me, man ..." He left the threat unfinished as he jumped, landing with a crash beside Jenkins, losing balance and sitting down hard in vibrant greenery.

"Fuck," he muttered, getting his feet under him and crouching next to Jenkins. "Okay, asshole, where's the fuckin' skeleton?"

"There, man." Jenkins, hand trembling so badly he just about covered all points of the compass, finally managed to indicate the skull.

"Fuck," Helprin breathed in wonderment. For once Jenkins had been right. There was a fuckin' skeleton down here.

"See?" Jenkins affirmed, "what did I tell you, man? 'S a fuckin' skeleton."

Helprin reached over Jenkins' shoulder and pushed foliage aside. A gold-crowned molar glinted in the sun. Half the left side of the cranium was missing, leaving a

gaping hole into the brain case through which salal vines grew.

"Maybe we should take it to the cops?" Jenkins offered.

"Fuck that," Helprin said, digging a package of cigarettes out of his vest pocket, "I ain't tellin' that fuckin' Bentley bitch nothin'."

He stood, crossed his arms over his chest the way he fancied made his arms bulge and showed off the SS runes on his left shoulder and barbed wire tattoo that encircled his left biceps, and considered the skull while he lit up. He flexed muscles to make the tattoos really stand out, the way he always did when he had some really heavy thinking in store, and inhaled deeply.

"This ... is really fuckin' *neat*, man," he said, after due contemplation, as he exhaled a lung's worth of smoke. "We can take it to the club. Make those assholes pay to see it."

'Those assholes', to Matt Helprin, meant basically anyone who wasn't with him at the time of the reference. He could just see all those assholes lining up to pay him a couple of bucks a throw to look at this fuckin' skull. Maybe they could get some black candles or something and make one of those pentagram things. Make it really spooky.

"Here, get the fuck out of the way," he said, pushing the younger and smaller Jenkins to one side. "I'm gonna dig it out, man. Just get some of these fuckin' vines and shit out of the way."

Squatting and dangling his cigarette from a corner of his mouth, he shoved some of the tangle away, spraying embers as he whistled tunelessly through a gap in his front teeth. It was not one of his more

endearing habits. Helprin actually had a number of habits that weren't particularly endearing.

"Just gotta get this shit out of the way, man," he muttered, sweeping another vine to one side and, in the process, uncovering a tiny cave created by the rock overhang.

To Jenkins, dabbing at the paint splat in the middle of his best T-shirt, the one that had 'USMC' stenciled on the front, and anxiously wondering how long it would take the wet spot in his pants to dry out, it looked almost as though Matt Helprin had been shot. His lanky body jerked in shock, then shuddered and became very still.

"What, man?" Jenkins squeaked nervously. "What's the fuckin' matter?"

Helprin stayed rooted to the spot, staring fixedly at something under the rock.

"Matt?" Jenkins said, trying to control his racing heartbeat, "H-Hey, man, what the fuck? What the *fuck?*"

"Oh, *fuck*," Helprin breathed at last, turning to look at Jenkins. Jenkins, noting that Helprin's normally narrow eyes were now very wide, despite the curl of smoke from his cigarette going in to them, and that all the color had left his companion's face, felt a new thrill of horror. Whatever this was, it wasn't going to be good.

"What the fuck, man?" Jenkins gasped, edging away from Helprin and skull. He caught his heels in the vines and sat down hard, getting back to his feet almost before his ass touched ground. Suddenly all he wanted to do was get the fuck *out* of here, but horrified fascination held him fast.

"Holy shit," Helprin breathed, his voice suffused with an awe, wonder and terror that Jenkins had never before heard, "You know who this is, man? Do you know who this fuckin' *is*?"

"W-who?"

"You know, man. *You gotta know.*"

"No, I don't fuckin' know," Jenkins said, in his fear coming as close as he'd ever come to showing exasperation with Helprin.

"It's *him*."

"Him *who*?"

"*Mailman Mel.*"

Nothing actually happened when the dread name was spoken. No clouds suddenly covered the sun. No streaking bolt of lightning split the heavens, no icy wind sprang up, no demonic laughter echoed through the silent forest. But for two teenagers, suddenly in the jaws of damnation, the afternoon had become icy and forbidding.

"N-naw," Jenkins managed after a pause to get control of a bladder that seemed to suddenly want nothing more in the world than to turn inside out. "Naw, it ain't, man. It ain't The ... The Mailman. It's just some Indian or somethin', man. S-s-some old fuckin' hunter. Prob'ly bin there a hunnert years or somethin'."

"Oh yeah? Whaddaya fuckin' call *that*?" Helprin said, moving aside and pointing to the little cave. There, shoved into the dry alcove and littered with dead leaves, twigs and dirt of twenty-three years, was an old blue canvas shoulder bag with faded white lettering that read 'U.S. Postal Service'.

Jenkins stared at the old mailbag while his stomach did flip-flops. That nailed the whole thing down. There could be no question.

They had stumbled upon the final resting place of Mailman Mel.

Jenkins never afterwards told anyone, and Helprin uncharacteristically never referred to it, but at that moment, as he gazed into the empty eye sockets of a horrible legend and an icy hand closed around his heart, Jenkins had a somewhat larger urinary mishap.

**YMCA playing field,
Tippie, WA
Friday, July 3, 1998**

With the snap of the ball the field, at least to Tippie police chief Samantha Bentley, turned into a gray and white ant heap. The pre-teens were dressed only in gray sweat pants, white T-shirts and helmets, so there was no bone-jarring contact, but otherwise, the scene looked much like every football game she had ever seen. Incomprehensible.

A split second after the snap, the ball was thrown through a gap in the players and bounced off grass, tumbling end over end. A piercing whistle shrilled and boys stopped in their tracks.

"I'll never make sense of it," Samantha said to her daughter, who sat beside her on the third row of bleachers reading a college psychology text between plays.

"You have to advance the old pigskin," Ellen said without looking up. "It's a game of territory."

"So says Odin Larsen," Samantha said.

"So says Odin," Ellen agreed, glancing down at the field. The boys were listening with rapt attention to a tall, Nordic blond man who spun the ball in large, powerful hands as he talked earnestly to three of them. He was dressed as they were, in gray, tight-fitting shorts, a white T-shirt and football helmet, but there resemblance ended. The boys, with one exception, were skinny and gangling, with acne, caved-in chests

and pipestem arms. The exception was fat and had acne. The instructor had the wedge-shaped build of a Greek god and towered over his worshipful charges.

"Looks like a pretty successful summer program," Samantha said, estimating the number of boys at better than thirty. "Must have gotten them from all over western Washington. The Y doesn't generally do that well."

"The Y doesn't generally have the great Odin Larsen as a volunteer coach, either," Ellen said.

Samantha, not sure whether her daughter was being ironic, looked back to where the boys had lined up again. Her future son-in-law, whistle in mouth, had moved back a few paces to survey the action. The ball was snapped and the field again dissolved into chaos. The youthful quarterback stepped quickly and nervously into the pocket and threw the ball in a clumsy spiral. It went behind another boy and bounced off the turf again as Odin's whistle sounded.

"That boy there," Samantha said, pointing, "the one it went behind? He was the, um, guy who was supposed to catch it, right?"

"The intended receiver," Ellen said, laughing. "Jesus, Mom, how could you go to all those games and learn nothing about it?"

"Dedication."

"Okay," they heard Odin call out, "we're getting closer, gang. That wasn't too bad at all. Okay, Johnny, Mark, and you, Miles, you guys just stand aside for a second. We're going to run this puppy again, and this time I'll quarterback. This is a matter of timing. You quarterbacks hear this? You have to go for where your guy is going to be when the ball gets there, not where

he is right when you throw it. Timberley, you just run your pattern. Don't try to second-guess me, okay? I'll get the ball to you. Timing is *my* job. You have to time these plays. Timing, timing, *timing*. I can't say that enough. You can't rush things. A rushed play is a broken play. Okay, line up."

The boys snapped into their lines with a steely-eyed determination that made Samantha smile. There was sudden electricity, an edge of excitement missing from earlier attempts.

"The boys just love it when Odin gets into a play," Ellen said, laying her book aside. "It's real fantasy island stuff for them."

"What about his knee?"

"Don't worry, mom. He doesn't do any running. Not much, anyhow. And none of the boys would touch him."

As Samantha looked on, the greatest football player ever produced in Tipple High and the greatest college quarterback ever to play at the University of Washington took the snap. As the lines clashed, pushing and jostling, Odin Larsen moved into the pocket, hopping on a stiff right knee encased in a heavy athletic brace. It was painfully clear that the man could not run, or even walk, without a limp. Planting weight largely on his good leg, he pumped once, then fired the ball in a clean, sharp, bullet pass. It flashed through the air, cutting confusion on the field like an oblong knife, and struck the YMCA logo on Timberley's chest. The thump of pigskin on ribs carried all the way to the bleachers.

With a muffled "ow", the receiver dropped the ball and doubled over, wrapping skinny arms around his chest.

Odin, who had managed to get the whistle back into his mouth even as the ball was in the air, blew the play dead.

There was a chorus of "Oh, fuck, man" and "Jesus Christ, Timberley" and Odin, laughing, told them to bag it.

"It happens," he said, motioning the boys around him, "everyone drops a ball now and again. No big deal. Even the Seahawks drop them once in awhile. The important thing right now is that our quarterbacks here get the idea of timing, right? That's what being a team is all about. Okay, let's run it again, this time Miles will play quarterback."

The kids quickly formed their lines again.

"They really want to make it work for him, don't they," Samantha said. She suddenly recalled sitting in the university stadium that fateful day two years earlier, when the pocket gave way and that 240-pound tackle from Iowa came hurtling through. In her mind's eye she could see Odin, who had been looking for his receiver, tuck the ball under his arm and turn to scramble for one of his famous broken play recoveries. And then the terrible slip. His right foot sliding outwards on a wet patch of Astro Turf, the incoming player crashing down and catching an unprotected leg at just the wrong angle.

Samantha shuddered, remembering the crunching crackle of the joint giving way, a sound that had seemed to be heard all over the stadium. She forced her mind away from the terrible image of 40,000 fans standing mute as Odin lay screaming on the field and Abel Larsen fought to get through the press of players to his son's side. What an end to a career that had

looked so promising. For there had been no doubt in the mind of any football fan in Washington State that Odin Larsen had been on his way to the NFL. And not just going there, either. The pride of Tipple, scouted and coveted by every varsity team in the country, had been clearly marked for super stardom from the first day he'd strapped on pads.

Now he was just a young man, largely forgotten by sports writers and fans, who helped run his father's failing hardware store, walked funny and had decided to do some volunteering with the YMCA this summer. And was going to marry Ellen Bentley, heiress to the Bentley mining fortune.

Odin, catching sight of her, waved. Samantha waved back and Ellen gave him a mocking wave as well. Odin made a face at her.

"Got to be going," Ellen called, slipping her book into her large handbag. "You coming by for dinner?"

"Yeah," Odin called back, "After I'm through here and I get a couple of things done for Dad."

"Better call Hattie," Samantha said, "and let her know there'll be another mouth to feed."

"Already did," Ellen answered.

"Efficient."

"Got to get practiced up for school."

They were filing out of the bleachers when a sudden clatter and splash caught their attention. Samantha looked up at a glowering teenager sitting in the top row of bleachers. The girl, who had a great mane of curly black hair and was beautiful in a pouting sort of way, was just picking up a dripping container of McDonald's Coke that she had either dropped or kicked over. She

had a sneer on her face and very little on her nubile young body.

"What's bothering Dolly Jenkins?" Samantha asked.

"No idea," Ellen said. "She's a real attitude problem. She's been out here a lot, but she never talks to anyone."

"How long has she been sitting up there?"

"She was there when I got here," Ellen said.

Samantha's gaze met that of Dolly Jenkins and she waved and smiled, getting only a grudging, surly nod in return.

"She's one of yours, isn't she?" Samantha asked.

"That's one of your rhetorical police-type questions, isn't it?" Ellen said. "Judge Albright referred her to the society, but she's not exactly one of mine, as you put it."

For the past two years, Ellen had been putting in volunteer time with the Tipple branch of the Thea Carter Society, working with juvenile girls who had been deemed 'at risk' by the courts.

"So," Samantha said, "how's she doing?"

"Mom," Ellen sighed, "you know I can't say anything about that. It's confidential."

"Well," Samantha said as they reached field level, "I don't think it would be stretching confidentiality too much to just say if she's making progress. She's a police problem too, you know."

"I probably shouldn't say this," Ellen said after a pause, "but I've been told we're not getting very far with her. I've heard she's being molested by her dad. Pretty regularly."

"Has she said that?"

"No, and we can't really ask her, either. It would destroy trust if it looked like we were cops or something. Sorry."

"Jesus," Samantha said. "I'd love to slap that bastard in the slammer."

"Neither Dolly nor her mother will make a complaint," Ellen said. "I'm only mentioning it because it's pretty common knowledge. All the kids seem to know about it. It's a pretty big joke with them."

"We've heard some things," Samantha said, referring to the Tipple PD, "but we'd have to hear it officially to do anything."

"You won't," Ellen said as they arrived at the police cruiser, "I told you. Dolly won't go to the police and her mother won't either."

"Who's working with her?" Samantha asked.

"Virginia Woodbine, off and on."

"You can't tell me how Virginia is doing with her?"

"I couldn't if I knew, Mom," Ellen said, "But I don't know. We don't gossip about these things, you know. Counseling is one on one and no talking out of class. In group she hardly ever says anything. All I've heard about the one-on-ones is that they aren't going too well."

"Maybe I could ask Virginia?"

"She couldn't say, either, Mom. Jesus, we have to get the trust of these kids or we couldn't do anything with them."

"Well, maybe I'll go over and have a word with Juke," Samantha said, sliding behind the wheel.

"Please don't," Ellen said. "For one thing it would just get Dolly whipped again and for another it would set Virginia back. Might even blow the whole program."

"Even if I told that bastard it was just something we'd heard around town?"

"Even if," Ellen said. "Honestly, it's a delicate situation."

Samantha put the cruiser in gear and rolled slowly through the parking lot. As she passed a group of pre-teens hanging around a couple of low riders, there were whistles and good-natured jeers.

"Hey, Chief Bentley, got a real suspect there?" one boy called.

"She looks like a killer, man," someone else yelled.

There was a chorus of "yeah, man" and more whistles.

"Same old jokes," Ellen sighed as the patrol car pulled out of the parking lot and gained speed.

"They should get some new material," Samantha agreed.

"Or maybe someone should think about getting a new job."

"I like being a cop."

"Honestly, Mom, I don't know why," Ellen said. "With all Daddy's money you don't even have to work, never mind be a cop. I don't see why you don't just relax and take things easy."

"Why don't you, honey?" Samantha said. "You could just go to school and take things easy. You know I'd pay. Why do you do all that volunteer work? Why work as a waitress?"

"That's different."

"No, it isn't. You're putting something into the community with your volunteer work and you're being self-sufficient with your job. I'm putting something back

into the community, too. Making up for generations of Bentley exploitation.”

“You married in, Mom. The Millers never exploited anyone. They were the ones being exploited.”

“By the Bentleys.”

“That’s really a pretty thin reason. I’ve always thought there was more to it.”

“Nope,” Samantha said, “that’s it. Payback time.”

“You could pay back some other way, you know. Police work is dangerous.”

“Not in Tipple,” Samantha laughed. “Worst crime we’ve had lately was the coin laundry burglary, and we have a pretty good idea who did that one.”

“There were those murders.”

“Honey, those were more than twenty years ago. Ancient history.”

Ancient to the world at large, perhaps, but not to her. A cloud passed over her mind at the thought of the murders and her own sordid part in the ensuing drama.

“History has a way of repeating itself,” Ellen said darkly.

“Wash your mouth out with soap, young lady,” Samantha said with a forced laugh, “that was a one-time thing, trust me.”

“It could happen,” Ellen said, “lots of newbies in town these days. How about that guy?” She pointed to an incredibly tall man wearing faded blue jeans, a black T-shirt with a Grateful Dead logo and a black Stetson, unfolding himself from a BMW in the Log Cabin Café parking lot. “There’s an evil-looking piece of business. Probably some sort of serial killer just looking for victims.”

"I've seen him around," Samantha said. "World's tallest man."

"Who is he?"

"I've no idea. But looks aren't everything."

"His sure aren't. Maybe you should arrest him for violating the ugly ordinance."

"Ellen, *honestly*."

"Well, you're a cop," Ellen laughed. "You're paying back the community. The community has a beautification policy. Jeez, Mom, do I have to tell you everything? Unless there's more to it than just paying back for what Grandpa did."

"No, there isn't."

That was a lie. In bitter moments when Samantha was honest with herself, she knew the Bentleys' exploitation of the village was just a convenient excuse. But she wasn't going to discuss the most terrible event in her life with anyone.

Ever.

Bentley Bituminous No. 1 Mine
Near Tipple, WA
Saturday, July 4, 1998

Keeping perfect time with the music, Dolly Jenkins unhooked her tiny skirt and eased it down her hips, showing the top of flimsy nylon panties. She tossed her head just the way Mom had shown her, shook her breasts in her see-through bra, and let curly black hair, glistening with sweat, fall over her face.

The difficult part of her routine was coming up. The spots were on her, the place was packed with horny guys and she would have to step out of her skirt without looking even *slightly* awkward. Sitting at a table right down front and all by himself was that big time movie producer guy, the one who'd done that war movie about saving some guy. He'd come all the way to Seattle just to scout her for a starring role in his next film. The audience was silent, hanging on every move; the pressure was unbelievable. But she was Delicious Dolly, the most exciting stripper to ever come out of Tipple, *bar none*. After the show the producer guy would be around to her dressing room, just begging her to sign his contract. And Marvelous Molly could shake her melons at *that*.

In reality, Dolly was doing her routine in an abandoned shack near the old Bentley No. 1 coal mine. The music pumped from a boom box sitting on a table fashioned from rough-hewn planks laid across a pair of empty fifty-gallon oil drums and draped with a piece of

old, oil-soaked tarpaulin so covered in graffiti it resembled a patchwork quilt. Her audience consisted of younger brother, Calvin, and one other boy.

It was the other boy who was making her very nervous.

Leaning against a window frame, flexing biceps, a smirk on his lean, acne-ridden face, lank hair falling across predatory eyes and sporting an immense erection in tight jeans, was Matt Helprin.

Matt Helprin, who was not supposed to have been there. Jesus, was she *pissed* at her brother. He'd told her only Jeremy Vanton and Clyde Hemmings would be there. They were both Calvin's age and Dolly could handle them easily. But when she'd arrived, she found that Vanton and Hemmings were not there and Matt Helprin *was*. Helprin was a horse of a completely different color. Not known for intelligence or sensitivity, he combined a powerful body with the social development of a five-year-old and the instincts of a honed psychopath, though Dolly didn't know that word.

When she glanced at Helprin from the corner of her eye, there was an almost delicious sinking sensation in her stomach.

Helprin, making no attempt whatsoever to hide the huge bulge and wet spot in his jeans, licked fleshless lips and muttered words of encouragement. They sounded like "c'mon, bitch, get it the fuck *off*."

Dolly would have liked to say "Abadeea abadeea, that's all folks" and stop the show right then and there, but fear of Helprin drove her on. That and, if she were honest with herself, more than a little arousal. For the truth was that the money she might one day earn following in her mother's footsteps was completely

secondary to the kick she got out of putting on her one-girl shows for her brother and his adolescent buddies.

Shifting her wad of bubble gum to her cheek, Dolly executed her patented little three-step and, without a trace of awkwardness, came up with skirt in hand. A bump, a grind, hold the skirt like a bullfighter's cape. Give them a peek, and another peek, then flourish the skirt, whip it around in the air and toss it into the crowd. Hands behind head, stick those tits out, give them a good look. Pirouette, show some ass, bend over for the ankle grab, then another bump and grind routine and finish right on the last beat of the music.

There it was. Another brilliant performance by Delicious Dolly. As good as anything ever staged by Marvelous Molly Melons.

Calvin clapped enthusiastically. Helprin smirked and gave three cursory smacks of his palms. It wouldn't be cool to clap as enthusiastically as that dweeb, Jenkins.

"Pretty good, huh?" Dolly said, gasping for breath. Hers was a very strenuous routine and smoking wasn't doing her endurance any good. She slipped the last menthol cigarette out of her pack. Drawing smoke deep into her lungs, she picked at sweat-soaked panties clinging to her ass.

"Gettin' better all the fuckin' time," Helprin said with a loose-lipped grin that Dolly didn't like at all.

"Good as Mom, I bet," Dolly said, looking at her brother.

"I dunno," Calvin said carelessly, then, catching the look in his sister's eye, quickly added that Dolly was just as pretty as Mom used to be. Prettier, even.

"Ya know," Helprin said thoughtfully, "real pros have to go all the way."

"I'm not a pro yet," Dolly said, breathing slowly returning to normal. She used her forearm to wipe rivers of sweat and managed to further smear heavily- and inexpertly-applied mascara.

"If ya don't go all the way, ya can't be much of a fuckin' stripper," Helprin opined. "I bet yer fuckin' old lady went all the way, man."

"Yeah," Dolly said defensively, "well, if you guys were paying me, maybe I'd go all the way. Once I go pro and get a gig in Seattle, then I'll go all the way. You can even come and watch. Or watch and cum."

She giggled. That was actually kind of quick. Come and watch, or watch and cum. She'd have to remember to tell it to Maureen and maybe some of the other girls. Dolly didn't often have a bon mot to relate to her friends.

"Maybe you should get in some fuckin' practice," Helprin said, either ignoring the pun or missing it completely. He lit his own cigarette and let it dangle from the corner of his mouth. There was an edge that made his words something a little more than just a casual, friendly suggestion.

"In ... In your fuckin' dreams," Dolly answered with a catch in her voice, coming abruptly back to earth. This was, after all, Matt Helprin. You might as well try to trade light-hearted banter with a dyspeptic crocodile. Affecting a casualness she didn't even approach feeling, Dolly turned and bent over to pick up her cotton miniskirt.

Helprin licked his lips, winked at Calvin and grabbed his member through damp denim.

Dolly stepped into her skirt and scooped her thin blouse. Pulling it on, she slid feet back in to sandals

and walked over to the bench set against the wall by the door of the shack. Sandal buckles jingled as she slid her feet to keep them on. Her breathing was still a little fast as she sat beside her brother, but it wasn't entirely from exertion. She took a deep breath, pushing ample young breasts against her blouse to tantalize her audience that she, not being the sharpest knife in the drawer, had momentarily forgotten included Helprin. She got an immediate response from that worthy and it made her stomach sink again. She promptly deflated her chest and tried to make her breasts look smaller. God, she had to watch herself. Pushing out her breasts was as natural to her as breathing, but she didn't want to do anything more to provoke the ugly bastard.

Dolly wiped her face again, then leaned down to buckle her sandals. As she fumbled, she glanced up to see what Helprin was doing. That was when she saw a tattered blue pouch lying open on its side under tarpaulin. A mound of letters spilled from it.

"What the fuck is that?" she asked, nodding at the pouch.

Helprin and her brother exchanged meaningful glances that said this was something out of the ordinary, even for these two.

"It ain't nothing," Jenkins squeaked with a nervous glance at the door, as though G-men were about to break it down. "Just something we found around, you know?"

"So what is it?" Dolly asked again. She wanted to go over and take a closer look. But there was quite often stuff of dubious origin in the mine shack, and it never paid to ask too many questions. Looking at stuff in the shack was something you didn't do unless Helprin

invited you. Sometimes the boys would even give her things like CDs or tapes. Or the Mickey Mouse watch she was wearing. Or even, once, when Helprin was high on glue that time, a really nice leather coat. She'd had that for all of three days before Helprin stole it back. The old bag was not in *that* league, but it was certainly an oddity.

"Nuthin'," Helprin said smugly.

"Come on, Matt, what is it?" Dolly wheedled, knowing Helprin liked to be begged.

"Oh, hell, might as well tell ya," Helprin said with a self-satisfied smirk, "but ya better not tell anybody else, see? It's a mailbag I found over by ... up in the hills. An old mailbag. Get it?"

"No," Dolly said. "It's an old mailbag. So what?"

"It's a *real* old fuckin' mailbag," Helprin smirked.

There was a pregnant silence while Dolly digested that. Calvin mimicked Helprin's self-satisfied smirk and leaned against the rough plank wall, arms crossed on skinny chest. This would be a good one when they sprang it on his sister, and he was savoring the moment. It would sure as hell wipe that superior look off her face. Just because she was *older*, man.

"I don't get it," Dolly said at last, giving her bubble gum a few tentative chews. She had the definite feeling there was something going on here and she didn't like not knowing what it was.

"It's a *real* old fuckin' mailbag," Helprin said, with uncharacteristic patience.

"Yeah," Calvin chimed in, "a *real* old fuckin' mailbag. We found ... I mean, Matt found it over by the lookout, you know?"

"Okay, so it's an old mailbag," Dolly said, still puzzled.

"Oh, for *fuck* sake," Helprin said with a look of disgust, "it's like maybe more'n twenty fuckin' *years* old?"

"Just tell me, okay?" Dolly said.

"Come on, Dolly," Calvin said.

"She ain't gonna come on," Helprin said, affecting a look of disgust. "It's a *real* old fuckin' mailbag and she don't get it."

Dolly, having decided to wait it out, chewed and said nothing. This wasn't working out well at all. She was affording Helprin far too much satisfaction and soggy underwear, working steadily up the crack of her bottom, felt like a wedgie with a wet dishcloth. Fortunately, out-waiting Helprin's patience was never a time-consuming task.

"It's *Mailman Mel's* bag, get it?" Helprin said after a minute or so had gone by, voice showing awe in spite of himself.

"M-Mailman Mel?" Dolly asked with a nameless thrill of horror at mention of The Mailman.

"It's the fuckin' Mailman himself," Helprin said. "It's his bag, man."

"Oh, come on," Dolly said, fear of The Mailman overriding normal wariness around Helprin, "if it was Mailman Mel's bag it'd be like a ghost bag. You could see through it and all, right? Like, they'd be ghost letters?"

Helprin and Jenkins furrowed their brows while they digested that. Jenkins surreptitiously scratched at his groin while Helprin absently picked his chin zit. There was something wrong with this line of reasoning, but

they couldn't get a finger on it. A large house fly landed on the mailbag and sat right on the big white 'U' of 'U.S. Postal Service', rotating its head and rubbing compound eyes with its forelegs. Dolly popped her gum, then cast a quick glance at Helprin to see if the sound had bugged him. Heat inside the shack was stifling, but Helprin and Jenkins, deep in their logical nightmare, didn't seem to notice it.

"Fuckin' mailbags don't die," Helprin pronounced at last.

"Hey, yeah," Jenkins seconded happily. That was *it*, man. "See, Dolly? It ain't a fuckin' ghost bag because mailbags don't die."

"Then how come when that dumb old geek Thurgood saw Mailman Mel walking up Lake Road that night he had his mailbag?" Dolly asked, skin absolutely crawling.

"I heard that," Calvin said. "It was a full moon and he could see trees and everything right through The Mailman. And he had these red eyes ..."

"Oh, shut *up*," Dolly laughed nervously. That story always scared the pee out of her, though she wouldn't admit it.

"When yer a ghost ya look like ya looked when ya died," Helprin pronounced, now on safe logical ground, "but yer clothes an' shit just stay behind, see? Yer ghost has 'em, but it's not really them, see? Just looks like 'em."

"Yeah," Calvin seconded, "It ain't really them. It's just like ya ... can see 'em and all, right, Matt? Clothes don't die neither, right? It's just like ... what ya looked like, right?"

"That's fuckin' it," Helprin said, "they ain't dead on account a' they don't die, but they're like a fuckin' part of ya. So they're a fuckin' part of yer ghost."

Dolly stared at the bag in awe. Maybe it *was* the Mailman's. It looked old enough and the letters all looked brittle with age.

"God," she said, crossing herself, "you guys *moved* this? You stole *The Mailman's* bag? Jesus, he'll be coming to get it."

Calvin went about six shades of green, starting at the roots of his hair and working downwards in waves. This was something he'd not thought out. Even Helprin seemed momentarily nonplused.

"N-naw," Jenkins managed at last, "M-Matt?"

"Naw," Helprin agreed, "He has his ghost bag, right? He don't need no real bag."

"Maybe he won't like having it moved," Dolly said, pleased that, for once, she was upsetting Helprin.

"If he gave a shit about it, he'd have come around here last night," Helprin said, "and he fuckin' didn't. We was here till after midnight, right Cal?"

"Yeah," Calvin said, "we was here till after midnight and The Mailman didn't come around. He *didn't*." The thought that they'd been there till after midnight and The Mailman hadn't paid them a visit seemed to comfort Calvin as much as the notion that the specter *might* have visited upset him.

"Maybe he couldn't find this place," Dolly said, "maybe he's still out there looking. Maybe you guys will be here and he'll come floatin' through the wall with them fuckin' glowin' eyes and them scars on his face. That 'C' and 'M'."

"Naw," Calvin said. "It was a big 'H' and an 'S' cut right into his fuckin' cheeks."

"No, it wasn't," Dolly said, "his cousin was Charles Manson. It was a 'C' and an 'M' for Charles Manson."

"Yeah," Helprin said, "his fuckin' cousin did that. But it was 'H' and 'S'. Don't matter none, anyway. He ain't comin'."

"How do you know?" Dolly challenged.

"Because he knows every square inch of these mountains, man," Helprin said. "If he wannit t'find this place, he'd fuckin' *be* here."

Dolly gazed at the mail sack. Of all the many and varied things that Helprin and her brother had done, this took the cake. This was absolutely *incredible*. They had found Mailman Mel's bag and brought it to the mine shack.

In spite of her apprehension, Dolly walked over to the table, squatting on her heels to take a closer look at the mound of letters. Helprin squatted on the other side so he could take a closer look up Dolly's skirt. Even though he had just seen her strip to her panties, it was better when he could get a surreptitious peek up her skirt.

"God, Mailman Mel," Dolly whispered, goose flesh prickling arms and breasts. Trying to control her shivering, she picked up several envelopes. It took a few moments because she was a slow reader, but at last she was satisfied that all postmarks were in June of 1975. Almost exactly twenty-three years old.

Holy Cow, this really was his mailbag. Luxuriant hair rose on the back of Dolly's neck. Was this spooky or what?

"Whereabouts did you get it?" she asked.

"Found it," Helprin said evasively.

"Up by the lookout, you know, there's this rock got a ledge ..." Calvin began.

"Shut the fuck up," Helprin said. "It don't matter where we found it, man. We found it. That's all anybody got to know."

"Yeah," Calvin said, "it don't matter. We thought there might be money in summa the letters, so we brought it back here. But there wasn't any." The last bit was added quite quickly upon a dark look from Helprin.

Popping gum and taking a huge risk, Dolly picked up several more opened letters and examined addresses.

"Jeez," she said, "Here's one to old Filbert. She died last year."

"Yeah?" asked Helprin, who hadn't bothered to read addresses, "wasn't nothin' in that one. Just a fuckin letter or somethin'."

"It's a birthday card," Dolly said.

Handling the letters wasn't so very bad. They were quite solid and real. Not ghost letters at all. Setting the old bag upright, she grabbed mail by the handful and stuffed it back where it belonged. Then, again taking quite a chance with Helprin, she didn't even ask permission to drag the pouch to the bench.

Maybe she could actually deliver the mail. Maybe The Mailman's ghost could rest if the mail got delivered. Maybe it would even become her friend. Dolly wasn't at all sure she wanted The Mailman's ghost as a friend, but it would certainly keep this creep Helprin away.

Sitting on the bench with the mailbag between long, supple legs, chewing and unconsciously taking deep

breaths to make her breasts stand out like her mother's in those old pictures, Dolly began idly taking crinkly letters out, puzzling out the addressee on each, then putting it aside on the bench. It was kind of like history. Most of the people named on the envelopes were still alive, but there were a few deaders and a few names she didn't even recognize. Probably people who moved away before she was born.

It was probably good for her peace of mind that puzzling out addresses kept her too occupied to see greed and lust in Helprin's eyes.

After about a dozen letters, Dolly became bored. This was worse than her remedial reading class. She popped gum and began stirring the pile with her feet. The letters felt dry and crinkly, like old leaves. Kind of weird. She picked a thick envelope up with her toes, flipped it into the air and gave the pile a last little kick, exposing one that stood out from the others. A flimsy blue airmail envelope sporting several colorful stamps. Dolly leaned over for a closer look. One of the stamps bore a picture of a tiger standing in tall grass. Dolly liked tigers and, even though this one was kind of small, she wouldn't mind having it. Maybe the person who was supposed to get this would let her have the stamp. She scooped the letter and smoothed it over her thigh, then, lips moving as she sounded out words, read the address. Her eyes suddenly widened. Written in a bold, heavy, man's hand was:

*Mrs Celia Larsen
210225 Snoqualmie Way
Tippie, WA 98290*

Trembling, Dolly extracted the letter from the already-opened envelope, making Helprin straighten up and take notice.

"Hey, you find any fuckin' money it's ours, man," he said.

"It ain't money, Matt," Dolly said in an ingratiating tone, "it's just an old letter. I just want to read it."

"I don't give a fuck what you read," Helprin grunted, subsiding, "just if you find any fuckin' money, it's mine."

"Sure, Matt," Dolly said, smoothing the letter out over her knee. "I don't want any money. I just want to read this letter. Okay?"

"I don't give a fuck what you read," Helprin affirmed, clearly disappointed that Dolly hadn't found money he'd somehow missed.

Lips moving as she traced words with a finger, Dolly worked her way down the single sheet. Her eyes got progressively wider. When she finished, she carefully folded the letter and inserted it in its envelope. She slipped the envelope into the waistband of her skirt, causing Helprin's eyebrows to rise. He seemed on the point of objecting, then and went back to watching Dolly's tits. They were lovely, firm little mounds with perky nipples and perfect aureoles, and he was just itching to get his hands on them.

Dolly, in the meantime, started pawing through the rest of the letters.

Near the bottom of the sack, she found what she'd been looking for – another blue airmail envelope with the same array of stamps and addressed in the same bold, dark handwriting:

*Mrs Samantha Bentley,
No. 1 Bentley Drive,
Tipple, WA 98220*

Its letter was extracted with the same care and read with the same avid interest. At length, nervous but excited, Dolly tucked the second envelope into her waistband.

"Well, I got to be going. Got a babysitting gig," she said, stretching and trying to look completely casual.

"Yeah," Helprin said, "well, this ain't a fuckin' library. You can leave them fuckin' letters here. We found 'em."

"Come on, Matt, it's just a couple of letters," Dolly said with a jocularly and confidence she didn't feel as she stepped towards the door.

Helprin was mentally a bit challenged sometimes, but far from physically slow. Leaping between Dolly and the door, he grabbed the letters from her waistband and held them out of her reach.

"Hey, what the fuck, Matt?" Calvin spluttered in surprise, "it's just a couple of fuckin' letters."

"You ain't takin' them fuckin' letters," Helprin said.

"Yes, I am," Dolly said, trying to grab the letters back from Helprin.

"No, you fuckin' ain't." Helprin pushed Dolly back.

In years long gone by, Dolly, who was a year older than Helprin, had often pushed him around, even beat him up a couple of times. The Pavlovian memory of those childhood beatings might have acted as a brake on Helprin, but the push confirmed, in a split instant, that the old dynamic had long ago irrevocably changed.

Dolly pouted and put on her best little girl act.

"Come on, Matt," she pleaded, "It's just a couple of letters and I like them. Come on, huh? Please?"

Unfortunately, begging gave Matt Helprin another huge erection. The sight made Dolly very nervous.

"Okay," Helprin said after a pause for thought.

"Okay?" Dolly asked, hope dawning in big brown eyes, which she blinked a couple of times for effect. "I can take them?"

"Yeah," Helprin said, making no move to stand away from the door, "Sure you can take 'em. But after you do another strip for us. That's when you can fuckin' take 'em."

Dolly, glancing again at Helprin's erection, was not completely thrilled with the idea of doing another strip tease, but the letters were a powerful incentive and she would never get them out of the shack without Helprin's permission.

"Okay," she said sullenly. "I'll do another one."

"All the way," Helprin crowed triumphantly, springing his carefully laid trap.

"Wh-what?"

"You got to go all the way," Helprin said, "you got to take it all off if you want these fuckin' letters."

"I ain't takin' everything off for you, Matt Helprin," Dolly said.

"Then you ain't takin' the fuckin' letters," Helprin responded quickly. It was a pretty simple equation, even for him.

"How about if I just take my bra off?" Dolly asked. "Bare tits?"

"Fuckin' all of it," Helprin said, "that's the deal. You got to go all the fuckin' way."

Even Dolly could clearly see the dangers of stripping to the buff in a lonely mountain shack with the likes of Matt Helprin. On the other hand, her brother was there. And Helprin wouldn't do anything with her brother right there, would he?

And paradoxically, too, the thought of peeling right to the buff in front of a dangerous kid like Helprin was really exciting in that visceral way. Like what Mom said about peeling in that biker bar in Tijuana. Her mouth felt cottony and her stomach was doing that familiar, almost delicious sinking thing.

"Well?" Helprin said, his limited patience wearing thin. "Ya gonna or not?"

"I'm thinking, okay?"

"Ya want the fuckin' letters?"

"Okay," Dolly said grudgingly, "but just this once, okay?"

"Sure," Helprin said. But that loose-lipped grin was not at all comforting to Dolly.

"And that's it. Just a strip."

"Cross my fuckin' heart," Helprin said, trying to look innocent.

"Okay," she said grudgingly, "but I get the letters. No bullshit, Matt. I get the letters."

"Okay, okay, you get the fuckin' letters. Do it, Cal."

Her brother started the music again and Dolly began her strip. This was it. This time she was going all the way. Right to the bare. She was trembling so badly she had trouble controlling her legs, but she was getting excited all the same.

Once again the blouse went, and then her patented three-step and the skirt was gone. She was sweating heavily in baking heat, her hair glistening in the

afternoon sunlight streaming through the window. She reached back for her bra clasp, then hesitated. This was going to be *bare*. She was going to take off her bra and panties in front of Matt Helprin. Her fingers fumbled with the clasp, then fell away as she did another bump and grind.

Then she looked over at Helprin, who held the letters up in front of his face, waving them seductively.

The message was crystal clear and Dolly's fingers went back to her bra clasp. This time she unhooked it and swept it off. It was the first time outside the privacy of her hot little attic bedroom that she had ever done that, so the action was just a bit clumsy. But her breasts felt free and she grabbed them, lifting the tight, compact globes and wriggling them at Helprin as she danced almost within reach.

"Fuckin' A," Helprin shouted happily, his grin becoming more lopsided and the bulge in his jeans even more pronounced.

Getting out of her panties was a little more difficult for Dolly, but, to Helprin's obvious delight, she managed it. Calvin didn't seem unhappy, either.

And there it was. She had done it. She was as naked as the day she'd been born. And that fulfilled her end of the bargain. Dolly stopped her dance well before the end of the tape selection.

"That's it," she said, covering her pubic area with her one hand and her breasts with the other, "I did it. Now gimme the letters, Matt."

"Hey, that's too fuckin' short," Helprin said, "you gotta dance some more. Come on, you stupid bitch, *dance*."

Dolly didn't like being called a stupid bitch, but there was something in Helprin's narrow, pale blue eyes that made her think twice about a hot retort. Made her think twice about any retort at all.

"Okay," she said sullenly, "but I gotta go soon because ... because I gotta babysit. Yeah. I gotta babysit."

Helprin, for an answer, reached down and adjusted his erection. He was smiling, but his eyes weren't. Dolly found she couldn't look at those any more. They were the shallow, lifeless eyes of a born killer.

Dolly went back to her dancing. Though she didn't have any real enthusiasm for it, it wasn't all *that* bad, being naked like this. It was kind of exciting, really. She looked over at her brother and saw he was sitting with his legs crossed and his hands over his privates. Obviously hiding his own erection. Strangely, though, his eyes seemed more on Helprin than on his sister.

The tape came to an end, and Dolly managed, as always, to end right on the beat.

"Okay, that's it," she said, gasping for breath, "now you got to gimme the letters, Matt."

Helprin very deliberately placed the letters beside him on the windowsill. Then he crossed his arms, making his biceps bulge, showing off runes and wire.

"You gotta come over here and get them," Helprin said.

Dolly reached for her panties, lying crumpled on the floor.

"No, you gotta get the fuckin' letters before you get dressed," Helprin stipulated. "You gotta come over here naked like now an' get the fuckin' letters."

"That's all?" Dolly said warily.

“Swear to Christ and spit to die,” Helprin said.

Dolly, resolving not to let Helprin put her off, squared her shoulders, thrust out breasts defiantly, and strolled negligently over to the window. When she got close to Helprin she smelled acrid sweat mixed with some sort of hair oil. Avoiding his eyes, she reached for the letters and yelped when his powerful hand shot out like lightning and closed on her wrist. She tried to pull away, but Helprin held her effortlessly.

“Just one other thing,” he said, his own breathing fast and ragged, “ya gotta let me cop a feel.”

“No fuckin’ way,” Dolly said indignantly, trying to pull away, “you promised.”

“Had my fuckin’ fingers crossed, “ Helprin said. “Ya gonna let me cop a feel or what?”

“Get your hands off me, Matt,” Dolly said, trying to make her voice sound tough and confident. Instead it came out in a terrified squeak. “Ow, Matt, that *hurts*,” she added, prying at Helprin’s fingers sunk deep in her flesh.

“Yeah, *fuck* you, bitch,” Helprin suddenly snarled, slapping her across the face and spinning her around, then shoving her roughly to hands and knees. In a flash his hand went to his pocket and a switchblade snapped open in a glittering blur of steel. An instant later it was against Dolly’s neck, its razor sharp, cold cutting edge freezing her. Then Helprin was using his free hand to undo his heavy belt and zipper. Out of the corner of eyes wide with terror, Dolly saw Calvin getting up. Thank god, her brother was coming to her rescue.

A moment later her hopes were dashed when she saw that all Calvin was really doing was moving to a better vantage point.

God damn that little bastard!

Jesus, wait till she told Daddy.

Of course, that would also involve telling Juke Jenkins what she had been doing in the mine shack, so maybe it wouldn't hurt Daddy to remain uninformed.

She gasped as Helprin drove deep, grunting and puffing. In her peripheral vision she could see her brother standing there, mouth open and hand on his own stiff member, watching as Matt Helprin raped his own sister.

It didn't last very long. Eight or ten strokes, then she felt the hot flood of Helprin's ejaculation deep inside and heard his strangled moan. In the throes of his climax, Helprin dropped the knife and Dolly, without thinking, swept it away. It slid end for end across rough pine boards and disappeared down a gap near the wall where part of a board was missing.

Helprin, not noticing that his knife was gone, pulled out and hauled up his Fruit of the Looms and jeans.

"You can ... fuckin' get dressed," he said unsteadily.

Dolly slowly got to her feet, more furious than traumatized. It was far from the first time she had been raped. In fact, Daddy took care of that little chore about three times a week, whenever he happened to be sober enough. And she had been pretty hot anyway, so it hadn't hurt. She didn't even care that her brother had been watching.

It was just ... just that she hadn't told Helprin he could do that.

That was it.

If she'd wanted him to do that, she'd have told him so.

She picked up her clothes and dressed slowly. The air in the shack was stifling and it took some effort to pull her blouse over her sweating torso. Her clothes were very uncomfortable, and that added to her growing annoyance. As she bent over to adjust her sandals again, she saw that her knees were abraded and several large slivers had driven into her flesh. Even as she noticed the damage, they started stinging.

Muttering “ouch” and “owww” under her breath, Dolly pulled out several of the larger ones, but there were still some that were right under the skin and unreachable without a needle and tweezers.

At last, dressed and pretending indifference to the flat, reptilian stare of Helprin and the curious gaze of her brother, Dolly picked up the two envelopes. They were hers. She’d earned them. Holding her head high, she stuffed them back into the waistband of her skirt and strode to the cabin door.

“You better keep your fuckin’ mouth shut,” Helprin said suddenly. “You say a fuckin’ word about this and you’re dead meat.”

Dolly walked out, getting about three paces before building resentment got the better of her.

“Fuck you, Helprin!” she shouted, turning back to the humid darkness of the little shack, “you fuckin’ asshole!”

She was dimly aware of a younger boy standing nearby on the porch, staring at her with wide eyes and an equally wide-open mouth. Marvin Hampton. He’d evidently been watching the whole performance through a large knothole. Just what she needed. Marvin Hampton watching her get fucked by Matt Helprin.

As she turned, the two letters fell from her waistband and landed on the porch, by chance more or less side by side and face up. There was a tramping and Helprin appeared in the doorway. Dolly hurriedly scooped the letters and turned on her heels, walking quickly and firmly off the porch and across the old mine yard, trying to keep her bottom from twitching under her tiny skirt and ready to start sprinting if she heard the crunch of Helprin's Doc Martens on draw slate that largely covered the yard.

At the head of Old Mine Road, she risked a look back, still prepared for flight if Helprin was anywhere in the yard. But the door was closed and Helprin was nowhere to be seen. Her bicycle was propped against the shack and, for a moment, she contemplated going back to get it. But that would put her within Helprin's range. Hampton was still standing on the porch, but she didn't think she had time to wait while he fetched it for her. No, the bicycle was going to have to wait for another day.

"Fuck you, Helprin," she screamed, flipping a bird at the silent shack. *"Fuck you, you fuckin' retard! You fuckin' moron asshole!"*

She set off down the road, picking her way over deep, dry potholes and around scrub bushes growing from the embankment on the uphill side. As the shack was lost to sight she started to feel a good deal better. The rape hadn't been all that uncomfortable and she had the precious letters stuck securely in her waistband. And she'd told that moron asshole Helprin where to get off, too.

She hauled the letters out of her waistband.

God, this was just so incredible.

Two letters from Mailman Mel's pouch and she had them.

And what unbelievable letters!

Her good feeling didn't last as she ran a finger over the addresses. What if the ghost of Mailman Mel didn't want anyone to take his letters?

She looked wildly around, halfway expecting to see some transparent apparition materialize on the roadway. But she was alone on this suddenly spooky sidehill under a blasting summer sun that seemed to have totally lost its heat. She shivered and quickened her pace as much as she could over the treacherous little road. It didn't help that she was wearing light-soled sandals. She could feel every sharp little pebble through the thin leather and her feet *hurt*. Within a hundred yards, progress slowed to a painful hobble.

Inside the cabin, the enormity of what had happened was beginning to dawn on Helprin and Jenkins.

"God, what if she tells?" Jenkins bleated, "what if she tells the old man? He'll fuckin' kill me, man. If that bitch talks I'm a dead man."

"She's been fucked before," Helprin pointed out, helpfully.

"Not like *he* knows," Jenkins replied, ashen-faced, "he don't know nobody ... nobody else fucked her."

"No shit?" Helprin asked, interest piqued, "That shit's true? Yer ol' man fucks yer sister?"

"Yeah, but he don't like nobody else doin' it," Jenkins said. "He was gonna kill Vanton for just touchin' her tits over her fuckin' blouse, man."

"She'll keep her fuckin' mouth shut," Helprin predicted with no great confidence. Even Helprin didn't like the notion of Juke Jenkins finding out he'd fucked

the man's daughter. Against her will too, sort of. Juke, along with a love of country music, had brought from his youth a violent temper and a fairly extensive gun collection.

"You fuckin' want to *bet*?" Jenkins squeaked. "Oh, yeah, man, maybe she won't tell the old man, but she'll tell all her fuckin' friends. How long do you fuckin' think before the cops are after us?"

"We got to do something," Helprin concluded after some thought.

"Do fuckin' what?" Jenkins said, chewing on his knuckle. "We got nothing to pay her with, man."

"We ain't payin' her," Helprin said, "we're gonna shut her up. Permanent."

"K-kill her?"

"Yeah, kill her. What do you *think*, you dumb fuck? We gotta stop her from talkin'."

"She's my fuckin' sister," Jenkins said.

"So what?" Helprin growled, pacing around the shack. "Where's my fuckin' knife, man? Where's my fuckin' knife?"

Helprin's pacing grew more agitated. He kicked the makeshift table, knocking tarpaulin and planks off the oil drums with a tremendous crash. Momentarily forgetting the mailbag's genesis, he took another kick that sent it the length of the shack, trailing letters in a rustling avalanche. Helprin did not cope well with frustration.

"*Where's my fuckin' knife?*" he shrieked.

"*I don't fuckin' know!*" Jenkins shrieked back.

"Fuck, we gotta shut that bitch up," Helprin yelled.

Jenkins, brotherly instincts at last aroused, sprang in front of the door.

“Leave her alone, Helprin,” he quavered, raising trembling fists. “Just leave her the fuck alone.”

Helprin stopped in his tracks, stunned that Calvin Jenkins, of all assholes, would dare tell him what to do.

“Hey,” he said in bewilderment, “hey, *fuck* you, man. Get the fuck out of my way.”

“Leave her alone, Helprin,” Jenkins managed, face pale and eyes wide.

“Get out of my fuckin’ way,” Helprin said, after due consideration. He grabbed Jenkins by the shoulders, intending to throw the smaller boy out of his way and get on with the business of shutting Dolly Jenkins up, permanently.

But instead of allowing himself to be flung aside as usual, Calvin Jenkins fired a perfect, three-point straight right hand to Helprin’s nose. Helprin’s head snapped and he took a step backwards, the bust in the snout box causing his eyes to tear. He stood there for a moment, staring in disbelief at Jenkins, then his nose began to bleed. Heavily.

“Fuck,” he muttered, grabbing his beak and hauling a well-used wad of Kleenex from his pocket, “I’m gonna kill you for that, you little motherfucker. Just as soon as I take care of yer fuckin’ bitch sister.”

He made a move to go around Jenkins, but Jenkins, having had a taste of battle, was in no mood to let him pass. He stepped in front of Helprin, again raising his fists.

For an answer, Helprin, completely distracted by the whole Dolly Jenkins fiasco, merely dropped the bloody Kleenex and threw two heavy punches to Jenkins’ mid section, dropping him to the dirty cabin floor. As Calvin flopped about like a cod on a chopping block, gasping

and wheezing, Helprin raced across the porch, barely noticing a stunned Marvin Hampton watching in wide-eyed wonder.

Once in the mine yard, he glanced desperately around for inspiration, then picked up a two-foot piece of rusted pipe that had been lying in a pile of old scrap and wire near the cabin entrance. Swinging it in short, vicious arcs, Helprin started across the yard, then ploughed to a halt, spun and bounded back to the cabin, grabbing the startled and horrified Marvin Hampton by his shirt front.

"If you say fuckin' anythin' about this, to anybody, I'll fuckin' kill you," he said, pushing his face within a few inches of Hampton's. Letting the younger boy go, Helprin ran across the mine yard to the forest, taking a shortcut that would head Dolly off at the bottom of Old Mine Road.

Hampton and Jenkins, who, still sobbing for breath, had managed to get to his feet and was leaning against the door, watched with relief as Helprin disappeared. Hampton actually hadn't been able to take in much, but what he *had* managed to see and hear had been profoundly interesting.

**Near Lookout Point
Tippie, WA
Sunday, July 5, 1998**

“Holy shit,” Bruce Murchison opined, crouching for a really good look at the skull while carefully keeping his distance. His face, under heavy freckling, was pale and his mouth hung open. He’d thought this was just more Matt Helprin bullshit. Right to the moment he’d seen those empty eye sockets.

“Let me see,” said Jeremy Vanton, trying to push in beside Murchison.

“Me, too.” This from Clyde Hemmings.

Standing to one side, proud but nervous discoverers, were Matt Helprin and Calvin Jenkins. Mailman Mel had been just too good to be kept to themselves. It had taken only a couple of days for their resolve to keep The Mailman a secret to erode at least enough to let some of the other guys in on it.

“Jesus Christ,” Murchison said, straightening up and letting the other two crowd in for a look, “I bet it *is* The Mailman.”

“Hey, shit,” said Hemmings, “we ought to take him back to the clubhouse, man.”

“Fuck you,” Murchison said, “this guy was Charles Manson’s fuckin’ cousin, man. Killed them kids and all. Ate their guts and everything. You don’t fuck with The Mailman.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“You wanna touch him, Hemmings, you asshole? You want his fuckin’ ghost coming after you?”

Normally Helprin would have stepped in with the final word, or at least helped beat up the debater he least liked, but these were not normal times. For a change, he had other things on his mind. One of them, hollow-eyed from lack of sleep, was standing right beside him.

“Dolly ain’t been home,” Jenkins said, keeping his voice low so the discussion group around the skull couldn’t hear him.

Helprin looked as enigmatic as it was possible for him to look.

“Did you do it? Did you really do it?” Jenkins inquired.

“What do you fuckin’ *think*?” Helprin said, smiling an enigmatic smile.

“Oh, fuck, man, *fuck*,” Jenkins moaned, almost loud enough for the others to hear. In fact, had they not been mesmerized by the Mailman’s earthly remains, they probably *would* have heard.

With a furtive glance at the three, who had edged well away from the skull and begun to swap Mailman Mel stories in order to scare the shit out of each other, Helprin gently took Jenkins by the throat and squeezed till the younger boy’s eyes popped.

“You better not say nothin’, man,” he hissed, “ever. Not unless you want to go with your fuckin’ sister.”

Jenkins, choking, managed to ask where Helprin had hidden the body of his dear sister, though he didn’t use those exact words.

“In a safe fuckin’ place,” was all Helprin would say.

**Vehicle impound yard
Tippie, WA
Thursday, July 9, 1998**

“Okay,” Odin Larsen said, resting his back against a heavy wire fence that surrounded the Tippie vehicle impound and raising his radio, “that takes care of the yard.”

“Larsen to base,” he said, pushing the speech button.

“Base,” Mabel Murphy’s voice crackled.

“We’re, ah, negative on the impound yard,” Larsen said.

“Okay, copy that,” the answer came back.

Larsen sighed and clipped the radio back on his belt.

“Now comes the hard part,” he said.

Keeping weight off his game leg, he surveyed a steep, heavily forested hillside behind the lot. Although it was called the impound, no cars in Tippie were ever actually impounded. The oil-soaked, weed-infested gravel lot was home to piles of abandoned vehicles and rusted-out wrecks from the highway. It was an occasional hangout for village teens when the weather was decent, and a source of vexation to the village council, which had been trying for years to find enough money in its budget to clear out the eyesore.

Larsen, accompanied by Elmer Carver and the Edwards brothers, Father Ralph and Coach Ray of the Tippie Coal Miners, had spent a fruitless hour combing

through the derelicts for Dolly Jenkins, reported missing by her mother several hours earlier.

The three sighed in unison, knowing exactly what their team leader meant.

Although they were much older than Larsen, it seemed natural for the three to defer to the younger man with his air of calm command and total leadership. From the time Ray Edwards had taken the unprecedented step of naming the freshman starting quarterback of the Coal Miners, Odin Larsen had quite simply been The Man in Tipple. It was taken for granted by most villagers that he could be mayor whenever he chose.

"The main trail goes up to Big Foot," Larsen said, looking up at the ridge. Big Foot was the name given a living room-sized boulder just down from the ridge apex. It had gotten its name from its shape. If you really exercised your imagination, it looked vaguely like a huge boot. Under what would be the toe was a semi-cave that was a favorite spot for all-night drinking parties. It was popular, despite the difficulty of reaching it, because it was closer to town than the old Bentley mine and the Tipple PD had never found a way to sneak up on it.

"We'll hike up there and cover the area around the foot. If we come up empty, we'll form a skirmish line, two on each side of the trail, and work our way back down," Larsen said. "If Dolly passed out or something, she won't be too far from the trail."

The other three exchanged glances. Of course Larsen was being delicate. Dolly was probably nowhere near Tipple. This was likely to be a tremendous waste of time.

"Look," Carver said, scratching his grizzled chin, "we drew turkey straws on this one, boys. They told us to search the car lot and we done 'er. That's that, I say."

"Well," Father Ralph said dubiously, taking off Coke bottle glasses and wiping sweat from the lenses, "Mrs Jenkins *did* say she was heading down to the Thea Carter Society group meeting, so she could have stopped off on her way there or back."

"That goddam ... sorry Father ... that stupid fat cow has no idea where she was going or even when she went missing," Carver said, spitting a stream of tobacco juice at a fat greenbottle buzzing around an empty Spam tin. He missed the fly, but the can jerked under the impact of a slimy, dark green wad.

"That's a little harsh," Father Ralph remonstrated, casting a quick glance at Odin for confirmation.

"Well," Odin said, "a little, maybe, but there's some truth to it. Molly Jenkins clearly doesn't know when Dolly went missing. Ellen was in charge of the last group session, so I happen to know it was June 28. Dolly was seen after that, by a lot of people. So nobody knows when she disappeared. Or where she was last seen. Could have been anywhere around here."

"You see?" Father Ralph said.

Carver spat a much more liquid stream of tobacco juice, hitting a large thistle right on the purple flower. The thistle bent, then straightened, throwing off a spray of rich, green juice and a sodden bumblebee. Carver wiped the excess off his chin and dug a tin of tobacco from his pocket.

"Look, guys," Odin said, "this is getting us nowhere. We're searching for a missing girl. I say it has to be done right. We owe it to Dolly and we owe it to this

community. There'll be a lot of people keeping their daughters indoors and worrying until we at least prove that Dolly Jenkins is not lying dead out here somewhere."

"God forbid," Father Ralph said.

"God forbid," Odin seconded, "I personally think Dolly's run away again. We all know about Juke and we all know what goes on in that house. But people aren't going to rest easy until they know there's no killer stalking this town. I say we owe the people of Tipple a good night's sleep."

"That's true," Ray Edwards said. "Odin's right, guys. People are already starting to talk about a killer on the loose. If we find nothing, maybe things will settle down a bit. People will think Dolly just ran off again. Which I think she did."

"Exactly," Odin said, "If we conduct a thorough search and come up dry, people will be reassured. But it has to be thorough. Not just going through the motions."

"Odin," Father Ralph said, "how would it be if you stayed here and sort of directed things. Ray and Ed and I can go up to Big Foot and work our way down. You can maybe keep an eye on things and ... maybe ... well, think of something we missed."

"And rest my leg, right Father?" Odin said with a smile.

"Um, well ..."

"It's okay, Father, I understand your concern," Odin said, "and believe me, I appreciate it. Normally I'd agree with you, but this is not a normal occasion. We have a missing girl, and it's really important to the community that we do our job and do it properly. Four

men up there will be better than three. A bum knee doesn't matter at a time like this. Let's do it."

Suiting action to his words, Odin, walking with his pronounced stiff-kneed limp and never once looking back, set off across the narrow strip of gravelly ground that separated compound from forest, weaving around small bushes and thistles.

Carver muttered "goddam," stuffed his cheek with a fresh wad of tobacco, and took off after Odin, the set of skinny shoulders proclaiming he was less than pleased with *this* exercise.

"My Lord, I just cannot believe that man sometimes," Father Ralph said.

"I can't, either," his brother said. "He's a brick. That damn leg isn't good for much. I know it stiffens right up after even a few minutes on it. Hurts him like hell. But he never complains. Never a word out of him. I've seen him after those football classes of his, rubbing it down with ice. It's just heartbreaking."

"I guess you can't talk him out of going up there?"

"Never could talk him out of anything," Ray said, "I wouldn't even try any more. He was always a headstrong young man. But you know, he was always right in the long run."

"Right or wrong, I guess we're going to Big Foot," Father Ralph said, shaking his head and setting off after Odin Larsen and Ed Carver. In a moment, his brother followed along. Odin Larsen was running the show, so argument was futile.

The trail up to Big Foot was steep and narrow, running at a near forty-five degree angle over and around boulders and fallen trees. Sometimes the men were virtually climbing, using roots hanging over naked

rocks as handholds. It took nearly a half hour to reach the gentler slope that was home to Big Foot, but at last, streaming sweat and gasping for breath, they found themselves under the toe. There was a heap of ashes in a circle of rocks and the ground was littered with candy bar wrappers, pop cans, more or less empty fast food containers and used condoms. Flies swarmed everywhere.

"My Lord," Father Ralph said, surveying the ecological disaster.

"You've never been up here, Father?" Odin asked, laughing.

"My, no. Goodness, what an appalling mess."

"It's pretty bad," Odin said.

"Rotten little bastards," Carver said, "sorry Father ... kids are just saying something about how they been brought up, that's all." He spat a stream of tobacco juice at a Coke can, hitting it squarely and sending it rolling across the rock surface. It gathered speed and disappeared over the edge of the cliff, clanging into trees far below.

"What they're really saying is over there," Odin said, pointing to the graffiti-covered walls, "anything you wanted to know about who's doing what to whom."

"What does it mean, Crips 98?" Father Ralph asked, looking at one legend painted in lurid pink.

"Gangs," his brother said. "Means these kids are members of the Crips. It's their territory."

"Means these kids want to be members of the Crips," Odin said disdainfully, "I don't think we have to worry too much about gangs like the Crips or Bloods around here. The only real gang, if you want to call it that, is the Shafters."

"Shafters?" Ray Edwards asked.

"Kids who hang out at the mineshaft. They mostly keep to themselves. It's Helprin's group these days."

"There's a bad one," Carver said.

"He really is," Odin agreed. "You can't say that about too many kids, but you can say it about him. That's what makes this wall kind of interesting. Not what's on it, but what isn't."

"I don't follow you, Odin," Father Ralph said, peering at the wall and crossing himself when he noticed a crude pentagram surrounded by runes.

"Helprin's mark isn't here," Odin said. "It's SS runes with a cross-hatched line underneath. Like the tattoo on his arm. Here, I'll show you." He limped over to the remains of the fire and dug out a charred twig. Stretching his bad leg behind him and grunting with effort, he leaned over and drew a pair of SS runes on the rock floor. Then he drew a straight line across the bottom of the runes and put five Xs across it so it looked like a prairie fence. "Like that, see?" he said, "Helprin leaves this on anything he's claimed. The other kids know that if they see that mark, they leave whatever it is alone. Like a dog peeing to mark its territory. It's very distinctive. He's the only one who does this. No other kid would dare use it."

"So that means ..."

"It means Matt Helprin hasn't been up here, or at least hasn't laid claim to anything up here," Odin said, rubbing out the diagram, "okay, that's our gang lesson for the day. No sign of Dolly here, so we're going to head back down. As soon as we get past that first drop, we'll establish a skirmish line and work our way through the bushes."

He straightened up with a gasp and Father Ralph quickly jumped to his side, supporting him so he didn't fall over.

"You're in a lot of pain, aren't you?" Father Ralph said.

"It's okay," Odin said, regaining balance, "I've had worse. Let's get this job done."

Gently disengaging himself from Father Ralph's grasp, Odin started back down the trail. It was evident he would have more trouble going down than he'd had coming up.

As Odin Larsen set off down the trail from Big Foot, followed by his admiring cohorts, and, in the case of Ed Carver, not so admiring, the Tipple PD was entertaining a visitor. Looking like a dissolute Joe Don Baker with attitude, a red-eyed, unshaven John "Jukebox" Jenkins slid his car keys across the reports counter.

"How'm I supposed ... get home?" he mumbled, reeling and nearly falling over.

"You can get a ride with someone," Samantha said, handing the keys to dispatcher Mabel Murphy. "I don't really care. Pick up your keys when you're sober. Not before."

"Guddam it," Jenkins said, placing a meaty hand on the counter to steady himself, "come in here t'tell ya m'daughter ain't come home an' ya take away a man's keys. Fuckin' ain't right."

Samantha sighed and tried not to wrinkle her nose at the smell of tobacco, raw spirits and very stale sweat.

"We're already looking for Dolly, Juke," she said with all the patience she could muster. "I've already told you that. Molly called us about two hours ago. We've

already got Ed Jensen and his men out looking. Along with half the town. We'll find her."

"Take a man's keys," Jenkins mumbled, nearly falling over before stumbling towards the door, "fuckin' ain't right."

"He's right," Deputy Chief Harlan Steeples said, coming up behind Samantha, "it fucking *ain't* right. We should have thrown him in the cells. Where does that bastard get off driving into town like that?"

"I know," Samantha said. "Well, we've got enough to think about without Juke. We've got his keys, he's not driving home. How's the search coming?"

"Negative so far. Not a trace of her."

"Did Jensen get enough of his men out for all the kid places?"

Steeples confirmed that Ed Jensen, head of the local search and rescue team, had men at all popular kid haunts. The old Bentley Bituminous Coal Co. mine buildings, lovers' leap, the Tipple vehicle impound, and several long-abandoned homes on the town's outskirts.

"I called around to the pool hall, the Y and Doc's Drugs again while you were talking to asshole there, and nobody's seen hide nor hair of her," he concluded.

"She's probably run away again," Samantha said.

"Well, if she did," said Steeples with a meaningful glance at the parking lot where Juke Jenkins had managed to make it to a seated position on the curb, "she'd better not stop at San Francisco this time. I heard our good old boy there whipped the shit out of her the last time. Used the buckle end of his belt."

"I didn't hear that," Samantha said in disgust.

"It was when you were on holidays, Chief. Story around was that she was actually in bed for three days

afterwards. I heard it too late. By the time I checked it out, Dolly was out and around again. Wouldn't say anything."

"Maybe we *should* lock that bastard up." Samantha looked out the window at the parking lot, where Juke was reeling on the curb, taking a pull from a fifth wrapped in a brown paper bag.

"I'm for it," Steeples said, starting for the door.

At that moment the radio crackled and Ed Jensen's voice, saying "Baker One to base" filled the office.

"He just loves that baker shit," Steeples said as Mabel cheerfully asked what Jensen had found.

"Um, yeah, the Chief there?" Jensen replied.

Samantha slid the mike away from Mabel, who looked disappointed. This was the most excitement she'd had since the Murchison's cat got treed.

"Sammi here, Ed. Got anything?"

"Ah, well, me'n Danny Carver are up here at the mine?"

"Yes, go ahead."

"Well, we got a sort of a problem, I think."

"State the problem," Samantha said, raising eyebrows at Steeples.

"Um, yeah, well, we found a couple of them boards, y'know, in the, ah, y'know, the wall across the old mineshaft, well, y'know, a couple of them boards was kind of loose?"

"Jesus Christ," Samantha muttered. Jensen was notorious for taking literally hours to come to the point. "State the problem, Ed."

"Well, anyhow, we got in there. It was kinda tight, but we made it. You ought to get them boards nailed back, y'know. Somebody could get hurt in there."

"Is that the problem, Ed? Loose boards in the barrier?"

"Ah, nope. Me'n Danny went into the mine a ways, maybe fifty feet or so, an' I gotta tell ya somethin' really stinks in there? Figure somethin's dead. Me'n Danny remembered what you said if we found any, ah, bodies or anything, so we pulled back and we're, ah, out here in front of the mine. Um, over."

"Okay," Samantha radioed, "good work, Ed. You and Danny hold right there, okay? I'm going to come up there. Just hang on."

"I guess we'd better go take a look," she said to Steeples. "Probably just some animal, but if it isn't, we don't want Jensen and Carver tramping around in there. Mabel, the rest of the guys will be reporting in, just have them keep looking for the time being."

"Shit, Mac has the four by four." Steeples said.

"Okay, we'll take my Lexus."

Grabbing her hat, Samantha raced out, followed by Steeples. In the small parking lot, searing July mountain heat struck them like a wall. It had apparently proven too much for Juke Jenkins, who was now nowhere to be seen.

Placing her emergency spinner on the dash, Samantha roared out of the parking lot and down Sandstone to the highway, nearly putting the Lexus on two wheels as she took the corner and headed east on Snoqualmie Way. The few cars on the highway pulled over to let her past and the LX 470's speedometer was quickly nudging ninety.

"Jesus Christ, it'll wait," Steeples said as they careened past a battered pickup truck, getting a flash glimpse of the startled faces of what looked like a

family fresh from the Ozarks. "Whatever it is, it's *dead*, Sammi."

Samantha eased off the gas and the Lexus slowed to just over seventy.

"Sorry. I got carried away."

"Yeah, let's not get *us* carried away," Steeples replied, relaxing a bit.

"Right. It's probably just an animal."

"Probably."

"I bet Dolly is halfway to San Francisco right now," Samantha said.

"She might have gone north."

"British Columbia? No, I think she'd head south again. Or maybe over to Spokane. Anyhow, she's older now, so maybe she's picked up enough road savvy to make it stick. Maybe we've seen the last of her."

"Maybe," Steeples said, but he lacked conviction.

As they flashed past the Larsen home, Samantha saw the place was deserted. Neither Abel's old Jeep Grand Cherokee nor Odin's yellow GTO was in the driveway.

"Odin is out with one of the search parties, isn't he?" she asked.

"Yeah. He's running the operation at the impound. Haven't heard anything from them since they came up negative, so they've probably gone up to Big Foot."

"I guess. It's the sort of thing Odin would do."

Noting a sour look on her deputy's face, Samantha asked him what the trouble was.

"Nothing," Steeples replied. "How's the wedding plans coming?"

"About the same. I don't have too much time, so I'm just leaving everything to the caterers."

“Must be nice.”

Samantha glanced sharply at Steeples, looking for a dig at her family fortune, but the younger man was carefully studying the passing forest. She often wondered if her money and position in the community were a sore point with her deputy, but he had never quite given her enough evidence to conclude he had a problem with it.

A mile past the Larsen home they took a left turn on to Lake Road and the forest closed in. The road ran straight for about a mile, then curved sharply left past the Jenkins house, a dilapidated two-story structure at the end of a long, rutted and overgrown driveway.

Less than a half-mile farther on, the road forked. The left fork was Lake Road and continued on along the shores of Lake Hatwich past a number of summer cabins belonging to locals and a few absentee owners. The right fork led to what had originally been Mine Road, a long switchback that ended at the Bentley No. 1 mine. After closure of the old mine, the forest service had taken over the bottom half of the switchback, renaming it Lookout Point Road. Wide and well-tended, it ran up to Lookout Point, from which the entire valley could be seen, laid out like a model train set. The other half of the switchback was Old Mine Road, a steep, rutted, potholed gravel and rock gap in the trees. For years, ever since the coal seams played out, the only maintenance had been periodic projects by the local scout troop to clear the worst of the encroaching brush as Mother Nature tried to reclaim her own.

It was a rough ride, even for the four-wheel drive Lexus, and Samantha clung tightly to the wheel as ruts and potholes tossed her about. She was having a good

time, but Steeples looked a bit green. In less than ten minutes of hard driving their ears were popping with increased altitude and trees on either side were thinning out. Through gaps between trunks they could catch glimpses, far below, of Tipple and, in the distance over mountains to the northwest, a greenish brown smudge that marked Seattle.

Moments later they shot over the edge of a small plateau cut into the mountain, went nearly airborne, and skidded to a stop in the old mine yard in a spray of slate chips and a cloud of dust.

Save for Jensen and Carver, waiting by their Jeep Cherokee, the mine site was deserted, shimmering in afternoon sun. Gasping in blast furnace heat from baking rocks, Samantha and Steeples picked up flashlights and approached the searchers.

"It's probably about a hundred feet in there," Jensen said, pointing at the old mine. "You can't miss it. Just follow your nose."

"You guys didn't go back in there, did you?" Samantha asked.

"Nope. Told us not to, we didn't. Smelled 'er, we come right back out."

"Okay, that's good. It's probably an animal, but we want to be careful, just in case."

Taking their five-cells, Samantha and Steeples slipped into the mine's cool darkness. The air was dry and musty and coal dust puffed in little clouds around their feet.

"Popular place," Steeples said, shining his light on the walls to show a gaudy profusion of graffiti. "Lot more cave paintings since I used to be around here."

"I guess it's more popular in the summer," Samantha said.

"You sure it's safe?"

"No, it isn't. I had a mining engineer in here last summer. Said this whole section of tunnel is pretty precarious. Wouldn't take too much to bring it down. That's why I had the barricade built."

"Pretty effective."

"Yeah, really."

When the barricade had been put in, the contractor had assured Samantha that heavy planks, fastened with bolts and slip nuts, would be enough to keep trespassers out of the shaft. He had reckoned without Tipple youth, who had both ingenuity and the time in which to apply it. Now she was going to have to bring in another contractor. This time she'd have the barrier built of reinforced concrete. Let the little devils find their way through *that* one.

It would be kind of a shame to permanently close a colorful piece of the area's history, but the alternative was having the damn thing fall in on someone sooner or later.

"Okay, let's go see what Ed's all excited about," Samantha said, walking off down the shaft between ore car rails. "Watch your step on these cross pieces."

"I know, Sammi, I've been in here before."

Whatever had caught Ed Jensen's olfactory attention, as they rounded a shallow bend and lost sight of the entrance they realized the man had been absolutely correct. They couldn't miss it.

"Oh, shit," Steeples said as he caught a sickening whiff of decay, "Jensen was right for a change. There's something in here."

"It's pretty bad," Samantha agreed. "Maybe a raccoon or something."

"Bigger than that."

"Deer?"

"Maybe."

Trying not to breathe through their noses, footsteps hollow and muffled on the dusty rock floor, the two moved slowly forward, the sweetish, unmistakable odor growing ever stronger. Their flashlight beams probed rusty rails and picked out pieces of timber here and there.

"Oh, Christ," Samantha said, "I see something that looks like a dress. What was Dolly wearing?"

"Don't know. Molly didn't know. Didn't even know when she was last seen. Is it a dress?"

"Oh. No," Samantha said in relief, "looks like an old piece of oilcloth or something. It's sitting on a cable drum, see?"

"Yeah, I see it. Jesus, that would fool just about anyone."

"Fooled me. God, Harlan, I nearly had a heart attack."

"Might be able to accommodate you yet, Chief. Hate to point this out, but oilcloth and an old cable drum don't stink like that."

"Yeah, you got a point there, Judge."

"I think it's getting stronger."

"No question of that," Samantha said, sweeping the shaft with her flashlight beam. "Oh, there it is."

Her light had fallen on a small bundle of fur a few feet past the oilcloth. On closer inspection, they found it was a mostly-desiccated black and white cat, stretched out with its head pulled back by dried neck ligaments in

a horrible portrayal of agony. A bloated little tongue protruded between needle-sharp teeth and eyes were black, empty slits.

"God, what a relief," Samantha said, "poor little thing. Must have come in here to die."

"Probably shot or poisoned or something," Steeples said.

"I just can't believe how bad it smells."

"Maybe it's because it's all closed off in here. No air circulation."

"I don't know, Harlan, it just seems like an awful lot of smell for one little cat."

"It's a cat, Chief. That's all it is. Dolly Jenkins is probably halfway to San Francisco by now."

"You're probably right, but I'm going to check a little further back," Samantha said, continuing down the shaft. With a sigh, Steeples fell into step, the beam of his flashlight running up and down rock walls as they passed, causing small coal seams to glitter like black diamonds.

"God," Samantha said dismally after a few paces, "I don't think it was the cat, Harlan. The smell is just getting worse and worse."

"Yeah, I know. I've been going to toss my cookies for the last thirty feet."

"Jesus, don't let it be Dolly. Please, please don't let it be Dolly."

"Amen," Steeples said, nearly walking up Samantha's back as she stopped dead in her tracks. Lying almost in the middle of the shaft about fifteen feet in front, illuminated by the pool of white light from her five-cell, was a pair of sneaker-clad feet.

"Oh, dear God," she breathed, running light up the body, "see that?"

"Yeah, I see it," said Steeples, looking over her shoulder.

"So much for little cats. Oh, God, Harlan. Oh, *no* ..."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Better stay put while I take a closer look. We don't want to disturb the scene any more than we have to."

She inched forward, keeping the flashlight directed at her feet and watching carefully to ensure she didn't kick or step on any evidence that might be lying around. After years of classes and seminars that were really just playing cop, this could be her first murder, and she wanted things done by the book.

"Maybe it's an overdose," Steeples said hopefully.

Samantha stopped by the feet and played her light over the body. It was on its back, stretched out, jeans and panties pulled to the knees. Stomach distended and showing under translucent, water-blistering skin the dark, webbed blood vessels of hemolysis. A bloodstained blouse was pulled up to just under the breasts, and the head was nearly touching the shaft wall. Empty eye sockets were filled with seething masses of maggots. Samantha reeled and her gorge rose.

She dug a handkerchief from her pocket and covered her nose. It was a little better, but the faint smell of Cachet mingled with corpse and she felt she would never again wear that brand. It was a favorite, too.

"What have we got? Dolly?" came Steeples' voice from the darkness.

"It's Dolly Jenkins," Samantha confirmed, "and I don't think it's an overdose."

"So much for 'Frisco," Steeples said.

"So much for 'Frisco."

Samantha stood in the reeking darkness with the decomposing body of the girl who had spilled her drink in the football stands just a few days before, trying to calm her racing mind. Suddenly she was in the middle of the biggest crime scene of her career. She had to stay cool.

Slowly, being careful to step in her own tracks, she backed away.

"We're going to have to seal this whole place and get the ident stuff," she said, "it's going to be a really bad afternoon."

Back at the mine entrance, breathing fresh air again, Samantha felt the eyes of the three men on her. She was the Chief and they were clearly stating by body language that this was her call. All the way.

"Anybody packing a cell phone?" she asked. Nobody was. "Harlan, where's yours?"

"Left it at home today. I was going to go back and get it, then we came out here. Didn't have time."

"Damn. I guess we'll have to do it the hard way," Samantha said, walking over to her Lexus. Grabbing the mike, she radioed the station. "Samantha here," she said when Mabel answered her call, "Mabel, wake up John and Mac, will you? Tell them to get the emergency generator and some lights and get them up here to the mine. Tell them to bring the ident kit and then get hold of Ray Medley. They can bring him up with them. And you can get the rest of Ed's guys up here too, okay?"

“Okay,” came Mabel’s voice.

In waking up the two constables on night rotation and calling for coroner Ray Medley, the ident kit and storm lights, Samantha knew she might as well have just announced they’d found the body of Dolly Jenkins in the Bentley No. 1 mine. Half the valley had police scanners and pretty soon the mine yard would be swarming with local looky-loos and news crews.

It was one of the rare times she wished she had a cell phone. But she had read somewhere that they might cause brain cancer. Something about electromagnetic waves. And, up to now, she hadn’t really needed one.

“Okay,” she said, “let’s get a barrier around the shaft. I don’t want people tramping around here.”

Steeple dug a roll of yellow barrier tape from Samantha’s Lexus and began stringing a perimeter around the mine. Samantha thought her deputy looked a bit stunned. He was a product of Tipple who had taken a job as constable because it was all that had been available at the time. He had never seen a murder and had never really expected to see one. Samantha couldn’t blame him for being a bit taken aback. It was the way she felt, too. This was a real murder investigation. Not just a class simulation. Her palms were sweating and her heart was racing.

God, what to do? Would she manage to think of everything?

What if she screwed it up?

What if a murderer walked because Samantha Bentley was just a little rich bitch playing police chief?

She was reviewing procedures from crime scene classes when a Land Rover charged over the crest of

the hill and ploughed to a halt. Samantha just had time to think how quick that had been when she realized it wasn't her men with the lights and generator.

It was village councilor Daniel Murchison and wife Ayla, with teenagers Bruce and Judy.

Jesus, bring the family, why not.

Ayla, a plump woman in jeans that were too tight and a blouse that was too thin, jumped out and hustled over. Samantha met her at the barricade.

"This is as far as you go, Ayla," she said, trying to be civil despite her revulsion at the ghoulish display. She had never really liked Ayla Murchison, and now she saw why.

"Oh, come on, Sammi," Ayla said, eyes glittering with excitement, "we want to see what you found."

"No chance of that," Samantha said, glancing at the teenagers who were following their father over. They must have been at their Hatwich Lake cabin to have gotten up here this quickly. God, who would bring kids in hopes of seeing the rotting body of a friend and classmate?

Murchison, boots crunching with authority, was lighting his pipe as he approached his wife and Samantha.

"Well, Chief," he said between forceful puffs that enveloped his head in billows of sweetish smoke, "what have we here?"

"We have a body, councilor, and we're working on it," Samantha said.

"Interesting," Murchison said, lifting the barricade.

He grunted in surprise as Samantha blocked him with a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said, "this is a crime scene. Nobody who isn't authorized by me will cross this line."

"Sammi," Ayla said with theatrically forced patience, "Daniel is a village councilor, so this doesn't apply to him. And he wants us to see, too, so we'll just take a quick look at be gone, okay?"

"No, it's not okay," Samantha said, "this isn't a picnic, Ayla. We have a dead girl in there and unless we determine it's suicide, this is a murder investigation. So just go home, okay? Daniel, you put that tape back the way you found it and stand clear. If you don't, I'll arrest you."

"You know, Chief," Murchison said, flushing from collar to the roots of thinning hair, "there were those on council who thought a woman, especially a rich woman, wasn't the right choice for police chief. Now, I was not numbered among them, but that could change, and change damn fast. Do you understand?"

It hit Samantha where she lived. She had been a surprise for everyone, attending police college and taking a patrol job a few years after her husband was killed climbing Mount Everest. She had turned out to be so good and so dedicated that when the old chief retired, on the instigation of Abel Larsen, she'd been offered the job. Since her days in the state police academy, she had attended numerous forensic courses and spent long hours poring over textbooks, preparing herself for the eventuality that she might one day be faced with a really serious crime. Now, at last, it had happened. And her biggest problem was a florid-faced village councilor with attitude.

"I understand that if you don't back off, you *are* going to jail," Samantha said.

"If I were you," Steeples said, coming up behind Samantha, "I'd do what the Chief says."

It was an unexpected but most welcome vote of confidence from Steeples, who had been passed over for the promotion when Chief Bill Starkey retired.

Murchison bristled and seemed about to launch another verbal foray, but Steeples raised a cautionary finger and Murchison meekly allowed the barrier tape to fall back into place. Samantha noticed that Bruce and Judy were enjoying their father's discomfiture.

"All right, kids, let's go," he said, "we're just going to see whether certain self-important police officers can interfere with the public's right to know."

"Jesus, can you believe that guy?" Steeples said as the Murchisons strode off, "the public's right to know? Where does he *get* that shit?"

"And *we're* self-important? Where does he get *that* shit?"

At that moment a group of seven teenagers arrived, breathless, on mountain bikes. Probably down by Lookout Point and spotted the Murchisons roaring past. Christ. This was going to get out of hand, for sure. The kids piled off their bikes and approached the barrier.

"Okay, kids," Steeples said, "let's keep back."

"Is it Dolly Jenkins?" a freckle-faced boy asked.

"I can't say. Just stand back and stay out of the way."

The small crowd drifted to the end of the barrier nearest the mine, animatedly discussing the probability that the body of Dolly Jenkins lay decomposing just a few feet away inside the mountain. The general consensus seemed to be that it was most likely Dolly. Although another possibility was Susan Fredricks, who hadn't been seen around for a while.

There was the sound of a jeep engine on Old Mine Road, and the Tipple PD Range Rover came into sight.

"Thank God for that," Samantha said.

"Yeah, they got up here pretty fast."

To the great interest of the onlookers, Samantha and her crew hauled the generator and lights from the back of the Rover. The audience drifted as close as it could get to the Range Rover. Clearly nobody in this Greek chorus wanted to miss even the smallest detail.

"Is that all the cable we have?" she asked.

"Yes, that's about it," Grady said, "about thirty feet, give or take."

It was going to be a lousy enough job without the noise and fumes of a gas generator running in an enclosed space. Samantha was tempted to wait until she could get another heavy-duty extension cord sent up from town. But the crowd was growing and she wanted the circus over with as soon as possible.

Several more youths arrived on foot and joined the group watching Samantha's electrical show. She noted, uneasily, that one of them was Calvin Jenkins, Dolly's brother. His face was pale and wooden. Well, no surprise. Of course rumors would be flying all over Tipple that Dolly Jenkins had been found in the old Bentley Bituminous No. 1 mine. Samantha felt a rush of sympathy for him.

The boy with Jenkins evoked no such feeling of warmth and compassion. Matt Helprin. Samantha could never look at the youth's sallow, acne-pitted face with its close-set, narrow eyes and loose-lipped, sardonic smirk without thinking how good he'd look in some medieval dungeon. If there were ever a candidate for impalement or boiling oil, it had to be Helprin.

This morning, though, Helprin was not smirking. He looked almost as pale as Jenkins and started like a rabbit when one of the other kids put a hand on his shoulder.

Of all the people gathering in the mine yard, only Helprin and Jenkins looked upset and frightened. All the others wore their curiosity like Halloween masks, faces openly and honestly proclaiming that they just couldn't get enough of this.

Resolving to check the two out later, Samantha radioed headquarters and told Mabel to get someone over to Larsen Hardware and pick up about a hundred feet of heavy-duty extension cord. Charge it to the department. Why not? It was pretty obvious that her tiny department's budget would be in the toilet over this one unless someone confessed in a big hurry.

Someone like Matt Helprin, maybe.

She left Black and Grady to crowd control while she and Steeples hauled storm lights in to the body. Working by flashlight in the cool, dark mine, they carefully arranged four lights in a perimeter around the corpse and ran the main cable back to the generator, which they placed as far away as they could towards the mine entrance. Then they fired it up. The five-horsepower generator caught with a reverberating roar. The smell of raw gas and exhaust suddenly seemed everywhere.

It was worse than she thought it would be but there was nothing to do but carry on and hope the extension arrived in a hurry.

Leaving the body bathed in harsh white light that made it look like something out of an grainy old black and white movie, they went back to the mine yard to

fetch the ident kit and cases of camera equipment. Most of the materials in the ident kit were new and even the camera equipment showed little wear and tear. Tipple and environs was a low crime area. Unfortunately, the old Bentley Mine was within Tipple limits, and that made the murder their problem rather than that of the Pierce County Sheriff's Department.

There was the sound of a powerful V-8 coming up the road and, moments later, the Larsen's Jeep Cherokee fairly flew over the crest and ploughed to a stop beside Samantha's Lexus. Odin Larsen climbed out along with the three members of his search team.

"Hi, Mom," Odin said, limping over to Samantha, "what have we got?"

"Dolly Jenkins is in there."

"My God. Dead?"

"For quite a while, looks like."

"Oh, Jesus, that's awful. Poor kid. Okay, what can the guys and I do to help?"

"Just man the barricades here and make sure everybody stays well back," Samantha said, "this is going to be a circus."

"We can handle it."

Odin went back to the search team and began issuing instructions. Ed Jensen had been head of the search and rescue unit ever since Samantha could remember, but the men didn't seem to mind a relative newcomer issuing orders. Not if that newcomer happened to be Odin Larsen. He listened respectfully to Odin and passed on the younger man's directions. Members of the team quickly fanned out along the barricade to face the growing crowd.

Back in the fetid shaft with the body, Samantha, careful not to disturb anything, made a detailed sketch. The scene wasn't as complicated as her classroom simulations had been. No chairs, tables, beds or anything else to account for. She decided to use the ore car rails as her reference points, giving her a line on which to base all measurements. Next she carefully measured the distance from the nearest track to Dolly's head and feet, precisely locating the body.

Then she went over the area around the body, inch by inch, looking for cigarette butts, candy wrappers, or just anything else that might provide a clue. There was nothing to be found. Not even a footprint in thick dust. The killer had had the foresight to drag some cloth or something over his footprints as he'd left the scene and all she could see were drag marks.

Pausing to admire her handiwork and squinting in the brilliance of storm lighting, she realized there was nothing more to do, artistically speaking. So far as she could see, there was absolutely nothing else to put into the crime scene sketch. It was actually a little disappointing. After all those hours in classes and seminars, it would have been nice to have a greater challenge. She could just see herself in court explaining to admiring jurors an incredibly complex crime scene sketch, replete with intricate measurements to precisely locate a hundred objects like ashtrays, cigarette butts, articles of clothing and murder weapons. Instead, she had a couple of parallel lines indicating a mineshaft, a couple inside of those indicating tracks, and a crude drawing of a body. With measurements from the head and feet to the nearest track.

"You should probably add that graffiti," Steeples, looking over her shoulder, shouted above the roar of the generator. He pointed to the shaft wall. Almost right above Dolly's head was a crude pair of SS runes. Under them was a line with five Xs on it.

Nodding, Samantha added the graffiti to her diagram. She frowned as she looked at it. She could vaguely remember seeing something like that before, but where? Nothing came to her.

"Okay," she shouted to make herself heard above the generator, "do your stuff, Harlan. Get one from each side, and the feet, and as close to the head as you can get. I'll record."

Steeples, having loaded the department's camera, took a position at the foot of the body.

"Okay," he said, "um, Hasselblad 503CXi, 50mm lens, flash, Kodak 120 film, twelve frames, ASA 400."

Samantha copied the data into her notebook and glanced at her watch.

"Okay," she said, "got that. Um, date is July 9, time is 1:30 pm, location is about sixty feet down a mine, weather we don't care about. Shooting northwards, I guess. Range is, oh, six feet?"

"About that," Steeples said, focusing the Hasselblad. A moment later the flash cast the scene in an even more surreal light. Steeples then walked around to the side of the body.

"Number two," Samantha said, "shooting westwards, range about six feet?"

"Yep."

The general shots, including graffiti, were the work of only a few minutes. Next came close shots of the girl's head and shoulders, exposed abdominal and

pubic areas, and pulled-down clothing. Shots of hands and feet. Samantha, giddy and ill, fought to keep her mind on what she was doing. No amount of training could ever have prepared her for this.

When all twelve frames had been exposed, Samantha had Steeples reload the camera and repeat the procedure in case there were any problems with the first roll of film. Then she took both rolls and placed them in a plastic baggie, tagging it with her name, date and location. It was the initial link in a chain of evidence she hoped would ensnare her first murderer.

As she placed the rolls of film in her ident kit, her radio crackled to life.

"Ah, Samantha, you read?" came Black's voice, breaking up a little because they were around the corner of the shaft and nearly cut off.

"Yes, I read," she replied, "go ahead."

"Doc Medley is out here, and we got quite a crowd. What do you want him to do?"

"Just hold there, I'll come out and get him."

"Okay. Um, be advised there are, ah, some reporters here and a camera crew."

Just what she needed. A lot of press coverage. Still, it was to be expected. Not counting three little girls who died in the infamous Mailman Mel case, this was Tipple's first murder.

Leaving Steeples with the body, Samantha trudged to the mine entrance. On her way past the generator she had to hold hands over her ears. Close to the machine the staccato, tunnel-magnified engine noise was almost unbearable.

It was a considerable relief to get out of the racket and stink of the mine, even if that meant standing in the

baking yard facing a gaggle of print and television journalists.

As constable John Black had reported, the barricade was lined with curious Tipple residents and, near the Tipple PD Range Rover, was a group of about eight journalists. Including, Samantha noted, April Watkins, who had graduated from Tipple High about two years ahead of Ellen, and now worked for King 5 TV in Seattle.

Catching sight of her, April called, "Chief Bentley, over here! Can you tell us anything?"

There were several other immediate and loud demands from the group for some sort of statement.

Well, there was no point in putting it off. As she neared the group, reporters and photographers, by judicious use of a few elbows and a bit of language, arranged themselves into a working configuration with photogs and TV cameramen in the foreground and print reporters around the periphery. Several radio reporters leaned into the scrum and extended mikes.

"Okay," Samantha said when she judged all was in readiness. "Um, as you know, we have found a body in the mine here. Foul play is suspected. Identification is withheld pending notification of next of kin. We're not divulging further details at this time."

Samantha favored the cameras with a brief, tight smile, and turned to go, ignoring a barrage of shouted questions.

"Samantha," April called, stepping away from the group.

It was probably not a good idea to appear to favor anyone, but April was, after all, a homegrown Tipple kid. Reluctantly, Samantha allowed herself to be led a

short distance from the rest. Several reporters looked uneasy, but didn't follow because there was obviously some sort of personal relationship here.

"The word is that it's Dolly Jenkins," April said, keeping her voice low.

Samantha remembered April as a type-A, hard-driving, aggressive kid. But basically honest.

"You can't use it until we've spoken to the next of kin," she replied.

"I know that. I just want to know. I went to school with her older brother, you know."

That would have been Carl Jenkins, buried the past winter at the age of twenty-three, after a drug deal in Seattle had gone very, very wrong.

"I hope I won't regret this," Samantha said at last, "but yes, it's Dolly."

"You won't regret it," April promised, walking back to the pack of journalists. They immediately crowded around her in what looked like a feeding frenzy. April just shrugged and shook her head. Samantha was fairly sure April wouldn't use the name or bother the Jenkins, but she would certainly use the next couple of hours to dig up stuff on Dolly. Should make for an interesting six o'clock news broadcast.

The next item on her agenda was leaning against the police Range Rover, wearing a fishing vest and reeking of alcohol from every pore. Obviously searchers had found Dr Ray Medley out on the lake where he always was about this time on a summer day. And in the state he was always in about this time on a summer day.

Lovely. She had hoped the old bastard would, by some miracle, be sober. But she hadn't had any other miracles, so why this one?

Motioning Medley to follow, Samantha made her way back into the fetid darkness and noise of the mineshaft. The stench folded around her like a curtain and she dug her Cachet-laden handkerchief from her pocket again. It was better than nothing.

The noise from the generator seemed even worse now. In the harsh glare of the storm lights, and bleached of her blood supply, Dolly Jenkins looked like a wax dummy. Save for the stench, it might have been a training exercise.

"Poor kid," Medley said, shouting to make himself heard, "I delivered her, you know. Brought her into this world."

The last words ended in a long, drawn-out, whiskey-laden belch and Samantha backed up, disgusted.

Medley then stood gaping at the body. Samantha realized he didn't really know what to do. He was a country doctor, and not a very good one at that, not a pathologist. Samantha told him she and Steeples had already photographed the body and crime scene from all angles. Next they should conduct a preliminary medical exam and prepare the body for moving. So they would have to do a thorough surface examination of both body and immediate area.

Medley appeared less than enthusiastic, but joined Samantha as she pulled on a pair of latex gloves and hunkered down to begin a surface check of the corpse. The smell was almost overpowering. Medley's ragged breathing and red-rimmed, teary eyes showed he didn't care for the exercise much more than Samantha.

He gulped once or twice and Samantha had the uneasy feeling that he was going to lose it. If he did that, in these close confines with the horrible noise and stench, she was sure she'd be sick, too.

"Okay," she said loudly, as much to distract Medley as anything else, "let's take a look at the head."

She gently grasped Dolly's head, the thick mass of black curls compressing under her gloves like a cushion stuffed with horsehair. It was an unexpectedly unpleasant sensation and her stomach heaved. For the first time she truly regretted her decision to abandon a life of ease on Danny's money for a role as a public servant. She tipped the head gently, nearly losing control because of unanticipated neck flaccidity, and exposed the back of the skull. Hair was matted thick with caked blood and maggots swarmed.

"Looks like she was hit on the head," Samantha said. "Agreed?"

Medley, without peering too closely at the evidence, hurriedly agreed. Samantha, who could have done this procedure without the man, sighed. Well, the book said the coroner or medical examiner should do the preliminary medical examination. Obviously whoever wrote the book had never gotten an up close and personal look at Ray Medley, MD.

"These look like bruises on her neck, too," Samantha said, easing the head back to its original position and pointing to some discoloration on the front of the girl's neck just over the collar bone. Always before, whenever she had been moving people in training exercises, there had been the muscle tension of the living, no matter how limp her subjects had tried to be. It hadn't prepared her for handling a body with

utterly no muscle tension whatsoever. Manipulating a decaying corpse was profoundly disturbing.

Medley's answer to the bruises was a suspiciously wet burp and a shudder. "Cold in here," he mumbled.

"Look," Samantha said, deciding to play fast and loose with procedures, "why don't you go get a breather, Ray? I can do this and write a report for you to sign."

"Well," Medley mumbled, clearing his throat and swallowing, "could use some air. Maybe I'll just duck out for a second."

He departed hurriedly, the muffled sounds of footsteps rapidly lost in generator noise. Samantha wished she were going with him.

"Useless bastard," Steeples opined.

"I guess."

"We'd have been better off getting Abel to do it."

A sizeable number of Tipple residents took minor aches, pains, cuts and scrapes to Abel Larsen, who had been a medical corpsman in Korea with considerable front line service. It was well known that, if you donated a few dollars to Abel's extensive first aid kit, he could probably put you right in no time. The illicit medical practice had been going on for years and nobody had ever complained. Least of all Ray Medley, MD.

Getting Steeples to pass her a pair of tweezers and a large plastic vial from the ident kit, Samantha carefully picked a half dozen maggots from Dolly's gaping eye sockets and from the back of her head. She closed the vial and used her pen to punch several breathing holes in the lid.

"Think that'll be useful?" Steeples asked.

"Might give us some better idea of when she died," Samantha said. "There's no rigor at all and she's getting pretty ripe, so it's got to be more than two days ago. And these maggots look pretty well developed. I think she's been here a few days at least."

She handed Steeples the vial, telling him to mark it with his initials and the date.

Then came the moment she had been dreading. She was going to have to move the corpse, at least enough to see underneath. Taking a deep breath through her mouth, Samantha motioned Steeples in to give her a hand. Together they rolled Dolly's body on its side, eyes watering at the sudden, rich gust of feter.

"God," Steeples muttered. Then he gagged and wiped at his mouth with his uniform sleeve. "I just can't believe this."

"Look there," Samantha said, gently sliding Dolly's blouse up and pointing to her back. "No lividity. It's all below her waist. It fixed there, so she was sitting up for maybe ten hours or so after she was killed."

"Maybe she was left in here sitting and just fell over when rigor eased off," Steeples suggested.

"Maybe, but I don't think so. It would have been quite a balancing act. If her killers left her sitting up, they'd have sat her against the wall. Then she'd just have slumped over when rigor ended. There's no way she could have wound up stretched out like this."

"I suppose. Why are you saying killers, plural?"

"No special reason," Samantha said. "Might have been one, might have been more."

That wasn't strictly true. There were two special reasons. Matt Helprin and Calvin Jenkins. They *had* been pretty pale and skittish out there, hadn't they?

And looking like *that* at this sort of three-ring circus was not at all like those two. They should have been right in their element.

Samantha turned her attention to the girl's clothes. Anything loose on the body that might fall off when it was transported would have to be collected and placed in evidence bags. Dolly had been wearing a pair of low-cut sneakers with no socks. The sneakers were badly worn at the toes and there was no discernible tread on the soles. The right sole, on the ball of the foot, was worn right through to underlayers. Jeans, pulled down to the girl's knees, were similarly worn. A pair of nylon panties and a threadbare blouse completed the outfit.

"Well," Samantha said when she completed her examination of the clothing, "it probably wasn't a sex killing, anyway."

"What do you mean?" Steeples said. "Of course it was. Her pants and panties are pulled down, blouse is up, what else would it be?"

"Look there," Samantha said, pointing to what appeared to be spotty semen stains along with urine and feces on the panties. "If the killer pulled her clothes down and raped her, then left her, there wouldn't be those stains on her underwear. If this was a rape, then the rapist would have had to pull her clothes down, rape her, then pull her clothes back up to get those stains on them, then pull them back down again. Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. Maybe he had second thoughts. Wanted another go. Maybe he wanted pictures. Maybe he raped her somewhere else, then brought her here to kill her. Who knows about these creeps?"

Samantha thought about that. There were possibilities, but somehow none of them seemed to be the right explanation. Smothering revulsion, she gently pried the girl's thighs apart. Flesh felt like waxy gelatin under her surgical gloves and the stench was appalling. If she lived a thousand years, Samantha would never forget these few, awful minutes.

"No vaginal bleeding," she said. "No apparent bruising, no tearing. I'd say it wasn't a sex attack. She was killed for some other reason, and this was set up to look like a sex attack."

There was the muffled clumping of boots on the mine floor and Mac Grady came into the light. He was carrying a brand new extension cord and holding a hand over his nose.

"One of Jensen's guys got here late. Had this in his truck," Grady shouted. "If you guys are ready, I'm going to shut down and move the generator."

It was strange, but Samantha had become so used to the noise and fumes that she had ceased to notice either. Hadn't even been aware that she and Steeples had been shouting at each other the whole time.

"Yes, go ahead," she said, standing up and stepping carefully back, motioning Steeples to do the same, as Grady disappeared back up the shaft.

A moment later they were plunged into darkness as the generator cut off. Samantha snapped on her five-cell, holding it angled at the floor, and the two officers stood in the cool, dark closeness of the mine, lost in thought.

"What about the Jenkins?" Steeples asked after a lengthy pause. "Not that they'll give two shits in a sandstorm, but somebody has to tell them."

"I'll do it," Samantha said.

"Want me to come along?"

"No, it's okay. I'll handle it. I want you and the guys to start asking around town. We've got to find out when Dolly was last seen. I really doubt that Juke or Molly will have a clue."

There was a muffled banging from somewhere up towards the mine entrance, then the cough of a gas engine. It spluttered, then roared into life and the storm lights came back on. But now the sound was muted by the shaft barricade and they could hear themselves think.

"Good to get that out of here," Steeples said, "if this place isn't safe the vibrations probably weren't doing it much good."

"Probably not," Samantha said, realizing that she hadn't thought of that. "Why in hell didn't you say something?"

"Just thought of it myself."

After getting out a pair of paper bags from the ident kit, Samantha carefully inspected Dolly's hands. Although there were scrapes on the palms and dirt embedded in skin, there was no evidence of flesh or blood under the girl's long fingernails. She carefully slipped the bags over the Dolly's hands and secured them with twist ties. It didn't look as though the teen had put up much of a fight for her life.

"You know," Steeples said thoughtfully, "there's something a little strange about this?"

"What?"

"Well, I don't get it. She's wearing ratty old jeans and a blouse that looks like it came over on the

Mayflower, but she has a pair of expensive panties on. You know, doesn't fit?"

"Now, how would you know about expensive panties?" Samantha asked, smiling in spite of horror.

Steeple flushed and mumbled something about a girlfriend and a birthday. Steeple was a handsome six-footer who cut a wide swathe through the young ladies of Seattle, but never liked to talk about his exploits. He looked so uncomfortable that Samantha stopped laughing almost instantly.

"It's a good point," she said. "Those must be her Sunday best, so why would she be wearing them with this other stuff?" She straightened, easing a kink in her back. This was a moment of truth. She had done all she could think of. If she had forgotten anything, it would surely come back later to haunt her. She told Steeple to get Ed Jensen and his men in with a stretcher. They'd take the body, carefully covered, down to the Begly Funeral Home where it would stay in a cold locker until a hearse could carry it to Seattle for a formal autopsy.

The first man to emerge from the darkness of the shaft was Odin Larsen. He was holding one end of a furling stretcher, with Ray Edwards on the other. Trooping behind them were Jensen, Father Ralph Edwards and Elmer Carver.

"Good God, Odin," Samantha said, "what are you doing in here with your leg? This is dangerous. If you trip or something ..."

"I can manage, Mom," Odin said, smiling, "if I'm going to be on the team, I'm going to be in all the plays and that's that. I'm just glad I can do something. I'm glad we can carry Dolly out of here with some dignity."

"Hear, hear," said Father Ralph.

"Sure as hell stinks," said Carver.

When the men, gagging at the smell, but some secretly thanking their lucky stars for this great bit of gossip, had gotten the corpse onto a stretcher and covered, Samantha gave a little speech about keeping this to themselves during the investigation.

The men all nodded solemnly. They had all known Dolly.

"Poor kid," Odin offered.

"Yeah, she didn't get much of a run at it, did she?" said Ray Edwards.

"Short life," said Carver, "short and really crummy."

"Odin," Father Ralph said, catching sight of the graffiti on the wall, "isn't that what you were looking for at Big Foot?"

"Yeah, it is," Odin said. "Well, we'd best get Dolly out of here."

"What are you talking about?" Samantha asked.

"That's Matt Helprin's sign, Odin was saying," Father Ralph said.

"Odin?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, I've heard it around, but I really wouldn't want to say anything about it. We don't know that Matt put it there. Somebody else could have."

"But so could that little crud, Helprin," Carver said. "That's his sign."

"I don't think we should be so quick to lay blame," Odin said. "Just because it's what he usually puts on his territory doesn't mean he put this one there. It would be kind of stupid, don't you think? Putting his mark next to someone he's killed?"

"He's a stupid little shit," Carver opined, adding, "Excuse me, Father."

"I think you'd best tell me what you know, Odin," Samantha said, "leave it to me to judge whether it's important."

"Okay," Odin sighed. "Matt Helprin has SS runes tattooed on his left shoulder and a single strand of barbed wire tattooed around his arm up high. So on that, you can see the SS runes and that crosshatched line underneath is the barbed wire. I've heard around that he likes to spray-paint that on places he's claimed. Like a gang mark. That's all."

"I never heard that," Steeples said.

"You just don't move in the right circles, Harlan," Odin said with an affable smile.

"By God," Carver spluttered, "the little bastard marked her off like you'd put a game tag on a deer."

"I doubt it," Odin said. "That would be pretty stupid. Those marks could have been there for months. All it means is that Helprin probably considers this his territory. Okay, guys, ready to go?"

Bending over, Odin picked up the front end of the stretcher. Carver took the back and the two started back up the shaft, Odin walking with a pronounced limp. In seconds they disappeared around the bend in the tunnel. Samantha knew that by ten that night there wouldn't be a resident of Tipple who hadn't been completely briefed on everything there had been to see and smell in the mineshaft.

"I must say," said Father Ralph, "your Ellen is a lucky young lady. Odin is a fine, fine young man. The way he just took charge of things today ... fine, just fine ..."

"Yes, Father, I know. I know what he does," Samantha said, ignoring the almost inaudible snort from Steeples. It was clear the two men didn't get along at all, and Samantha wondered at the source of the animosity. "I wonder if you could wait for me at the yard? I'm going to have to talk to the Jenkins and they might need spiritual help. They're Catholics, aren't they?"

"Yes, I suppose they are. Lapsed, though, I'm afraid to say."

"They still might need you."

As Father Ralph joined his brother and Jensen in a little parade out of the mineshaft, Samantha and Steeples, under the powerful arc lights, began a painstaking ground search. Their only find was a tiny scrap of paper, looking like part of an envelope flap, that had been lying under the body. At last they had to admit there was nothing more they could do.

"I'll get Mac and John to take down these lights," Steeples said as they walked back to daylight, "Want me to get someone to seal up this shaft?"

"No, don't bother," Samantha said. "It would take the kids about five seconds to open it up again. I'll have to get it permanently sealed when we're done."

As they stepped into the mine yard, blinking in afternoon glare that was actually painful after hours under storm lights, they saw the crowd was much diminished.

Walking over to the barricade, Samantha loudly told the little throng that the show was over. Reluctantly, the small group began to disperse. Some got into four-wheel drives, kids got onto mountain bikes, and some just walked.

As Samantha drove off the ridge with Father Ralph clinging to the dashboard, she noticed that Matt Helprin and Calvin Jenkins were still standing by the barricade, staring at the mineshaft. She watched them in her rearview until they were lost to sight and the pair never took their eyes off the mine entrance.

Samantha wondered about that all the way down Old Mine Road, onto Lookout Road and on down to Lake Road. And the ramshackle two-story olive green farmhouse that housed the sprawling, ever-growing Jenkins clan. There were several rusted out, abandoned cars in the overgrown yard, along with an old iron bed and springs, an ancient wood stove and a dilapidated school bus on blocks. The bus had been converted to carry a country music show put together by Juke and Molly during the precipitous decline of their respective careers. A faded legend on the side proclaimed it the conveyance of the Juke Jenkins Country Music Revue (and featuring Marvelous Molly Melons). The revue had been a colossal failure, stranding Juke and Molly in Casper, Wyoming, in the middle of winter. Only the pawning of Molly's diamond ring, she was fond of pointing out at the top of her lungs, had brought enough fuckin' money to get them back to Tipple in one fuckin' piece. And there the bus had sat ever since, a monument to futility and broken dreams.

As she parked, Samantha noted that someone had dug up ground under the bed and planted a couple of rows of sweet peas that were entwined with the rusted springs and rapidly being choked off by an invasion of rank grass. They had evidently not been watered for several days and were beginning to wilt. Near the right

corner of the house was a large maple tree with a tire swing hanging from its largest branch. Sitting in the tire, trailing bare feet on the worn dirt path under the swing, was a soiled little girl wearing an oversized pair of faded and patched coveralls and nothing else. Her eyes displayed no interest as Samantha shut off her engine, picked up her small ident kit, and climbed out of the Lexus.

"Hi there, you're Elsie Faye, aren't you?" Samantha said, bending down to smile at the little girl. This would be the one born about ten months before the twins. It was hard to keep track of all the little Jenkins'. Seemed to be a new one every year.

The child nodded, but her expression didn't change.

"Are your mommy and daddy home?"

Again a slow nod. Samantha had to resist the urge to gather the grubby little Cinderella into her arms and whisk her away to a castle in the sky. Or at least the offices of Child Protective Services.

Samantha picked up her kit again and turned to the house, but before she could take a step a tiny hand clutched at her pants. Surprised, she looked down as Elsie Faye, pulling at grass with her toes and cramming a grubby little fist against her mouth, mumbled something.

"I'm sorry, honey, what did you say?" Samantha asked, bending down.

This time she made out Elsie Faye's question: When is Dolly coming home?

"I don't know, honey, maybe later," she said, tears in her eyes as she climbed creaking steps.

As she approached the open front door, stench hit her in a solid wall. Stale everything. Stale sweat, stale

cooking, stale clothes, stale, musty carpets. She was about to knock when a vast cloud of a woman rolled from the kitchen, a billowing lump of white flesh in living room gloom. Samantha stepped across the threshold, noticing Juke Jenkins asleep on the couch, snoring loudly and drooling on his stained tank top, a football game blaring on the television. Taking his keys had not prevented his homecoming. Samantha made a mental note to question him about Dolly when he was sober enough to know his own name. She thought it unlikely Juke Jenkins had anything to do with the murder. Perhaps because Jenkins probably wouldn't bother taking Dolly all the way to the mineshaft. Too much effort. He'd just have gone off to the forest and stuffed the body under a log.

Molly Jenkins' eyes were bloodshot and there was a lipstick-smeared glass of some clear liquid clutched in her meaty hand. She was wearing a soiled one-piece, sleeveless dress like a Hawaiian muu-muu, and the impression she created in closed confines was that of a galleon under full sail.

"What ... what're y'doin' here, Bentley?" she slurred suspiciously. "If yer here about that li'l asshole Ca..." She belched copiously. "Calvin ..."

Trying to keep disgust off her face, Samantha told Molly Jenkins she was sorry, but Dolly had been located.

"Dead, ain't she?" asked Molly, showing only vague curiosity.

"I'm sorry. Yes." Samantha took her hat off.

"Well, one less fucking mouth to feed," Molly said after a reflective moment.

“Father Ralph is here to look after your spiritual needs,” Samantha said. “I’d like to see her room, if I might.” She was barely able to contain her temper. She was slow to anger, but, as husband Danny used to say, she was hell on wheels once she got going.

“Up them stairs,” Molly said, pointing down a hall, “on the end.”

Steering a wide course around the snoring, reeking Juke, and leaving Father Ralph to explain things to the children, Samantha started up the narrow flight of steps. They were so steep they made her think someone must have just slapped treads on a ladder, and she was bathed in sweat by the time she reached a short, dark, oppressively hot little hallway in what was obviously a converted attic. The place was like a sauna in Lower Slobbovia.

“It’s ... th’one ... on th’end,” Molly said, wheezing as she squeezed her ponderous way up the stairs.

Samantha opened the end door to find herself in a cubbyhole room under the steeply sloping roof. It was tiny, just as boiling hot as the hallway, and barren save for a ramshackle bed with a soiled sheet and a pillow without a cover, a cheap cardboard wardrobe and a dresser with a badly cracked mirror. Samantha set her kit on the floor, aware that Molly had entered behind her.

She had put her hat back on and dug out her notebook when she heard a long, slurping snuffle. She turned to see huge tears rolling down Molly’s fat cheeks.

“My poor baaaabeeeee,” Molly wailed, the unexpected and eerie sound sending shivers down Samantha’s spine, “I ain’t touched this place since she

went missin'. Just the way she left it. M'poor, poor baby girl. Oh, dear god, *Dolllleeeee!*"

"Look, Molly, I've got to search this room, okay? Maybe you could go downstairs and be ... be with Juke?"

"That rotten skullfuck," Molly snarled, little piggy eyes becoming flat and hard. "Thinks he can jus' lay around all day an' fuck th'dog an' I'm gonna look after his fuckin' brats! One of these days I'm gonna take me a fuckin' knife an' cut that fucker's balls off and ..."

"Molly," Samantha said, resting her hand on the woman's huge shoulder, "settle down. I want you to go on down and look after things while I look around up here, okay? Your family needs you, Molly. Okay? Molly?"

The last 'Molly' was because the woman was now looking at something over Samantha's shoulder and her doughy face was slowly collapsing again.

"My poor baby wannit t' be a dancer," she mumbled, "just like me."

"That would have been ... okay," Samantha said, fumbling for a response.

"Just look at that," Molly said, pointing. Huge fat deposits pouched her triceps and wobbled obscenely.

Taped to the underside of the sloping roof over the bed was an old poster from something called 'The Penthouse' in Vancouver B.C. It was adorned with images of brassy-looking women sporting 1970s hairstyles, set in large stars outlined in gold and silver glitter. In the center, bursting out of the biggest star and hefting breasts that were at least three sizes too large for her build, was a slim, young Molly Jenkins. Her

glitter was red and her caption shrieked 'Garden fresh from Seattle! The triple M! Marvelous Molly Melons!'

"The Triple M ... I was fuckin' hot," Molly said, beads of sweat glistening on her upper lip. "Wasn't I fuckin' hot?"

"Yes, you were," Samantha agreed, wearily, "now, really, I do have to do a search here."

"I still fuckin' got it, ya know," Molly said, doing a little bump and grind that sent rolls of fat wobbling around her waist like tubes in a water mattress. "Still fuckin' got it ... still fuckin' got it ... the Triple M ... Triple ..." Her voice trailed off, dreamily.

"Molly," Samantha said, "I really do have to ask you to give me some room, here."

Molly gave huge breasts another shake and cupped them in beefy, mottled hands. "Me'n Juke, we wouldn't a' gone bust in fuckin' Wyomin' if that skullfuck manager guy didn't fuck off with our fuckin' money an all. We'd still be out there. I'd still be doin' it on account o' I still got it. I could ... I could make them guys eat outa my hand ..."

"I believe that, Molly. Now, look, I've got to look over Dolly's room, so why don't you ..."

"You want to see? See I still got it?" Molly asked, touching the top button of her billowing dress with sausage-like fingers that Samantha suddenly noticed had cracked and dirty nails, "want to see the goods? The melons?"

"Maybe later," Samantha said quickly, "maybe I could just get things done here and you could show me when I come down, okay?"

Molly's face crumbled again and tears started at the corners of her eyes.

"M'poor baby," she said brokenly. "M'poor baby ain't comin' home no more ... No more ... I ... I gotta see my Juke ... I gotta ... get a drink."

She turned and lurched out of the room, managing to bounce off both sides of the door. Her tread on the steep, narrow stairs was ponderous and slow. A few moments later Samantha heard her shriek, "You little fuckin' bastards, what the fuck are you doing?" There was the sound of flesh smacking flesh, a child's wail, and gentle remonstrations from Father Ralph.

Samantha opened her notebook and recorded the date and time. Then, before turning her attention to the spartan little room, she carefully printed a reminder to get Child Protective Services looking into the Jenkins' charming operation. Not that they hadn't already been out here a hundred times.

It didn't take long to itemize the room's contents. Samantha, used to the clutter of her own daughter's room during Ellen's teenage years, could hardly believe that Dolly had so little.

No posters or pictures, other than the Penthouse poster, adorned the dirty walls or sloping ceiling. No pictures of friends, family or favorite movie stars were shoved into the dresser mirror frame. There were no stuffed toys on the bed, no souvenirs, no keepsakes.

On the dresser lay two combs and a hairbrush badly tangled with long, curly black hair. In a battered wicker hamper in the closet she found dirty clothes, including several pair of panties, all extremely worn. In the drawers she found two frayed skirts, threadbare cutoffs and several blouses. A couple of bras that had seen better days.

Hanging from its brass buckle on a hook inside the door was a heavy man's belt of braided black cowhide.

Samantha was sweating heavily when she finished her search. She stood in the middle of the floor, her head nearly touching the sloped ceiling, momentarily at a loss as to what to do next. The revolting, foul little room fairly screamed brutality and privation.

God, how could that child have lived like this?

Samantha's eye went to the belt again and she shuddered. Juke, no doubt. Left there as a reminder to Dolly of just what she could expect if she didn't ... do what? That didn't take too much imagination. With another shudder, Samantha noticed old scars around the door where wood had been splintered away, probably by a kick. She walked over and checked it more closely. The doorknob had a lock, but the entire latching mechanism on the doorjamb was gone. The room could not be locked. Dirt rubbed into exposed wood indicated it was old damage. Samantha had to resist an urge to go down and lay her baton around Juke's hairy ears. She'd never used the damn thing outside of training sessions, but now would be a good time to get in a little practice.

So far, she had found nothing of any value. She momentarily considered taking hair samples from the brush, then dismissed the idea. What would that show? That a hairbrush found in Dolly Jenkins' room had been used by Dolly Jenkins? No shit, Sherlock.

The throaty rumble of a powerful engine on Lake Road interrupted her thoughts, and Samantha turned to look out the open window. Roaring past the house, trailing a long cloud of dust and evidently heading for

the Larsen fishing shack, was Odin Larsen's distinctive yellow Pontiac GTO.

She hadn't realized Dolly's room commanded such a view of Lake Road. In fact, if she leaned out the window, not a bad idea considering the smell, she could actually see bits of Hatwich Lake through the trees. It was really a pretty nice view. About all this horrid little garret had going for it.

It was just as she was turning back into the room that Samantha realized there was about four inches of space between the closet, a flimsy contraption cobbled together from pieces of two by two and cheap composition board, and the wall. Apparently whoever built the closet couldn't be bothered to work around the jog created by what looked like the corner of a chimney protruding a few inches in to the room and had simply come straight out from the wall. It was strange that she had not noticed the gap before. She slipped her flashlight from her belt and peered into the tiny crevasse.

There, jammed about two feet in, was a small mound of white fabric. Reaching carefully and trying not to think about spiders or rats, Samantha used her pen to drag the object gently into the room, where she spread it out on the floor. A short, white summer skirt with a Velcro waistband. Decorated with tiny blue flowers and sporting several large patches of dirt and some pine needles, it had been ruined by a large tear along one seam.

Why had Dolly hidden the ruined skirt behind her closet?

Samantha looked over at the heavy belt hanging on the door. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to

figure that one out. Juke wouldn't take too kindly to his hard-earned welfare money being thrown away like that. Once again, she had to control an almost overpowering urge to go downstairs and make Juke's life suddenly very unpleasant.

Carefully placing the skirt in one of the paper bags she generally carried for gathering evidence and tagging it for later identification, Samantha took a last look around the barren garret with its sad and sordid memories of a lost little girl. It could hardly be any wonder that a child who had grown up in this wretched place would become a client of the Thea Carter Society. And whose ultimate goal in life had been to become a stripper like her mother had been.

And marry someone just like dear old dad?

As she crossed the threadbare living room, she saw that Juke Jenkins had managed to fall off the sofa and was curled in a ball on the filthy living room rug, saliva dribbling from open mouth as he snored in great, heaving gasps. Thirty years earlier, a twenty-two-year-old John 'Jukebox' Jenkins, pride of Tipple, Washington, had briefly made the big time. Samantha could remember as a teenager clipping and taping to her wall a huge story in the *Tipple Miner* about the local phenomenon who had played the Grand Ole Opry. God, the man had been so handsome in his skin-tight jeans, cowboy boots and denim shirt. It was hard to believe that the lean young singer who had inspired fantasies fit only for whispering to friends at slumber parties and this slobbering, snuffling wreck were one and the same. It had nearly broken Samantha's teenage heart when she'd read that Juke Jenkins was to wed an exotic dancer who went by the stage name

Marvelous Molly Melons. She almost blushed as she remembered those nights in front of her mirror, teasing at her breasts in a futile effort to turn them into marvelous melons.

She was nearly to the front door when the owner of the melons came from the kitchen.

"You find that no-good fuckin' little whore," Molly shrieked, "you tell her to get the fuck back here. You tell her she's gonna get a fuckin' whippin' for not doin' her fuckin' chores! Think I like doin' this shit?"

"Molly," Father Ralph said from behind her, "remember what we discussed? About forgiveness? You mustn't be in denial. You have to let go, Molly. You have to forgive your daughter."

"I ain't forgivin' nuthin'," Molly shrieked, "that little bitch ain't even watered the fuckin' garden in a fuckin' week!"

As she walked out, Samantha saw the two-year-old twins, Tyler and Taylor, dirty and clothed in rags, playing near their father's drunken body. Long odds said that in about ten years they'd be a big headache for the Tipple PD.

As she reached her Lexus, wondering whether Dolly, wherever she was, would forgive her mother, Samantha heard footsteps on the gravel. She looked up to see April Watkins coming towards her with a cameraman in tow. The King 5 van was parked prominently at the end of the Jenkins driveway.

"You've told them, right?" April said, uncoiling her microphone.

"Right," Samantha replied, putting the small ident kit into her Lexus.

"Find anything?"

"No, nothing of any value."

"How are they taking it?"

"Heartbroken, of course."

"Can you give us a statement?"

Samantha nodded, waiting for the cameraman, a florid-faced, middle-aged man with a shock of white hair and wheezing, shallow breathing, to get himself positioned. The portable light came on, momentarily dazzling her.

"Okay," April said, "go ahead."

"Well, we have identified the body of an adolescent female found today in the Bentley Bituminous No. 1 mineshaft as that of Dolly Jenkins. Foul play is suspected ..."

Concluding the brief interview, April motioned to her cameraman and set off up the driveway towards the Jenkins home.

"I don't think it would be a good idea to go up there right now," Samantha said.

"Why not?"

"I'm just telling you it wouldn't be a good idea. Not right now. Maybe in a day or two. Father Edwards is consoling them."

It shouldn't have mattered, really, but Samantha felt revulsion at having the dead girl's sordid family life paraded on television. It seemed as though it would be adding insult to injury.

April looked sullen, but went back to her van, towing her cameraman in her wake like some fat, grizzled lap dog. The van made a U-turn and rolled off down the highway, soon lost to sight in the trees. Samantha had a feeling it would be back as soon as she left.

Tipple, WA
Friday, July 10, 1998

"Fuckin' bullshit, man," Calvin Jenkins said with all the moral outrage he could muster.

He was sprawled on a couch at Matt Helprin's house, watching the noon television news with Helprin. Watching news was not something the pair normally did, but this was definitely a Kodak moment.

On screen was a tearful Molly Jenkins, standing outside her dilapidated house and holding one of the twins, who obviously wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of this unaccustomed position.

"Who would do a thing like that to my poor baby?" Molly was sobbing. "My poor, poor *baby*?"

"What fuckin' *bullshit*, man," Jenkins said again, "that fat fuckin' cow never gave a flyin' fuck about Dolly. Fuckin' *never*."

"Hey, shut the fuck up," Helprin said as the report cut to a shot of Samantha Bentley, also standing in front of the Jenkins house. She was being evasive.

"Chief, can you tell us where the murder took place?" April Watkins was asking.

"No, not right now," Samantha said.

"Was she killed in the mine?"

"We're not prepared to go into that at this time."

"Are there any suspects?"

"None at this time. We're pursuing some leads, but that's all."

"Dumb bitch," Helprin said, using the remote to shut off the TV, "she ain't got nothin'."

"Shit, what if she fuckin' comes after us, man?" Jenkins said, insides going mushy at the thought.

"Listen," Helprin said, "you don't shoot yer fuckin' mouth off, nothing's gonna happen. You say a fuckin' word and yer goin' with yer fuckin' sister, unnerstand?"

"I saw you with that fuckin' pipe, man," Jenkins said, "is that what you killed her with?"

"You fuckin' better not say shit about the fuckin' pipe," Helprin said. "Dolly wasn't never at the fuckin' shack, get it?"

Helprin's assurances that the Tipple PD had nothing didn't help Calvin escape the funk in which he'd been living since the day Helprin picked up a length of pipe and disappeared after his sister. He was terrified, both of Helprin and of what might happen to him if Juke Jenkins ever found out fuckin' Dolly had been stripping for them. And that Matt fuckin' killed her.

There was a sense of awe and wonder to it all. It had really *happened*, man. His sister had been killed and, outside of the killer himself, he was the only guy in the valley who knew who did it. It was like totally fuckin' *weird*. He was just dying to tell someone and only the thought that he might then be *really* dying sealed his lips.

"You killed her," Calvin said, wonder showing in his voice, "you really fuckin' *killed* her, man."

"Fuckin' right," Helprin said with a sneer and a toss of lank blond hair. "And I ain't gonna think twice about offin' you either, ya fuckin' faggot."

Calvin, who, if truth were told, had been really watching Matt's ass during the rape, was sick with fear.

"Hey, look, Matt, man," he said, chewing on a knuckle, "listen, man, don't tell nothin', okay?"

Helprin got that look on his face. The lopsided, smirking look of a really tough guy who was really in the know and really on top of things.

"Yeah?" he said. "Think I'm fuckin' scared of those assholes? Think I'm fuckin' scared to say I done it?"

"Hey, man," Jenkins mumbled, terror skewering deep into his innards, "*don't*, hey?"

"So they chuck me in jail for a few months, big fuckin' hairy deal," Helprin said. "You get to go home after yer old man finds out yer precious fuckin' sister was strippin' for us."

"D-don't," Jenkins whimpered, almost overcome at the mental image of Juke's face when he found *that* out.

"Yeah? You askin' or tellin'?" Helprin sneered.

"I'm askin', Matt. Please, please don't tell the old man nuthin'," Jenkins implored, noticing even through his fear that Helprin was getting a huge erection. He knew what that portended and it was not actually an unwelcome sight. "Please, Matt, *please*," Jenkins added for good measure.

"Yeah?" said Helprin, slowly unzipping his fly, "what are you gonna do for me if I don't, man?"

Meanwhile, the lady who 'don't got nuthin' was in Seattle, standing before a stainless steel autopsy table in a brightly lighted, tiled room, as pathologist Dr William Chan undraped the body of what had just a few days ago been a teenager who sat in the stands at a kids' football practice and tipped over a glass of Coke. The body had been brought on a gurney from a stainless steel drawer by his assistant, a tall, skinny,

sepulchral man whom Chan introduced as Farley Williston. And whom Samantha had already decided gave her the willies. If she'd asked Central Casting for a cadaverous morgue attendant, she couldn't have gotten a better choice. All that was missing was the castle on a lonely moor, illuminated by flashes of lightning, and a pelting rain storm.

Chan glanced at Samantha, overhead lights reflecting in wire-rimmed glasses. "Ready to go?" he asked with a wide smile.

Samantha had once attended a seminar given by Chan. He was almost childishly pleased when Samantha told him she'd been there.

"Ready," Samantha said, taking a handkerchief from her pocket and holding it over her nose. She had been careful not to get any perfume on this one.

"Here," Chan said, proffering a small screw-cap jar, "dab a little camphor on your upper lip. It'll help."

Samantha gratefully dabbed the Vaseline-like substance under her nose while Chan pulled the mike over and noted the date, time, height, weight and race of the dead girl.

As Samantha breathed the pungent camphor, which really *did* seem to cut the stench, Chan began a systematic examination of clothing, checking for any tears, cuts or foreign matter.

Then Williston stripped the body, laying the clothing out on a separate table, and Chan carefully checked each item. Peering at the jeans, he scraped some black dust off the posterior area and slipped it into a vial.

"Coal dust, I think," he said, "seems to be pretty uniform on the buttocks and backs of the legs."

"So when the body was placed on the ground in there, the pants were up?" Samantha asked.

"Right," Chan beamed at her, "exactly. And it seems confined to the back of the pants, so she wasn't struggling at the time. Otherwise we'd expect to find it all over, particularly on the knees."

Next Chan examined the blouse, noting the pattern of blood on the collar, indicating it had seeped downwards from the head wound. "It appears that this girl was in an upright position for some time after she sustained some injury to her head," he said.

"Yes, the lividity ..." Samantha began.

"I'll get to that. Let's be systematic, here."

Samantha sighed. She recalled frequent use of the word 'systematic' in the seminar she had attended. She had even written it in big block letters in her notebook, and decorated it with flowers and musical notes. Unfortunately, she had been seated in the front row of the lecture theater and had soon realized with horror that Chan, leaning over his lectern, had been able to monitor the progress of her elaborate doodle. She fervently hoped he had forgotten or didn't make the connection between the artistic student those years back and the police chief in the room with him now.

"We have some extensive staining here in the panties," Chan noticed, quickly taking samples of the major stains. "Appears to be semen, urine and fecal matter."

"Would you say they were in an, um, up position when Dolly died?" Samantha asked.

"Pulled up? Yes, that would be my guess," Chan said, after a closer look. "These stain patterns are consistent with the panties being pulled up."

"But she could have been sexually assaulted, then pulled up her panties, then been killed," Samantha said.

"Yes, that would be possible, based on what we've seen so far," Chan agreed. "But let's be systematic. One step at a time."

As Chan finished with each item of clothing, Samantha put it in a separate paper bag, sealed the bag and initialed it with the date and time.

"Okay, Mr Williston," Chan said, "let's get it on the scales."

Getting it on the scales was a brutal process of simply hauling the cadaver off the gurney and onto a large tray suspended from a set of ceiling-hung scales.

"One fifteen," Chan noted, watching the scale as Williston measured the body.

"One sixty-three," Williston said, voice barely louder than a mumble.

"Hundred and sixty three centimeters," Chan said.

Following the examination of clothing, Chan stepped to the autopsy table and swung the boom mike around. This was going to be the bad part. Samantha, nose full of camphor overlaid with the sweetish smell of decay, swallowed a mouthful of watery, tasteless saliva as her stomach gave a warning churn.

"Are you all right, Chief?" asked Chan, who, despite Coke-bottle spectacles, didn't seem to miss a thing.

"Go ahead."

"You can take it, huh?" Chan smiled.

"I ... I'll be okay."

"Okay," Chan said, snapping on the microphone, "body is that of a well-nourished Caucasian female, aged approximately fifteen to eighteen years ..."

Moving Dolly's head to one side, a repeat of the action that had caused Samantha such distress in the mineshaft, Chan carefully examined the head wound. "Evidence of a very heavy blow to the back of the head," he said, probing the ragged edges of the gash, "and presence of vegetation."

He flicked off the mike and carefully extracted a small fragment of leaf from pulped flesh. "What would you say this is?" he asked, holding the fragment up with tweezers.

It was barely an eighth inch square, but it looked to Samantha like a piece of fern leaf.

"That's what I'd say, too," Chan said, slipping the fragment into a vial, "but I wouldn't bet the rent. We'll send it over to the university botany department to get a positive on it. There's something else, too." Going back to the wound, Chan picked out several flakes of what first appeared to be scabbed blood, but on closer examination seemed to be the wrong color.

"Blood?" Samantha asked.

"Over there, in that set of drawers by the far wall, second from the top on the right you ought to find a magnet. Could you bring it over?"

Mystified, Samantha retrieved the bar magnet.

"Okay, just pass it over my hand." Chan said, holding out his gloved palm.

As Samantha passed the magnet over them, flakes levitated and stuck to it.

"Flakes of iron rust, I'd say," Chan said. "Probably from the object that caused the head injury."

"I'm looking for an axe or something?"

"Judging from the shape of the wound and the size of these flakes, it's more likely to be a piece of rusty

iron pipe or something of that nature,” Chan said. “It isn’t a sharp cut such as you’d see with an axe or machete. Just a large area where the flesh is all smashed to hell.”

“So she was killed by a blow to the head?”

“Possibly,” Chan said, gently turning the girl’s eyelids inside out, “but we have here petechial haemorrhages, you see?”

He indicated a cluster of pinpoint haemorrhages on the inside of the eyelid, looking like a bad case of measles.

“She was strangled.”

“Right,” Chan beamed, “exactly. We can take these as evidence of strangulation. We’ll probably find the hyoid bone fractured as well. I would say she was struck on the back of the head and then strangled while unconscious.”

“Based on a lack of defensive wounds?” Samantha guessed.

“Right on. You really *did* listen, didn’t you?”

“I guess poor Dolly didn’t get much chance to fight for her life,” Samantha said.

Flipping the mike back on, Chan restated his findings, then proceeded to examine the rest of the body, finding dirt embedded in abrasions on the girl’s hands and several splinters in her knees. The dirt and splinters were extracted and saved.

The splinters, Chan said, were likely pine and could have been picked up from just about any unfinished pine boards. “There doesn’t seem to be any coal dust in these hand abrasions, either,” Chan noted, “So I’d say this didn’t happen in the mine.”

“What about the pine splinters, Dr Chan?”

“Bill. I’m Bill.”

“Um, Bill. Could the splinters be DNA matched to a specific board?”

Chan pondered that one, then said he didn’t really know, but thought it might be possible. If they had the right board or boards, they might be able to establish that the splinters and the board came from the same tree. However, a defense lawyer might argue that the technology was not proven with pine trees and they might wind up having to gene sequence dozens of trees to prove that their sample could not have come from any other pine board.

“Take it off my list?” Samantha asked.

“I would. Unless you don’t have a very long list and like very long shots.”

Samantha noted the idea in her book and drew two parallel lines down beside the note to mark it off. Beside the parallel lines she wrote two large question marks.

“What position was the body in when it was found?” Chan asked, looking at the lower extremities.

“Flat on its back, but the lividity was fixed, so she was sitting up for several hours after death.”

Chan beamed. “Was lividity part of my lecture?” he asked.

It had been, but it had also been part of dozens of other lectures, seminars and training courses Samantha had attended over the years. She decided not to let Chan in on that one. “Yes, and just about everything else,” she said. “I got writer’s cramp.”

“How long was the body seated, do you think?” Chan beamed, poking at livid skin.

"Lividity was fixed, so I'd say ten hours to be on the safe side."

"Fixed? Did you get that from my lecture, too?"

"Sure did."

Chan looked pleased. "For the record," he said, "it would seem this young woman's body spent some time in an enclosed space."

"How can you tell?"

"Here," he said, rolling the body half over, "look at the left buttock. See the large, white, nearly circular patch in the lividity? That's a contact mark. The body was sitting on the left buttock and pressure there stopped blood from settling out. Now, here on the outside of the right ankle, and the front of both knees, similar patches. The body was folded up, knees to chest, and crammed into some sort of box."

Samantha, almost forgetting how ill she felt, made another note.

"Okay," Chan said, "was the body flaccid when you found it?"

"Yes."

"Passing over the obvious decay, what would that tell us?"

"Not a lot," Samantha replied, "rigor is far too unreliable, and so is body temperature. We wouldn't even bother recording it."

"Right," the pathologist said, "rigor is unreliable, although it *is* suggestive. In a cool mineshaft, I'd expect it to take some forty-eight hours to fade away. However, the girl is relatively trim and we have evidence she was stored somewhere else for a period of time, so it could have taken less than two days. In

warm conditions, putrefaction has been known to set in within twenty-four hours or so of death."

"I collected some maggots and sent them in to the university," Samantha said.

"What size were they?"

"I don't know an awful lot about them. Pretty big, though."

"Good work. Gotta love that. Depending on the species of fly and conditions under which the body was stored, that could indicate she was dead more than just a couple of days."

Next Chan took careful combings from the pubic area. "No apparent vaginal bruising or tearing," he noted. "Inconsistent with rape or violent sexual assault." Getting some cotton swabs, he carefully took wipings from the walls of Dolly's vagina. Then he gathered up the little vials from the table alongside the body and placed them in a holding tray. "Offhand," Chan said, as Williston used a hose and shower nozzle to begin washing the body, "I would say there was sexual activity, but I'd have to classify it as consensual."

A final examination, following washing, failed to turn up anything else of interest to Chan or Samantha.

"Mr Williston," Chan said, "if you would do the honors."

Williston, without a word, produced a large format camera and started to take pictures, working from head to feet.

"I often do these myself," Chan said, "but I've found Mr Williston here gets me exactly what I want. We'll get the exterior and do a series once we get inside."

The next step was a complete set of X-Rays, and for that Chan called in a technician. The X-Ray tech, a

young blonde woman with a large piece of bubble gum in her mouth and heavy horn-rim glasses, didn't seem at all disturbed by Dolly's cadaver. Her body language made it quite clear this was nothing she hadn't encountered a thousand times before. In fact, it seemed to suggest, this was pretty tame compared to some other things she'd seen.

Samantha, looking at the wall clock and realizing how much time she had passed so far in this noxious environment, wondered how anybody could ever get used to it. The tech, a model of efficiency, took less than twenty minutes to get her pictures and depart, pushing the mobile X-Ray machine before her.

"Okay," Chan said at last, wheeling a tray of gleaming surgical instruments over to the autopsy table, "here comes the gory stuff. Mr Williston, if you please."

Williston flopped the naked body back on the Gurney and pushed it over to the autopsy table. Next he slid his left arm under Dolly's back and lifted, using his right hand to slide a body block underneath. He set the body back down on the block, which pushed chest and abdominal areas outwards. Picking up a large scalpel, Williston quickly made the classic thoracoabdominal cut, or Y-cut, to open up Dolly's chest and abdomen. The bottom of the Y, going down the middle of the bloated abdomen with its decompositional blisters and tracery of veins produced by a process called hemolysis, brought forth an incredibly foul-smelling, watery substance and Samantha, eyes tearing, gagged again.

"You can hurl over there in the sink," Chan said cheerfully as Williston, completely oblivious to stench,

peeled skin and muscle off the chest wall, pulling the resulting flap up and over Dolly's face. Then he picked up a bone saw that looked like a small hand drill with a cutting disk on it.

"Pretty bad, isn't it?" Chan said sympathetically. "I wasn't kidding, you know. If you want to hurl, go ahead. This isn't some macho contest. I won't tell anyone."

"I don't know ... how you can stand it."

Williston actually managed a faint smile as he sawed through the rib cage on both sides of the chest, lifting the chest plate off. It looked like something you'd find hanging in a meat locker. Samantha thought she'd never eat ribs again.

"Don't get me wrong, it's not the most pleasant part of my job," Chan said. "It bothers me, too. I just focus my attention, you know? Sort of zone it out?"

'Zoning it out' was clearly not an option for Samantha. She looked again at the wall clock. Despite what she suspected, it was still running, the sweep second hand making its inexorable way around the dial. This was easily turning into the longest day of her life. Chan opened the pericardial sac and pulmonary artery, slipping a finger inside.

"In a person of this age, this is just procedure," he explained. "I'm looking for blood clots and not expecting to find any."

"Not in a kid that young," Samantha said.

"No, it's just an elimination thing. I'm sure it was strangulation. Okay, Mr Williston, let's have the guts out."

"Gonna bury her?" Williston asked, gazing at his boss with an almost yearning expression.

"Don't know," Chan said, "best mark 'em off."

To Samantha, he explained, "We'll attach strings to the carotid and subclavian arteries. That way if they have her embalmed, the undertaker can easily find them for the embalming fluid. Just another little service. We aim to please."

Williston was clearly highly skilled, locating arteries with ease and quickly attaching long pieces of yellow string. Then he sliced through tissue and detached larynx and esophagus, pulling them downwards. The diaphragm was cut away and abdominal organs pulled out. Eventually the entire mass was attached to the rest of the cadaver only by ligaments and the lower gastrointestinal tract. Quickly freeing it and using both hands, Williston picked up the slippery mass and handed it to Chan, who took it to a smaller table and proceeded with a dissection.

Samantha now had two bits of guerrilla theater to watch, as Williston moved the body block under Dolly's head. Without fanfare, he used his large scalpel to slice from one ear to the other, over the crown. He grunted with effort as he drove the blade right to skull. Then, in two ghastly operations that obviously required considerable strength, he pulled the front down over the dead girl's face and the back down behind her neck, completely exposing the skull.

"Mr Williston is going to crack the cranium, Sammi," Chan explained without looking up, "you'll probably be interested."

"Taa daa," Williston said sepulchrally as the Stryker blade blurred and the saw emitted a high-pitched whine.

Samantha seriously considered accepting Chan's invitation to puke in the sink as blade screeched into

bone, spraying fine powder. The smell of burning bone mingled with cadaver stench and the overlying scent of camphor from the dab under her nose. Her eyes watered and her mouth filled with tasteless saliva of the immediate pre-vomit stage. This was truly awful.

In a moment Williston, executing a careful zigzag in his cut to assist in replacing the top of the skull, had separated it from the rest. With a toothy smile, he grasped the lid in both hands and pulled it off with a crackling, sucking sound.

"Looks pretty normal up here," Chan said, coming over to the main table and poking at the top of the brain. "I expect bruising of the medulla oblongata. From when her head was accelerated." Reaching down between gray mass and skull, Chan made a few practiced motions with a scalpel. There was another horrible sucking sound and Dolly's brain was in his hands.

"Heavy contusion to the medulla oblongata, as expected," he noted, turning it to the overhead lights, before plopping it on the tray scale and recording weight.

He handed it to Williston, who quickly looped a length of string around the spinal cord and suspended it in a large jar of fluid.

"Formaldehyde and water," Chan explained, "you'll remember from my lecture that we cannot manipulate the brain at this time. Too easy to deform it. This will stiffen it up and we can dissect it in a couple of weeks. I doubt we'll find anything new, but we'll let you know if we do."

Going back to the gaping cavity in the skull, Chan stripped out the dura and examined the skull.

"Severe fracture to the occipital plate, which is about what we expected," he said.

Back at the smaller table, Chan used a sharp twelve-inch knife to slice and dice the body organs, collecting samples in a large jar.

"Not too much in the stomach," he reported, "I'd say she had some chips or something like that about four hours or so before she died. Maybe a bit longer. Something with cheese on it. Oh, Jesus, look at these lungs. She was a smoker, wasn't she?"

"Yes, I think so," Samantha said.

"Only sixteen and there's already scarring. Too bad. Don't know what gets into these young people. Okay, let's do the awful-awful."

Lifting the large intestine like a huge, glistening gray sausage, Chan handed it, along with the stomach, to Williston.

"Mr Williston, who strangely doesn't mind this part, will run the gut," he explained to Samantha, adding, "You might want to avoid this one, Chief Bentley."

Samantha, who knew from her basic autopsy courses what was coming, felt faint.

"I have to be here for the procedure," she said, licking her lips and swallowing. Chan made a sympathetic face.

"Well, it'll stink a bit, but it won't be so bad if you take another dab of camphor and stay over here. Mr Williston will bring it back when he's done."

Williston, evidently enjoying Samantha's discomfort, in a sepulchral way, took the lower intestine over to a large stainless steel sink at the side of the autopsy room. There he would slice it open, allowing feces and partially digested food to flow out.

In a moment, Samantha was assailed by the smell of feces and vomit. That did it. With a strangled “Excuse me”, she turned and sprinted from the room, crashing through swinging doors into the antiseptic-smelling hallway. Placing both hands against the wall, she leaned over, hung her head, and tried very hard to keep her stomach down. For a long, gasping moment, it was touch and go.

Why in hell had she ever decided to do this job?

Ellen was right. She wasn’t cut out for this.

She should be sitting at home in the old Bentley mansion, maybe doing some charity work, or maybe preparing for the winter season on the Riviera. Helping Ellen with her wedding preparations. Anything but hanging around this awful place in the bowels of a hospital trying to keep her breakfast down.

“It’s pretty bad, isn’t it?” a cool voice said as a large, gnarled hand came to rest on her shoulder.

Samantha turned to confront a very tall man wearing a white lab coat and sporting a nametag that read “William Blake, MD.” In addition to towering over her, he bore a strong resemblance to Jack Palance. But his eyes, set deep over high cheekbones that hinted at some native Indian ancestry, were kind and immediately set her at ease. She recognized him at once as the tall man in the Grateful Dead T-shirt. The one Ellen had wanted arrested for violating ugly ordinances.

“Yes ... yes, it is,” she said, torn between nausea and amusement.

“First one?”

“Yes. Believe it or not. We’re ... we’re a small department. Don’t get many ... many murders.”

"Well, believe it or not, they get a little easier to take after awhile. Which part got you? No, don't tell me. Let me guess. They're running the gut right now, aren't they?"

"Good guess," Samantha said, smiling in spite of her churning stomach.

"Gets just about everybody the first time. Gets a lot of folks every time after that, too."

"I guess."

"I'm Bill Blake, by the way," the doctor said, thrusting out a huge paw, "William Blake. Like the poet. Save that I'm not at all poetic."

Samantha's hand disappeared in it all the way to her wrist, but Blake's grip was surprisingly gentle.

"Samantha Bentley. People call me Sammi. I'm Chief of the Tipple police."

"Nice place."

"I think I've seen you around there once or twice," Samantha said.

"I wouldn't make a very successful criminal," Blake said, smiling and pointing to his face, "this isn't easy to forget, is it?"

"Oh. No, I meant that you're, um, well, tall and all," Samantha fumbled. "I noticed you because you're, ah, well, you were wearing a Grateful Dead T-shirt."

"I like to dress up when I go out," Blake laughed. "Well, for the record, I've seen you driving by once or twice, and I think you're pretty hard to forget, too. But for different reasons."

"Oh, well, that's nice," Samantha said. "Um, well, it's, ah, kind of interesting that we ran into each other in this place, isn't it?"

"Not really. This isn't exactly a chance meeting. I heard via the grapevine that the Tipple police chief was up here for an autopsy. Thought I'd take advantage and make your acquaintance."

"Why?"

"We might be neighbors one day soon. I've been looking at a house there, in point of fact."

"Whereabouts? No, don't tell me. Let me guess. On Salal Street."

"That's the upscale neighborhood, isn't it? It was an easy guess."

"So was yours."

"So it was," Blake laughed. "Well, perhaps I'll be seeing you around there, Chief Samantha."

"Sammi. Everybody calls me Sammi."

"Perhaps I'll see you around Tipple then, Chief Sammi."

"Perhaps. Well, I'd better go back inside." Samantha smiled at Blake and turned to push through the autopsy room doors.

"Chief Sammi ..."

"Yes?" She paused halfway through.

"This is probably not the best time to mention it, but perhaps you'll let me buy you lunch if I'm out that way."

"Not in the next hour or two," Samantha said.

"No, not that soon." Still laughing, he walked on down the hall.

As Samantha re-entered the autopsy room, Chan was finishing his dissection and sample collecting.

"Well," he said cheerfully, "I guess that's it. You'll have to excuse me, Chief Bentley, I have another of these to do before supper. A floater. You can stay and

watch if you like. Or you can watch Mr Williston fix up Miss Jenkins."

"Yuk. I'll pass. And it's Sammi, by the way, not Chief Bentley."

"Thank you," Chan smiled.

"Is there a phone nearby?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, over in that office, see, the green door over there?"

"Okay, thanks," Samantha said, turning away.

"Oh, by the way, ah, Sammi ..."

"Yes?"

"Remember, it pays to be systematic. You might write that down in your notebook. Perhaps with some flowers and musical notes."

Going to the phone in a little office off the autopsy room, a red-faced Samantha decided to withhold the strangulation as a test for false confessions. She needed something only the killer would know and, since there were too many witnesses at the recovery of the body, the whole damn valley knew about blows to the back of the head.

In a brief statement, Samantha said only that as a result of an autopsy, the death of Dolly Jenkins, sixteen, of 55876 Lake Road, Tipple, Washington, was ruled a murder. The girl died following blows to the back of her head with a blunt object. Police were continuing to investigate.

Next she called home to check in with Ellen, who told her their maid and cook was under the weather.

"So what does this mean?" Samantha said after determining the ailment wasn't serious, "a wild night on the town for us? Crab casserole at the Red Lantern? Burgers at McDonald's?"

"I'll cook something," Ellen replied. "Hattie will need some soup or something anyway. Listen, before you go, there's something I ought to tell you."

"About?"

"Dolly Jenkins."

"Awful topic. I don't think I'm going to want dinner, honey."

"Was it bad?"

"It was terrible. Honestly, I nearly hurled."

"Poor mom. You really ought to ..."

"Quit this thankless job. I know. Now, what did you want to tell me about Dolly?"

"Oh, right. After I got off shift today I took a sort of busman's holiday. Stopped by the Burger Queen with Odin and a couple of his friends. You know, Chummy McLarnen, those guys?"

"Yes, I know, should I be taking notes here?"

"Not really," Ellen laughed, "I don't have all that much, Chief. It's just that everyone was talking about Dolly and her friend, Maureen Davisson, you know her, came in. Chummy called her over to our table and said something about her 'forty-niner' friend."

"Forty-niner?"

"Yeah, you know. Oh, m'darlin' Clementine? Miner forty-niner?"

"Oh, God, that's ugly," Samantha said.

"I know, it was really poor taste. Chummy is *such* a goof. There were some jokes, you know, awful stuff, like how Dolly got shafted ..."

"Oh, Lord, how classy."

"I know, it was pathetic. But Maureen stuck around. I guess because Odin was there. He's still *such* a local celeb. Makes me sick sometimes."

"I've heard you on the topic," Samantha said dryly.

"Well, anyway, I guess Maureen was trying to make an impression, because she suddenly said she knew something nobody else knew. Everyone jumped on her, you know, wanting to know what it was and all, and she really clammed up fast. She looked pretty scared. I don't know what she's got, Mom, but it might be an idea to check her out."

"My daughter the cop," Samantha laughed. "I suppose your young Sir Odin, defender of justice, truth and the underdog, came to Maureen's defense, though, right?"

"No," Ellen laughed, "he just sat there, cool as a cucumber, and took it all in."

"Strange, he usually steps in when someone is getting picked on, doesn't he?"

"Well, he probably had an off day," Ellen said, "or he just didn't think it was so very bad. Even White Knights are entitled to a holiday now and again."

"So they are," Samantha said. "Well, tell him from me to get that sword and shield polished. I'll stop by the Davisson place on my way home. I'll see you about six, I guess."

The Davissons lived in a large, ranch-style cedar-sheathed house on Salal, a short street ending in a cul-de-sac. It was a new street on the western outskirts of Tipple, and the expensive subdivision it served had been constructed only three years before. Salal was the only street in town not named after some mine accessory or activity, and had been a bone of contention at several Tipple council meetings. Al Davisson, a successful Seattle lawyer, and his wife Darlene, had been among the first new residents.

Most houses on the east side of Salal, Samantha knew, had high backyard fences to hide the less expensive houses over on Adit. It was a snobby development and the newcomers didn't generally associate much with old timers. Maureen Davisson was something of an anomaly amongst the younger set, mixing easily with long-time area residents and forming a fast friendship with Dolly Jenkins, who was from so far on the wrong side of the tracks she'd have needed the Hubble space telescope just to see them.

The Davisson residence was behind a high cement block fence at the end of the cul-de-sac. The front yard was a Japanese-style garden, with gravel paths, Koi pool, stone lanterns and a profusion of carefully tended shrubs. It was a beautiful, tranquil place that didn't at all suit the faux Tudor house.

Darlene Davisson, accompanied by Maureen, was busy netting Japanese maple leaves and pine needles from the pool when Samantha stepped through the heavy cedar gate. Samantha was not known as a social gadfly and Darlene's face showed surprise at having the chief of police, in full uniform, pay an unexpected call at this hour of the day.

"Hi, Sammi," she said cheerfully, "how's the big wedding coming along?"

Maureen, a shade too bright-eyed and definitely nervous, echoed her mother. How was that wedding coming along?

"Fine," Samantha said, sitting on a stone bench and removing her hat. "Ellen's pretty excited, I guess, though she's not really showing it much. Odin, well, you never know about Odin. Always takes everything in stride."

"Gee," Maureen said, nervously eyeing Samantha, "Ellen is so lucky. I mean, Odin's such a great guy and all ..."

"Listen, I'll cut to the chase, here," Samantha said. "Maureen, you told some people today that you knew something about Dolly Jenkins."

"Well, everybody knows all about Dolly," Darlene said quickly. "God, what an awful thing. You know, you leave the city and come out here to a small place thinking it'll be different, then something like this happens ..."

"No, I don't think this is run-of-the-mill gossip," Samantha said. "Maureen, Ellen had the feeling that you thought you knew something nobody else did."

"N-no," Maureen mumbled, staring at a large golden Koi swimming languidly in the shade of the Japanese Maple. It nosed at the surface, slurping for food, then turned a lazy one-eighty and, with a flip of its powerful tail, drifted off towards an arrangement of rocks and small pines that bordered the pool's far side. Scales shone brightly as they caught the sun.

"That's a nice one," Samantha said.

"He's a Kin Matsuba," Maureen said quickly, "Mom and I just got him a week ago. We were at a show in Portland and he was one of about two dozen this old Japanese guy had in a fifty-five-gallon drum, you know, one of those plastic ones ... The other ones weren't as good, but Toshiro, that's what we call him, was the best and ..."

The words came tumbling out and Maureen, evidently realizing that she sounded exactly like someone desperately trying to change the topic, trailed off.

Samantha gazed at the garden's centerpiece, a beautiful lodgepole pine pruned and trained like a bonsai and growing over a large rock. She remembered hearing that the tree and rock had cost the Davissons something in the neighborhood of \$4,000. It was symbolic of new money coming into Tipple as Seattle grew explosively and the well-to-do began a restless quest for bedroom communities. Tipple, along with the rest of the little towns within an hour or so of the big city, was destined to grow, and, with the growth, would come new crime problems. The death of Dolly Jenkins, which had rocked the quiet community to its core, was perhaps the harbinger of more trouble to come.

"I'd like to hear what you know," she said mildly, turning her attention back to the girl.

"I ... I don't know anything ... that anybody else doesn't know," Maureen said, adding: "not really."

Darlene looked suddenly troubled. "Honey, *do* you know something?" she asked.

"No, not about who killed Dolly," Maureen said, with a quick glance at her mother, "I don't know anything about that."

"What *do* you know about?" Samantha asked gently. "Maureen, we need help, here. We've got a killer loose in our community. Maybe more than one. We can't catch the people who killed your friend if people like yourself won't help us."

"Honey, you'd best tell whatever it is you know," Darlene said. "Daddy and I will stand right beside you, you know that."

Maureen fixed eyes on the pool, where a fat white Koi with black markings had emerged from under some water lilies. "That's a Shiro Bekko ..."

"Maureen," Darlene said firmly, "that's enough about the Koi. Samantha has to know something, now please tell her."

"Mom, it isn't anything much," Maureen entreated, glancing at her mother again. "It's no big deal."

The two older women just waited.

"Dolly ... Dolly liked to dance for some of the guys up at the old mine shack," Maureen said finally, without looking up.

"Dance?" Samantha asked.

"She did ... strip teases, you know? But not all the way. Just bra and ... and panties."

"Why was that?" Samantha asked, thinking of the Marvelous Molly Melons poster in Dolly Jenkins' fetid little room.

"She wanted to be a stripper like her mom was," Maureen said, "she said it was good practice, you know? Like if she couldn't dance for some boys she knew, how could she dance for strangers? But I think she really just liked doing it. She said once ... that it ... turned her on. Made her all ... you know?" Maureen blushed furiously as she reached the part about Dolly's sexual arousal.

"Is that all?" Samantha asked, keeping her voice matter-of-fact to make things easier for the embarrassed teen.

"Y-yes ..."

"No, it isn't," Darlene said, "I've been your mother for sixteen years, young lady, and I know when you're

trying to keep something back. You tell Sammi whatever it is. Now."

Maureen shot another glance at the implacable countenance of her mother, then Samantha, and then went back to gazing into the depths.

"I ... I saw her July fourth," she said. "Dolly, that is. And I never saw her after that."

The last was offered almost defiantly, as though Maureen expected to be disbelieved.

"She was going to do a strip tease," Samantha guessed.

"You ... you already know?"

"No, I'm just guessing," Samantha said gently. "Was that it? Was she going up to the shack?"

"She said it was going to be the last time," Maureen said. "I begged her not to go up there, but she said it would be okay this time. But she wasn't going to do it again. Anyhow, she said she'd meet me at the bleachers later for the fireworks, you know? But she never showed up."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Samantha said.

"Dolly was like that. She didn't show up lots of times. I ... the girls and I didn't think it was ..."

"Unusual?"

"Yeah, like that. It wasn't unusual."

"Did she go to the mine shack?"

"I don't know," Maureen said, "she said she was, but I don't know if she did."

"Do you know why she said it would be the last time?" Samantha asked.

"Mom ..." Maureen said, entreaty in her eyes.

"Samantha," Darlene said, "is this really important?"

"I think it might be," Samantha said. "We have to track Dolly's last hours if we have any hope of finding where and when she was killed."

"I thought she was killed in the mineshaft," Darlene said.

Damn.

Samantha realized she had let a crucial detail of her investigation slip out. However, Darlene Davisson was a levelheaded person who could keep her own counsel, so perhaps damage could be contained.

"No, we don't think she was," Samantha said. "That's confidential, so please don't repeat it. To anyone."

"Honey," Darlene said after a pause, "answer Samantha's question. Why did Dolly say it was the last time she was going to ... to dance at the shack?"

"Because ... because Matt Helprin was ... was looking at her kind of funny lately, she said ... she didn't want to ... to do it ... with him, so she was staying away from him. But she said Calvin told her Matt wasn't going to be there that day. That's the only reason she said she agreed to ... dance ... Because Matt wasn't going to be there. Just Calvin with Jeremy and Clyde."

"Jeremy Vanton and Clyde Hemmings?" Samantha asked.

"Yeah. It was only going to be Jeremy, Clyde and her brother. That's why she said it would be okay."

"Well, it certainly wasn't okay," Darlene said. "If I ever hear of you doing any such thing, young lady ..."

"Darlene," Samantha said, "I'm sure Maureen wouldn't."

Actually, from what she'd heard around Tipple about Maureen's nocturnal activities, she wasn't sure at all. But the vote of confidence seemed to win Maureen over.

"Matt Helprin was there," she said suddenly.

"On July fourth?" Samantha asked.

"Yes."

"And just how do you know that?" Darlene asked.

"Darlene, please ..."

"Samantha, this is my daughter. I want to know how she knows that Matt Helprin was at the mine shack the day Dolly Jenkins disappeared. I think that's a perfectly natural thing for a mother to want to know."

"Clyde told me not to tell," Maureen said, "it was confidential."

"I understand your loyalty," Samantha said, "and normally I'd respect the confidence. But one of your friends and classmates has been murdered, and we have to find out who did it."

"Before he does it again," Darlene said.

"Well, there is that possibility," Samantha sighed, "but, honestly, we're trying to keep a lid on the hysteria, and that kind of speculation won't help."

"Would you want to see Ellen wandering around by herself at night?" Darlene said.

"No, I'd want to be safe. But everybody is pretty much playing it safe right now, so I'd like to keep the ambient level of panic to a minimum, if I can. Having everyone running around scared of their own shadows isn't going to help."

"Maureen, honey, answer Samantha's question," Darlene said. "What did Clyde tell you?"

"He said he was going up to the shack with Jeremy but Matt Helprin stopped them before they got there. He told them it was going to be a private show and said ... said he'd ... beat the shit out of them if they showed up."

"Maureen, was Matt Helprin the only boy Dolly was afraid of?" Samantha asked.

"Everybody is scared of Matt," Maureen said, "even the older kids. He's a freak."

"Is that why you didn't come to us with this in the first place?"

"Chief Bentley, everybody is scared of Matt," Maureen said, "there's just something about him. His ... his eyes do ... squirming things. All the other kids, except maybe Calvin Jenkins, want to stay away from him. Jeremy told me Matt started hanging around the shack about a year ago and most of the other guys stopped going. Just Calvin. Some of the guys think ... think ... they ..."

"They're homosexual lovers?" Samantha prompted.

"Y-yes. Mom, I'm *afraid*."

Samantha pocketed her notebook and dug a business card out of her wallet. She quickly scribbled her unlisted home number on the back and handed it to Maureen. "You're not going to be involved in this," she said. "If Matt Helprin bothers you at all, you call me right away. You have nothing to fear, understand? Nothing."

Thanking the two for their cooperation, Samantha started to walk back along the path, boots crunching on carefully raked gravel. "One thing," she said over her shoulder as she reached the cedar gate, "do you know where we can find young Mr Helprin?"

"He mostly hangs out at the shack," Maureen said, clutching the business card as though it were a talisman.

It was nearly seven pm, but still blistering even though the sun was low on the horizon, when Samantha, who had rounded up Harlan Steeples and changed from the Tipple PD cruiser to her own Lexus, arrived in the mine yard.

"Looks like somebody's home," Steeples said, looking at light in the shack windows. "Hope they baked a cake."

"Is there a back way out of there?" Samantha asked.

"I don't think so. I was up here hunting a couple of months ago and I think I got a look at the back of this place. Didn't see anything. Of course," he added, climbing out of the Lexus, "if there's a back door they're already gone."

As it turned out, there was no back door and the two officers, suddenly throwing open the front, found Matt Helprin and Calvin Jenkins, hollow-eyed and stressed, seated at their makeshift table in the brilliant white light of a kerosene lantern.

"Da da dada da da, *da da da daa*," Steeples sang cheerfully as he stepped through the door.

Hearing Steeples sing the first bars to "The Stripper" didn't exactly thrill Helprin and Jenkins. In fact, this was about the last thing they wanted to hear.

"Guess you guys know why we're here," Samantha said, stifling an impulse to laugh at their expressions.

"It only was once," Jenkins blurted, face pale. He immediately winced as Helprin's boot met his shin under the table. It was none too subtle, and Steeples raised eyebrows.

"I understand it was far more than once," Samantha said.

"She was up here a lot, boys," Steeples added, "But we're interested in July fourth. Remember? You know, that night they shot off all the fireworks?"

"It was just that once ... that she took it all off," Jenkins said, leaning over to rub his shin. "Mostly she just went down to her ... underwear, you know?"

"Nuthin' happened, man," Helprin said sullenly, staring at the table.

"That so?" Steeples asked cheerfully, "Nothing happened *when*, Matt? July fourth?"

Helprin, face suddenly even more pale, cast a quick glance at Calvin Jenkins, but evidently found no moral support.

"None of them times," he said.

"So nothing ever happened? What never happened, Matt?"

"She just took summa her clothes off, that's all. That's all that ever fuckin' happened, man."

"Why do you think we might suspect something else happened, Matt?" Samantha asked.

"I don't ... get the question," Helprin fumbled after a pause during which he seemed to find something of great interest on the table. With a trembling finger, he began tracing some initials crudely painted on the liberally decorated tarpaulin.

"You seem to think we might suspect that Dolly was molested," Samantha said. "What do you think might make us suspect that?"

"Look, I don't fuckin' know nuthin' about Dolly Jenkins, okay?" Helprin said.

"Look," Steeples began, but Samantha laid a restraining hand on his arm.

Samantha, regarding the sullen Helprin, who looked like a young Kiefer Sutherland with his lank blond hair and hard, lean body, was becoming concerned about the fact that these were juveniles. Juveniles who had not even been read their rights. Right now, it was just a conversation, but she didn't want anything said here that could later compromise a court case. She'd gotten what she'd come for. Confirmation that Dolly was in this shack July fourth, the day she had most likely disappeared. And there had been an extra tidbit. Even though terrified of Matt Helprin, Dolly had on that day, for some reason, stripped right to the buff, not just panties and bra.

"Okay," she said, cheerfully, "that about wraps it up. We just heard that Dolly might have been around here right before she went missing, and thought we'd check into it. No problem, guys."

Was it her imagination or did Helprin's face go a faint shade of green at the thought that police considered this one of Dolly's last stops on earth? He stopped tracing initials and clasped his hands tightly in an attempt to control shaking.

"Wraps it up?" Steeples asked.

"Sure, Harlan, we got what we came here for, *didn't* we?" Samantha said.

"I, ah, guess so," Steeples said, covering his confusion. It seemed to him they had just gotten this little bastard on the ropes and now they were letting him off.

"It's fine, Harlan, it's fine," Samantha said.

"Uh, yeah, I guess."

Helprin, visibly relieved that the two officers were on the point of leaving, relaxed and stuck his feet out, leaning back and crossing his ankles.

"Have a nice night," he sneered.

"Yeah, have a nice night," Jenkins sneered.

"Let's go, Harlan," Samantha said.

"Nice Doc Martens," Steeples said, looking at Helprin's new boots.

Helprin promptly sat up and tucked his feet back under the makeshift table. "Yeah, pretty nice, I guess," he mumbled.

"Those are pretty expensive, right?" Steeples asked.

"I guess," Helprin said grudgingly. The cost of a pair of Doc Martens clearly wasn't a topic he was anxious to pursue.

"Where did you get them?"

"None of yer fuckin' business, man," Helprin said, still staring at the table.

"I could make it my business," Steeples said.

"From my fuckin' Ma, okay? My Ma bought 'em for me. So fuckin' what?"

"Okay, that's fine, Matt. I'll just check with Helena when I get a moment and if she can come up with a sales slip, all will be well."

"My Ma doesn't keep fuckin' sales slips."

"Well, she can tell us where she got the boots," Steeples replied with a smile Helprin didn't seem to appreciate.

"Come on, Harlan, we might as well push off," Samantha said, touching Steeples' arm, "lots to do tonight."

That was when she caught sight of an old, rusted wire wastebasket to one side of the door. In it were two

wads of Kleenex with large, dark stains that looked like dried blood. She strode over to the basket, scooped it up and placed it on the tarpaulin in front of Helprin and Jenkins. Their eyes fastened on the bloody tissues then went in unison to Samantha and Steeples.

"This wouldn't be Dolly's blood, would it?" she asked.

"Shit, no!" Helprin snapped, color completely leaving his face, "it's *my* fuckin' blood, man."

"Yeah, yeah, it's his," Calvin chimed in, face going as white as Helprin's.

"Me'n Cal were kinda wrestling around, see, an' his elbow got me onna nose, that's all," Helprin said, "like we was onna floor an' I was gettin' a fuckin' hammerlock on his arm, like, an' he was kinda twistin' around an' his fuckin' elbow got me, man."

"Yeah," Calvin blurted, "we were wrestling kind of and I got him onna nose, like, with my elbow. What he said."

"I can show you what happened," Helprin offered.

It was strange that such a truculent, uncooperative youth would suddenly become so desperately anxious to please. Samantha's suspicions, already at a fever pitch, rose sharply.

"See?" Calvin said, pulling up his shirt to disclose two deep purple bruises just under his rib cage. "We were just wrestling. This is what I got, see? It was an accident, man."

"Yeah, it was a big fuckin' accident," Helprin confirmed.

"Okay," Samantha said, "I can see how that would happen. But you guys shouldn't keep this stuff in the shack here, decaying blood is a real health hazard."

"Oh, yeah," Calvin agreed, grabbing the wire basket and fairly leaping to the door. Treating it as though it were filled with plague, he dropped it on the porch and raced back to the table.

"We'll be going, guys," Samantha said. "If you think of anything else, you be sure to call us, okay?"

"I'll be checking on those boots, Matt," Steeples said as he followed Samantha.

"You fuckin' *do* that, man," Helprin sneered defiantly. But it was easy to tell his heart wasn't in it.

As Steeples closed the door, Samantha, who had surreptitiously pulled on a pair of surgical gloves, carefully picked out one of the bloody Kleenexes. Back at the Lexus, she slipped the Kleenex into a paper bag and sealed it, adding initials with date and time.

"Get this to the FBI lab, okay?" she said. "It was good of Calvin to throw it out. It isn't really their domicile, but you never know what a good defense lawyer could do. And this way they might not realize we took a sample. No sudden vacations."

"Shit," Steeples breathed in admiration, "good work, Chief. Dolly Jenkins' blood. We've got the fucking little creeps."

"I don't think it's going to be that easy," Samantha smiled. "If it was Dolly's blood, I think even those rocket scientists would have gotten rid of it. No, I think it really *is* Helprin's."

"Oh, wait," Steeples said, "I see where you're going. We match this to a semen sample from Dolly."

"Right. If we find Helprin's DNA in the samples we got from Dolly, we just might have something."

"Yeah," Steeples said after a moment, "it's better, isn't it? If it was Dolly's blood, well, she could have had a nosebleed or something in the shack."

"Exactly. But if we match DNA from this to a semen sample from Dolly, it gets a lot better, real fast."

"It's great," Steeples said. "It'll match and we'll *have* that little fuck. He's been a pain in the ass ever since he was born. God, I can't wait."

But as they pitched and bounced down the steep mine road, Samantha had misgivings. Why, if those boys had raped and strangled Dolly, had they half-dressed her first? If she were already naked from her dance, why put her bra and blouse on, not to mention jeans, panties and sneakers? Why pull Dolly's panties fully up, as indicated by the semen, feces and urine stains, and then pull them halfway down? Creative thinking as they went along? Or maybe Dolly had gotten dressed before they'd killed her. Maybe she was killed to stop her from ratting them out.

But what about lividity? Did they come back later and move the body from a sitting position to a prone position? Or did they leave it on its back, curled up with rigor, and it later straightened out? Where had they put it initially and why? Why keep it in some box somewhere?

And why put it where it would incriminate *them*?

"You know," she said, gasping as the Lexus hit a particularly deep pothole, "with thousands of acres around, why dispose of the body so close to their club house?"

"These are not rocket scientists," Steeples said. "You ought to know that. You've been rounding these little turds up half their lives."

"I guess. So what's with the big boots scene?"

"Oh, you mean the Doc Martens?"

"Yeah."

"I was reading the bulletins this morning, there was one from Lynnwood. Hiking outfitter called Greentrails got burgled over the weekend. Lot of boots took a hike without anybody wearing them."

"Doc Martens," Samantha guessed.

"Yep, Doc Martens. The bastards must have gotten scared off, because they only emptied the first two bins in the storage room. So they got sizes seven and eight only. About a dozen pair of each."

"You think Helprin was in on it?"

"Well," Steeples said, "I know it seems a bit farfetched to think that in an area of three million people, our Mattie would be the man behind some obscure burglary in Lynnwood. But I told you I think he's traveling to pull his shit these days. This had the marks of a Matt Helprin job. Sloppy as hell. Do you think Helena Helprin could afford new Doc Martens for our young Matt? Deserving youth though he is?"

Samantha wondered about that all the way down Lake Road and along the highway to Tipple. Helena Helprin doted on Matt, but she received no financial help at all from Matt's deadbeat father and waitressing at the Red Lantern didn't pay all that well. And, since Matt had managed to alienate most of Tipple at one time or another, there weren't a lot of tips for his mother.

As the Red Lantern bar and grille came into view, Samantha looked over at Steeples.

"Thinking what I'm thinking?" she asked.

"These boots are made for walkin'," Steeples sang.

"Might as well see what she says. I'm late enough for dinner anyway."

Inside the restaurant section of the Red Lantern, the officers found a bored Helena Helprin wiping down the Formica counter while a drunk from the adjacent bar sat staring morosely into black coffee. Other than that, the restaurant was deserted. From the bar came a babble of voices and the thumping base line, which was all the music that could be heard in this section of the place.

"Hi, Sammi, Harlan," Helena said as the two sat on counter stools. "Get you anything?"

"Nope, business call," Samantha said.

"Oh, shit," Helena said, her face sallow and drawn. This would be far from the first time Tipple's finest had paid her a visit and she could easily guess the topic. "What's he done now?"

"Did you buy Matt a pair of Doc Martens?" Samantha asked.

"Doc Martens? I ... I don't understand."

"Look," Steeples said in a bored voice, "your kid has a new pair of Doc Martens. Did you buy them for him or not?"

"Oh. Yes. I ... I bought them in Seattle."

"Whereabouts?"

"I ... I don't know. Maybe Penny's."

"Do you have a receipt, Helena?" Samantha asked gently. It was obvious Helena was covering up for Matt, but Samantha, being a mother, understood the impulse.

"No. I ... I don't keep receipts."

"Charge card slip?" Steeples asked, voice not nearly so gentle.

"No, I always pay cash. I bought them with tips," Helena said with sudden defiance, "that's why I work this lousy shift and leave the days to summer people like your Ellen, Sammi. Tips are better at night."

Samantha wanted to kick Steeples. His brusque manner had aroused Helena Helprin's fighting instincts. Where she had initially been unsure and might have responded to gentle cajoling, she was now determined to defend her offspring.

"We were just interested because there were a bunch of Doc Martens stolen from a store in Lynnwood," Steeples said.

Samantha tapped Steeples on the shoulder. "Come on, Harlan, let's roll," she said, "thanks, Helena."

Helena looked defeated. "Why is it that whenever something goes missing, people start asking about Matt?" she asked sadly. "Why can't you people ever leave my son alone?"

"Poor Helena has enough trouble," Samantha said as they gained the parking lot. "We can't prove those boots came from that robbery, so we don't have anything."

Both officers realized that so long as Helena stuck to her story, their chances of nailing Matt Helprin for some after-hours 'very high-discount shopping' in Lynnwood were pretty minimal.

"And besides," Samantha said, "we have bigger fish to fry."

Tipple, WA
Saturday, July 11, 1998

Some of the bigger fish arrived early the next day in the form of seventeen members of the carp family floating belly-up in the Davissons' Koi pool.

Samantha, summoned by telephone by Mac Grady, who said there was something she'd better see, arrived to find Grady at the pool with the Davissons, wearing an expression of bafflement and helplessness. Fish murders were clearly not in his purview. Red eyes and puffy faces showed Darlene and Maureen had been crying, and Miles Davisson's face looked like an Easter Island carving.

"Chief, they got up this morning and found all these fish dead," Grady said, meeting Samantha halfway up the path. "And that," he said, pointing to the large, expensive rock, "was there, too."

Sprayed on the rock in lurid red paint were the words "SHUT UP". Under them were SS runes and the now all-too-familiar crosshatched line.

"Jesus Christ," Samantha muttered, "okay, we don't have to be Albert Einstein to figure out what happened. Get a water sample and we'll get it analyzed. At least we'll know what killed them."

She walked over to the Davissons, trying to think of something reassuring. By the look on Miles Davisson's face, this would be a monumental task. She knew the little family was feeling grief at the loss of its pets, but more than that, violation and vulnerability. Someone

had come onto their property and attacked them as they slept. They'd probably never again feel really safe.

"I'm very sorry," she said, "I know this must be awful for you."

"It's more than just awful, Chief," Davisson said. "Whoever did this could just as easily have come right into our house and killed us, too. We left Seattle because of the crime problem, but let me tell you, nothing like this ever happened to us *there*."

"I know," Samantha said. "It looks as though Maureen got too close to Dolly Jenkins."

"Just exactly what do you mean by that?"

"She knew that Dolly was doing a strip tease up at the old mine shack, and that was, so far as we know, the last time Dolly's friends saw her. Maureen let it be known that she knew something, but didn't say exactly what it was. It looks like the killer decided to issue a warning."

"Or it's just some macabre joke," Davisson said.

"A macabre joke. Yes. There's that possibility."

"This is all my fault," Maureen said, breaking down again and burying her face on her mother's breasts. Darlene threw her arms around her daughter.

"No, it isn't, Maureen," Samantha said, placing her hand on the girl's shaking shoulder, "you and your family are victims, here. This isn't your fault at all."

"It is," the girl cried, pointing to the graffiti, "I never should have said anything."

"We don't know that has anything to do with Dolly's killer. Just because it's a certain person's mark doesn't mean it was made by that person."

"Whose is it?" Maureen asked.

"You don't know?"

"No."

"Chief," Davisson said, "this is no time for guessing games."

"You're right," Samantha said, "I'm sorry. I've heard this is a gang sign. That it's left by Matt Helprin and matches tattoos on his left arm and shoulder. I was just surprised that Maureen wouldn't know that."

"I never heard that," Maureen said. "Oh, God, Mom, it's Matt Helprin. God, I'm *dead*."

"Chief, I think you'd better come with me for a moment," Davisson said. He led the way around the corner of the house, down a flagstone path flanked by a heavy hedge, to a high fence that bordered the back yard. Two wide pieces of cedar fencing had been neatly forced loose on the bottom rail so they could be pushed out enough to admit a prowler. There were imprints of a wrecking bar in the soft cedar two-by-four. The intruder had obviously come equipped for the job, silently prying boards loose rather than just kicking them out.

"I think this is the way he came in," Davissons said. "Mean anything to you?"

Beyond the fence was an area that had been intended for development and cleared of forest more than a decade earlier. The proposed project had fallen through and the land had become overgrown by brush and small trees. It was heavily crisscrossed by trails used by local kids. On the other side was the back of Adit Street.

"Helena Helprin lives over there," Samantha said.

"On just about a direct line. That's how that crummy little bastard got in here," Davisson said. "He just came through the trails in there and forced these boards.

Then he walked around the house, cool as you please, and put poison in our fishpond. And painted the rock. Do you have any idea of the damage he's done?"

"Well, I know it's very damaging to your sense of ..."

"Those fish cost anywhere up to \$250 apiece and it's going to cost at least a thousand to sandblast that obscenity off my rock," Davisson said. "Now, I want that little bastard arrested."

"I'll have a talk to him," Samantha said.

"No, you'll do more than talk, Chief Bentley; you'll arrest that little swine."

"I can't arrest him on the basis of graffiti," Samantha said. "I'll have to have more than that to go on. We'll have to investigate."

"Fine," Davisson said sarcastically, "then investigate and arrest that little bastard. I want him off the streets."

It took Samantha the better part of the morning to track down Matt Helprin, but she finally found him in the Tipple pool hall, busy trying to hustle Chummy McLarnen, who was not known as a good pool player. In fact, Chummy wasn't known for being particularly good at *anything*, but he had a streak of vanity that made him a natural target for the Matt Helprins of this world. Samantha's entry caused sudden silence in the place. Balls rolled to a stop on green felt and the clicking of pool cues and murmur of conversation stopped abruptly as the hall's clientele watched her progress with a mixture of interest and apprehension. Play resumed only when it became obvious her target was Matt Helprin.

"Hi, Matthew," she said cheerfully, "want to talk here or outside?"

Helprin sighed theatrically and laid his pool cue on the table. "I'll be back in a sec," he said to McLarnen, "double or nothing. Think about it. Ya nearly had me last game, man. But y'ain't gonna do it again."

"Oh, yeah?" said Chummy, swallowing the bait.

Outside on the street, Helprin became a little more apprehensive.

"So, whaddaya want?" he asked, brushing greasy hair out of his eyes. "I ain't got all day. I got that stupid bastard onna line, okay?"

"I want to know what you put in the Davisson's Koi pond," Samantha said.

"Say *what*?"

"Last night you went over to the Davisson's and killed all their fish. You spray painted 'shut up' on the rock and added your little sign."

"What fuckin' *sign*, man?" Helprin asked.

It was curious. Either Helprin had hitherto undiscovered talent as an actor, or he was genuinely puzzled.

"That sign," Samantha said, tapping him on the left shoulder, "your runes and barbed wire. The sign you use to mark your, ah, territory."

"Oh, *fuck* you, man, I don't use no sign to mark nuthin'," Helprin said, "and I didn't kill no fuckin' fish, either. I don't even *know* about no fuckin' fish."

Samantha was about to add that the same graffiti had been found on the mine wall over the body of Dolly Jenkins, but something held her back. "Okay, so where were you last night?" she asked instead.

"I don't fuckin' know."

"You don't know where you were last night?"

"I was ... around, y'know?"

"Around where, Matthew?"

"Like, around. I was, ah, here for a bit. Then I got a ride into Seattle ..."

"Who gave you a ride, Matthew?"

"I don't know. Some fuckin' guy. I was hitchin', y'know?"

"What did you do in Seattle?"

"Went to a movie."

"What movie?"

"It was, ah, that one with that guy ... Tom Hanks ... That war movie, y'know?"

"Saving Private Ryan?"

"Yeah, man, that one."

"I saw that," Samantha said. "I thought the ending was kind of hokey. You know, where all those guys are sitting in a bar and they start singing that song?"

"Oh, yeah, that was fuckin' stupid."

"The movie ends with an old man in a graveyard in Normandy, not a group of guys in a bar," Samantha said, "Now, want to tell me where you really were?"

"Oh, *fuck* you, man."

"Okay, Matthew, you can go back to your game. I can't prove right now you killed the Davisson's fish, but I will. I promise you I will. And I'll prove some other things as well."

"Yeah, yeah ..."

Helprin opened the door of the pool hall, then, with a glance inside to make sure the guys were watching, flipped Samantha the bird and left her standing on the hot sidewalk of Crib Street. Lord, it was frustrating. Helprin wouldn't account for his night, but that in itself was not proof of anything. He could just as easily have been on one of his nocturnal 'shopping' excursions.

Without some proof tying him to Dolly Jenkins and the Davisson's fish, she had nothing at all on the unpleasant youth.

Tipple, WA
Monday, July 13, 1998

“Sammi, there’s a Dr Peabody or someone on the line for you,” Mabel said via Samantha’s ancient desk intercom. Just another antiquated piece of junk the fathers of Tipple felt would last another year or so. Samantha had put a new phone system on her proposed budget for the past five years and it had been shot down for the past five years. She supposed that when it finally packed in, it would actually be replaced by Samantha herself. A sizeable proportion of Tipple PD equipment had been provided by what she ironically called the Bentley Foundation.

With a sigh, she picked up her phone and punched line one. “Bentley here,” she said.

“Ah, Chief ... ah, Bentley?”

“Yes, Samantha Bentley.”

“Oh. This is Dr, ah, Ray ... Ray Peabody, over at the University of Washington.”

“Oh, right,” Samantha said, “you must have gotten the leaf from Bill Chan?”

“Dr Chan?”

“Yes, Bill.”

“Sorry, I’ve just never heard him called that.”

“Really?” Samantha asked, “he told me to call him that.”

“You’re kidding,” Peabody said incredulously, “he never allows that kind of informality.”

“Well, he did,” Samantha laughed.

"You must have *some* kind of charm, Chief."

"Sammi. Since I'm so charming."

"Sammi. You must have some kind of charm. I've never heard of Dr Chan getting on a first name basis with anyone. He's very formal."

"I think he liked my art work," Samantha said dryly.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. What can I do for you, ah, Dr Peabody?"

"Ray."

"Ray. What can I do for you?"

"It's more what I can do for you," Peabody said. "I took a look at that piece of leaf Dr Chan sent over. It's a fragment of fern leaf. *Blechnum spicant*."

Samantha couldn't recall seeing any ferns growing in the alpine forest around the old Bentley Bituminous No. 1 mineshaft.

"Don't ferns grow in mostly wet places?" she asked.

"There are a few hardy souls that live in pretty dry places, like, say, *Polystichum braunii*. You'll find that one growing up mountain sides."

"But this one ..."

"Likes wet places," Peabody said. "I'd expect to find it, oh, around streams, lakes, swamps, that sort of place."

"Did Bill send you a soil sample too?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, but soil is not exactly my thing. I sent it over to a colleague in geology."

"Have you heard back from him?"

"Her. She called me just before I called you, in fact. She thought what she had there was indicative of the soils found around lakes or streams in this area. I think they're culturing bacteria from what they have."

“Why?”

“Well, just a lab exercise, I suppose. It might be possible, too, to match them to another sample if you turn something up.”

“How specific could you be?” Samantha asked, intrigued.

“I couldn’t be. Not my department. But my colleagues over in geology tell me they could be fairly specific. Mineral and organic content of soils can vary widely over quite short distances, you know.”

“I think I heard something about that,” Samantha said, suddenly recalling a lecture some years before. One of those curious little factoids you never think you’ll find useful. “Of course, I’d have to know where the crime took place to get a sample for matching,” she said.

“Well, yes, there is that. I take it you don’t know where this fern fragment came from?”

“No, we got it from a wound on a dead girl.”

“That’s pretty gross,” Peabody said after a pause.

“Sorry. You asked.”

For Samantha, Peabody’s findings raised interesting questions. The presence of the leaf embedded in the wound suggested that the implement used passed through plants, picking up leaf fragments, before striking the girl’s head. That would mean Dolly had to be sitting or lying in ferns at the time the blow was struck.

She was pondering that when her daughter dropped in with a bizarre and profoundly discomfiting bit of news.

“I was up to the springs swimming with Odin this morning,” Ellen said, sprawling on the old sofa and

poking through a bowl of assorted candies on the coffee table. "Figured I'd get in some vacation stuff before work. Anyhow, you are *not* going to believe this."

"You have my undivided attention," Samantha said, "although, these days, nothing much surprises me."

"This will. This *really* will."

"Okay. Surprise me."

"Well, there was a group of kids up there. Like Jeremy Vanton and Hemmings, you know, those guys who hang with Calvin Jenkins and that little Helprin creep?"

"I know the crowd," Samantha said dryly. "At least if they were up there, they weren't breaking into somebody's tool shed or something."

"There was this story going around," Ellen said, "everybody was saying that Matt Helprin and Calvin Jenkins found Mailman Mel."

"What?" Samantha said incredulously, "They found *who*?"

"Mailman Mel. I kid you not. The story was that they were playing with paint ball guns up in the mountains somewhere and they found the skeleton of Mailman Mel."

"I don't believe it."

"That's what they said. Vanton claimed he saw it. He said the skull had an 'H' scratched into one side and an 'S' into the other. Seriously."

"That's incredible," Samantha breathed.

"Odin tried to get out of him where it was," Ellen said, "but he wouldn't talk. He said Helprin threatened to beat the shit out of anyone who told where it was."

"Maybe Odin should have threatened to beat the shit out of him if he *didn't* tell," Samantha said.

"Nobody would believe Odin Larsen would do something like *that*."

"Jesus," Samantha shook her head, "Mailman Mel."

"That's what they said. Kind of spooky, isn't it?"

"Well, if you believe ghost stories," Samantha said, disguising, from force of habit, her interest in The Mailman, "otherwise, it's just another case, I guess. I suppose it shouldn't be too surprising. Everybody always sort of thought he killed himself. If he was up there anywhere, some hunter or something probably would have found him sooner or later."

"I still think it's pretty spooky. Just about everybody does," Ellen said.

"Spooky or not, I suppose we're going to have to hunt up one of those two and find out about it." Samantha got to her feet projecting a nonchalance she was a long way from feeling. "Don't wait dinner for me."

It took about two hours for Samantha and Steeples to turn up Calvin Jenkins. They finally found him where they actually least expected him – at home. They also found a reasonably sober Juke Jenkins sitting on a lawn chair that had seen better days and, surprisingly, reading a music trade paper. A Juke Jenkins who was also amazingly cooperative when Samantha asked him if he would mind answering a few questions.

"Naw, I don't mind," Jenkins said sunnily, scratching his beer gut through a soiled white tank top, "You go right ahead and ask anything, I'il darlin'."

Samantha, with a glance at Steeples, who, undoubtedly remembering past encounters with Juke, was resting his hand on the grips of his 9 mm, decided to cut to the chase.

"When did you last see your daughter?" she asked.

"Before she went missing," Jenkins responded, spluttering with laughter.

"Do you remember the date?" Samantha asked patiently.

"Nope. Guess it was maybe the fourth. Think I heard her makin' plans to go off to the fireworks with some of her little tighty friends."

"You didn't see her after that?"

"Don't think so."

"Okay, well, we may have some other things to ask you later."

"Guess I'm a suspect, huh?" Jenkins said, peering at Samantha.

Steeple stepped away from Samantha to get her out of the field of fire. The intent was not lost on Jenkins, whose puffy, watery eyes narrowed as he tracked Steeples. He pawed a strand of greasy hair from his forehead, then held up his hand, palm outwards, as Steeples, alarmed by the sudden movement, slid his weapon partially out.

"You don't gotta use that," Jenkins said. "I ain't gonna do nuthin'. I know the little bitch turns up dead, you guys are gonna wonder about me. Well, I fuckin' didn't kill her. Wanted to, lots of times, but I didn't. Yer gonna have t'look someplace else."

Samantha could see a warning flush on Steeples' face and knew he was about to say something about Juke's beating his daughter, or molesting her. She laid a hand on Steeples' arm to forestall comment. If Juke was going to be cooperative, she was prepared to let sleeping dogs lie.

"We'd like to speak to Calvin, Juke," she said, "do you know where he is?"

"What's that little fucker done now?"

"Nothing we know of," Samantha said. "We think he's found something, though, and we'd like to know a bit more about it."

"Calvin!" Jenkins yelled suddenly, startling Samantha and nearly causing Steeples to draw his weapon, "get out here, you little fucker!"

In a moment Calvin Jenkins, hands shoved into back pockets of his jeans à la James Dean, slouched out and leaned in the doorway. He went pale at the sight of two of Tipple's finest, but managed to keep his composure.

"He's all fuckin' yours," Jenkins said, picking up his trade paper again. "I'm thinkin' of gettin' back into the business," he added to nobody in particular in a voice roughened by years of heavy drinking. Samantha looked at paunch, puffy face and dirty, graying hair. It was pretty clear that if Juke got back into anything, it would be another bottle.

It didn't take long to pry the secret of Mailman Mel from Calvin Jenkins, who seemed relieved when he found the two cops were only interested in The Mailman. About an hour later Samantha, sweating from climbing mountains in the blazing afternoon sun, found herself up to her knees in salal in a little meadow high above Lookout Point, gazing into the empty eye sockets of a weathered skull.

Squatting in the dense vegetation, being careful not to disturb anything, she eased some of the vines aside.

"Did you ever go over Mel Manson's file, Harlan?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Once or twice."

"Did he have a gold crown on the, ah, left side? Last molar back?"

"Yeah, I think so." Steeples leaned in to peer over Samantha's shoulder, taking dark sunglasses off to get a better look. "Um, yeah," he said as his gaze fell on the gold tooth, "I would say we have our man."

"It is, huh?" Jenkins piped up, "It *is* the fuckin' Mailman, right?"

"We think it is," Steeples said.

So these few pitiful bones were the answer to the riddle of The Mailman. For once popular suspicions had been correct – he *had* been dead all these years.

"We looking at another murder, you think?" Steeples asked.

"No, it's a suicide," Samantha said.

"How can you say that for sure?"

"I know, Harlan, I know. We'll get it recovered properly, but we're going to find it's a suicide. Just trust me."

Samantha straightened up and stepped carefully away. Considering that half the valley's kids had probably been up here over the last few days, the area immediately around the bones seemed remarkably undisturbed. There was a crushed trail leading up to the big flat rock and a profusion of cigarette butts in tramped-down salal, along with empty beer cans, several candy bar wrappers, a couple of crushed cigarette packs and the obligatory used condom, but the trash line ended abruptly several feet from the remains.

"Guess nobody wanted to get too close," she said.

"Fuck no, man," Jenkins blurted. "That's the fuckin' *Mailman*. He killed all them fuckin' kids. Ate them, too."

Ate their fuckin' brains. His fuckin' ghost still stalks these mountains, man."

"Well, at least being a local legend had kept the bones safe," Samantha said.

Steeple's looked uneasy.

He was about to look even less happy. Samantha decided to leave him on the mountain to stand guard over the remains while she contacted the Pierce County sheriff's department and got the name of a forensic anthropologist. Might as well do site excavation by the book.

"I'll send John up to relieve you for the overnight watch," she said. At least officer John Black would have a warm coat, a sleeping bag and some food. Whether he'd be really happy to spend a night with the bones of Mailman Mel was another question entirely. The lack of disturbance immediately around the remains bore mute testimony to the grip of The Mailman's legend on the valley's younger citizens.

**Near Lookout Point
Tipple, WA
Tuesday, July 14, 1998**

She was back on the mountain before nine the next morning, leading a small team consisting of University of Washington anthropologist Mark Stanley and three bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked and obviously very keen students. A leggy blonde girl with wide gray eyes that were usually following Stanley and two young men who both had curly hair and looked enough alike to be brothers. The students, whose names Samantha had promptly forgotten, were loaded with digging implements, a large earth screen and heavy packs of supplies. Though at times they staggered and once even fell with their load, not a word of complaint passed their lips. Their attitude made it clear that being asked to go on a real site excavation was the opportunity of their young lives. Samantha thought of the trio as the Three Keeners.

Black, who had spent a really spooky night in front of his little campfire just inside the tree line, was more than glad to see them. His automatic was lying on his pack right beside his sleeping bag and Samantha had little doubt he had spent the night with the weapon not more than inches from his fingers.

"Gun wouldn't be much use against The Mailman," she said.

Black flushed and, with a sheepish grin, holstered the automatic.

"I guess," he mumbled.

"See any ghosts?" Samantha asked.

"Nope," Black mumbled, kicking dirt over the fire.

"The guy out there in the field is a bit of a local legend," Samantha explained to Stanley and the Three Keeners. "He was a mail carrier who disappeared about twenty years ago. He was suspected in the murders of two little girls here in the valley."

"That's awful," said the blonde, with a look of revulsion at the meadow.

"Relax, he was innocent," Samantha said. "After he went missing another little girl was killed and the real murderer was captured. But we think, before that, this guy came up here and shot himself."

"Oh, that's *awful*," the blonde said.

It also wasn't the whole story. Part of Samantha's own history was wrapped up in a few pitiful bones lying at the base of a rock. For her, the whole story was far more awful.

"Looks like there've been a lot of people around here," Stanley said, pointing to the trampled trail and crushed salal around the big rock. "This site won't be worth shit."

"You'll find it hasn't been disturbed," Samantha said.

"Get out."

"No, it's true. Only local kids have been up here and they wouldn't dare touch The Mailman."

"Just because he was a murder suspect who was innocent?" Stanley asked, incredulously.

"It isn't exactly that simple," Samantha said. "His name was Mel Manson."

"So?"

"The story is that he was a first cousin of Charles Manson."

"That's right," Black chimed in, evidently unable to contain himself, "he was in Manson's cult. They had some falling out and Manson carved an 'H' and an 'S' right into his cheeks so he could never show his face again. Helter Skelter, get it? He came back here and swore he would never leave this valley, before death or after."

"I'm afraid Mailman Mel is the bogey man around these parts," Samantha said, "I don't think anyone from around here would want to disturb his bones."

"We'll have a look," Stanley said, walking carefully through kid-flattened vegetation. He crouched near the rock and reached into the tangle of salal, gently easing vines aside. "Well, I can't believe it," he said, walking back to the group, "but you're right, Chief. Looks like nobody has touched the bones at all."

The Three Keeners looked uneasy.

"Oh, come on," Stanley laughed, "you guys will have very short careers in forensic anthropology if you're going to start believing ghost stories. Let's get organized here and get on with this."

Once he had the little team galvanized, things went quickly. In a few minutes they had set up the screen and spread several small tarps. Then they carefully cut away salal that had grown up and through the bones, taking branches and stacking them on one of the tarps. Soon they had cut all the vines down to a few inches from the ground. The tall blonde girl, who was called Vanessa by Stanley and 'Van' by the two young men, photographed the scene from every angle.

"Use the whole roll," Samantha said when it seemed that Vanessa was going to abandon the task after shooting only twenty frames. "We might be wrong about the suicide. This is potentially a criminal case, until we know otherwise, so we're going to follow proper procedures."

Vanessa dutifully shot four more frames, then handed the film cassette to Samantha to bag and label as the two young men carefully laid out a grid with stakes and garden cord. Stanley drew a meticulous diagram, carefully locating skull and large bones, which were then lifted out and placed on a tarp covering most of the rock. The skull, caked with dirt and moss, was missing its lower jaw. There were several mossy vertebrae and most of the pelvic girdle.

When they were satisfied with their surface search, they began to dig up grids, going about three inches down with each pass, picking out any large items and throwing earth on to their screen. Vanessa carefully sifted, picking out anything of interest and placing it on the tarp. It was a smooth, well-practiced operation and progress was fairly swift.

Digging in grid B-2, one of the men muttered, "got something." He picked at the earth with his trowel, then said, "Holy cow, Mark, look at this."

Stanley got down on his hands and knees and swept away bits of earth with a whiskbroom. "Let's go underneath and get it all, just the way it is."

A few seconds later they came up with what looked like a large lump of earth. Stanley gingerly transported it to the tarp.

"Take a look at this, Chief," Stanley said.

The object was a badly-rusted automatic with a finger bone sticking through the trigger guard, held in place by packed earth infused with a network of tiny roots. She couldn't be certain, but the weapon looked like a Makarov 9 mm. The grips had completely disintegrated and there was one bullet missing from the clip.

Within three hours of intense work, the team had recovered several vertebrae, a femur, miscellaneous finger and toe bones, clumps of long black human hair, a number of buttons from a postal uniform, scraps of cloth, a pen, a wristwatch, two rings, one a large silver skull and crossbones with fake ruby eyes, and a 9 mm casing.

"So, what do you think?" Stanley asked finally, stepping back and wiping sweat from his brow.

"Everything is consistent with Mel Manson."

"Suicide, looks like," Stanley said, slapping at a mosquito. With the blazing sun now fully upon the little alpine meadow, a legion of insects was making life miserable for team members. They wiped, slapped and scratched.

"I'd say so," Samantha said.

The skull had a dime-sized hole in the right temple and a gaping cavity on the left side. The automatic had been found with some metacarpal bones. Mel Manson had probably sat on the flat rock, facing the valley, and fired a single shot through his head. The Mailman's hand had locked on the weapon in a cadaveric spasm as the recoil flung it away from his instantly lifeless body, which fell backwards into salal. There it had lain all these years, disarticulating as it rotted away, picked at and carried away in pieces by animals, bones

bleaching in summer sun and cracking in freezing winter winds, slowly submerged in earth by forces of nature. Eventually most of the small bones had been carted off by animals. The single middle phalanx, the second bone of the right index finger, was covered by seasonal detritus that eventually turned to earth and froze it in the trigger guard, a mute witness to a lonely death.

And it was apparent to her now that on *that* horrible day, the day in her life Samantha most regretted, this man had been carrying a loaded 9 mm automatic. He had probably been on his way to do this when the incident occurred. He had been on his way to blow his own brains out but, instead of using the weapon to defend himself, this strange, gentle, harmless man had gotten back on his bike and pedaled away to his death. How many years of dedicated service to the community could pay for *that*?

As Samantha morbidly examined recovered bones and objects, Steeples emerged from the forest, cursing and shaking pine needles from his uniform. He was carrying a large bag of hamburgers and a small cooler.

"Mac is covering downtown," he said by way of explanation, "so I figured you guys might want some lunch."

"Jesus, yes," Stanley said. "Here, put it right here. We have an extra tarp. Jesus, thanks. We got so goddam excited about this we forgot to bring anything."

"Thank you," Vanessa added, going over to Steeples and taking the bag and cooler. She settled on the tarp while the others flopped around the edges, wiping sweat and dirt from their faces. It was odd how Vanessa, who had more than held her own all morning,

suddenly reverted to homemaker, carefully setting out paper plates, burgers, and cans of pop. It was a puzzle to Samantha, at least until Vanessa gave Steeples a look. One of those she had been giving Stanley all morning.

"Looks like you have an admirer, Harlan," Samantha said, drawing Steeples aside.

"Yeah, maybe," Steeples said, flushing under his tan, "well, maybe."

"Maybe. More than maybe. Anyhow, there's something missing."

"What?"

"Mel Manson's mailbag."

"Hell, he probably just chucked the thing somewhere," Steeples said. "He was going to off himself, why would he care about a goddam mailbag?"

"Maybe he wouldn't," Samantha said, "but I remember him, you know. He was pretty dedicated."

"That spook?"

"He wasn't that bad," Samantha said. "He wasn't bad at all. And what do you mean, 'spook'? You don't believe all those stories, do you?"

Steeples looked out over the meadow to the valley beyond.

"Oh, come on, you *don't*, do you?"

"Well," Steeples said defensively, "some pretty reliable people have reported seeing something. There was that sales guy, remember?"

"Sales guy? Is that one I haven't heard?"

"Maybe there isn't anything to it," Steeples said grudgingly.

"So, tell me."

"There was a salesman up here a few years ago. He picked up a guy with a mail sack late one night. Down on Lake Road. Right where they found Mailman Mel's bike chained to that tree, you know? He let the guy off right down there," Steeples said, pointing to the Lookout Point switchback.

Steeples said the salesman later said he couldn't figure out why the strange-looking mailman with the dark, cavernous eyes wanted out right there, but he'd been glad to get rid of the man. It was only later that he heard the legend of Mailman Mel and realized who he'd had in the car.

"Sounds like an urban myth," Samantha said.

"So how was the guy able to describe Mailman Mel?" Steeples said in spite of himself. "He even got the scars right. The 'H' and 'S'."

"Oh, hell, Harlan, if there even was a salesman, he probably found out about Mailman Mel somewhere or other and decided to fabricate a story. It would be a pretty good sales gimmick, wouldn't it? Great ice breaker. Hey, I saw the ghost of Mailman Mel."

"Yeah, maybe," Steeples said, his tone of voice saying he was anything but convinced. Being half Samantha's age, he could never remember having seen The Mailman, but he had grown up with Mailman Mel ghost stories.

"Well, anyway," Samantha said, "at least the stories kept kids away from the bones. We can be thankful for that."

"I guess," Steeples said.

A traveling salesman. She snorted as she gazed down the mountainside at Mine Road. What would a salesman be doing driving up Lake Road anyway? And

even if he was, why would he take some hitchhiker all the way up to Lookout Point? It was a really *stupid* story.

Nevertheless, she noticed that from his vantage point on the rock, The Mailman could have seen just about all of Tipple. She realized uneasily that Mel Manson had probably sat on the big rock and put the gun to his head. He could have squeezed the trigger while staring directly at the homes of the people who had hated and persecuted him. He could have been looking at the lights of *her* home as the 9 mm slug blasted through his brain.

A shadow flashed across the meadow and Samantha started violently, her heart hammering. Then it was gone, leaving the summer sun as bright and hot as ever. A huge raven was flying low over the meadow. As her breathing returned to normal, it came to roost in a large, dead fir. There it sat, watching her, as though it knew what she had been thinking.

The whole thing was idiotic. Mel Manson had been just a man. A poor, misunderstood, depressed soul who had one day come up to this lonely meadow and ended a tortured life. And that had been that. End of story. No transparent apparitions with glowing eyes and phantom mailbags. If any person in the world had a right to be haunted by Mel Manson, that person was Samantha Bentley.

All these years of thinking that perhaps The Mailman was still alive somewhere, only to have his disarticulated skeleton come striding out of her past to point a bony finger at her. On a bright summer afternoon with the mercury well over eighty-five, Samantha shivered with an unaccountable chill.

The raven suddenly screeched and left the dead branch, swooping low over the meadow and away towards Tipple, where it was quickly lost against the brilliant blue of the sky.

**The Bentley home,
Tippie, WA
Wednesday, July 15, 1998**

Dinner conversation had been mostly about Dolly Jenkins, despite Samantha's attempts to steer it away.

In stores, gas stations, on the golf course, in restaurants and at private gatherings, valley residents were talking of just about nothing else and she thought Dr William Blake, an outsider, would by now have had enough of it to last a lifetime. True to his word, he had called the day before to ask her to lunch. She'd been busy, but responded with an invitation to join the Bentleys and Larsens for dinner.

Now, although he seemed interested, she wondered whether he'd be glad he had accepted an invitation to yet another Dolly Jenkins case dissection.

At any rate, even if she had wanted to regale the tall doctor with the sad tale, it was her personal policy to not discuss active police cases with anyone outside her department. That even included Ellen, who had made several attempts to bring her in to the discourse. Her refusal to become involved had left it a strange, three-way dialogue between her daughter, Abel Larsen and Odin, who lounged in a Louis XIV chair with his stiff leg stretched out. Odin, despite his posture, always managed to look as though he belonged in the hushed, darkly paneled Bentley dining room while Abel could look awkward in a Burger King. It was hard, sometimes,

to believe the rough-hewn former soldier and elegant ex-athlete were really father and son.

Blake, who towered over the three, contributed an occasional “is that so” and “the hell you say”, but didn’t seem inclined to add much. But, despite the fact that he must have heard all this and more during his real estate wanderings around Tipple and surrounding environs, he didn’t appear at all bored.

The conversation flagged while Hattie, working from a wheeled tray, served sherbet. Having her maid serve dinner was something that always made Samantha, daughter of a mine foreman, uncomfortable. She would long since have stopped it, but it had been a point of pride with her husband to have service when entertaining even close friends, and she had carried on the tradition. For perhaps the thousandth time, she resolved to just serve hamburgers in her kitchen. Danny had been dead a long, long time. Time to let his little traditions die, too.

“Beg your pardon?” she said, suddenly realizing her daughter had been speaking to her.

“I just asked how it went with Mailman Mel’s mother today? You can tell us, it’s an old case, right?”

The Larsens showed surprise.

“Is that where you were going this afternoon, Mrs B? To see Mailman Mel’s mother?” Odin asked, playing with his silver dessert spoon. When in the company of Ellen, Odin tended to call Samantha “Mrs B.”, an old pet name, rather than “Mom”. Odin’s calling Samantha “Mom” seemed to make Ellen uncomfortable.

“My God,” Abel said, “I’m surprised Emily Manson is still alive.”

“Was that his mother?” Ellen asked.

"Yep. Used to live over south of Tacoma a ways," Abel said.

"I never knew you knew Emily Manson."

"Oh, I've known lots of people in my time, angel. I grew up around there, you know. Didn't know her very well, but I heard she really went to pieces after Mel disappeared like that. Hung around for a few years, never talked much to anybody, then just up and disappeared one day. I heard somewhere that she died."

He broke into a fit of coughing. Red-faced and eyes streaming, he managed to excuse himself and left the dining room, still emitting great, phlegmy coughs. Samantha knew he would step outside to have a quick cigarette. Abel was an incredibly heavy smoker. At dinner, he had managed to go a half hour without a cigarette. A personal best.

"I know it's none of my business," Samantha said to Odin, "but I wish your father would cut back a bit on the smoking. He really doesn't look good these days."

"Who is Mailman Mel?" Blake asked.

"Well, if you're going to live here, you've got to be up on The Mailman," Ellen said. She quickly outlined the facts surrounding the disappearance and finding of Mel Manson.

"It's so spooky," Ellen concluded. "That poor man. I heard that some sales guy saw his ghost last year. Could even describe the scars and everything."

"I heard that," Odin said. "I heard that the 'H' and 'S' were cut so deep they were scratched right on the bone. Is that true, Mrs B?"

"I'm sorry to ruin a good urban myth," Samantha laughed, "but Mel Manson didn't have any scars."

"None?" Ellen asked incredulously.

"At least, not an 'H' and an 'S' cut so deeply into his face there were scratches on bone," Samantha said. "He was just strange because of something that had happened in Vietnam."

"Well, anyway," Ellen said, evidently disappointed, "how did it go with his mother?"

"Not too bad," Samantha said. "She was quite composed, really."

It was true. The elderly woman, fit and healthy despite advanced age, had taken the news without flinching. Even when Samantha told her that her son had taken his own life.

"I knew he was there," she had said, "all those years. I knew he was up in those hills. I could feel him on the wind."

But for all her composure, there had been a deep well of bitterness. The horror her son had gone through, she said, was just because he came back from Vietnam a little 'different'. There had never been a shred of evidence that her son had anything at all to do with the horrible deaths of those two little girls. And yet they had treated her poor boy like a pariah until, one day, he disappeared.

She produced a picture and forced it on Samantha, who gazed with shame at haunted eyes staring over more than twenty years, realizing she was looking at a soul in torment. She also realized there were no scars on Mel Manson's face.

Did he not have scars, she asked.

"No," Emily had replied firmly, "he never did. That was just a stupid story that grew up around my poor Mel. That his cousin cut a big 'HS' on his face for

'Helter Skelter'. Scarred him so badly he couldn't be seen in public. What rubbish."

Abel came back into the room, smelling of fresh smoke and still coughing.

"What did I miss?" he asked.

"Just some Mailman Mel talk," Ellen said.

"Still on that, are you?" Abel replied, sitting down at the table. "Poor bastard, all scarred up like that and then suspected of killing those little girls."

"He wasn't scarred," Ellen said, clearly disappointed, "Mom found out there were no scars."

"So why did he never show his goddam face?" Abel asked. "He never did, you know. Always wore that goddam hooded thing under his coat. Even in the summer. Stank like a goat, they said. You could never see his face. Everyone knew it was because of the scars."

When told Mel Manson had no scars, Samantha had asked why, then, did he always wear a large hooded jersey under his mailman's coat? She could remember seeing The Mailman many times, hood hiding his face, pedaling along Lake Road. But she, like the other villagers, had never taken a close look at Mailman Mel. Had never talked to him. People had known Mailman Mel and seen him many times. Some people from time to time must have gotten a close look at his face and seen it was unmarked. And yet these legends of horrible scars were accepted as fact.

"Want to know why he stayed away from folks?" Emily said. "Do you really want to know?"

"I'd like to know," Samantha had responded.

"Does 'C' Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, 11th Light Infantry Brigade mean anything to you?"

"It sounds like an army unit designation," Samantha said, mystified yet impressed at the old lady's recall.

"It was my son's unit in Vietnam, Chief Bentley," Emily Manson said. "He was in the first platoon, and his lieutenant was named William Calley. Now does *that* name mean anything to you?"

"I'm not sure. It sounds familiar."

"How about My Lai 4?" the older woman asked with a penetrating glance.

"Oh, my God," Samantha said as the pieces fell into place.

"My poor baby was there, Chief Bentley. He was at My Lai 4. But he never fired a shot at those poor people. Never fired a shot at anybody. Not during the whole time he was over there. He told me so. He told me so and I believed him, because my boy never lied."

But the terrible massacre had scarred Mel Manson, deep inside where it really counted.

"That was where he carried his scars, not carved in his face," Emily had said contemptuously. "He wasn't any cousin to Charles Manson, either, not so far as I ever knew. The first we ever heard of *that* Manson was after Mel got home."

Abel excused himself again. As he left the room, Samantha shook her head and looked helplessly at Odin. Another cigarette. Odin smiled and shrugged. Nothing he could do.

"I'm going to help Hattie with the coffee," Ellen said. Assisting Hattie was an old habit of hers. Sometimes it was more like Hattie was a family member than paid help.

"I don't see why he'd hide his face like that if he didn't kill anyone," Odin said. "It just doesn't make sense."

"There are a variety of reasons he might react that way," Blake said. "It might be guilt by association. He might think the world knew he was there and thought he took part. Or he might feel overwhelmed by guilt because he was there and did nothing to stop it. Or it might have just been a bit of peculiar brain chemistry. Low neurotransmitters in particular areas of his brain. Certainly horrific events affect different people in different ways. I'd have to have talked to the man to have any idea of what was really going on in his head."

"You sound like a psychiatrist," Samantha said. "I thought your name tag said Bill Blake, MD."

"I *am* a psychiatrist," Blake replied. "Psychiatrists are doctors, too."

"I think I'll make a contribution to dessert," Odin said, suddenly getting up to limp into the kitchen after Ellen.

"My God," Samantha said, "that was abrupt."

"Do you suppose my deodorant has failed?"

"Or mine."

Feeling awkward and embarrassed at forgetting that psychiatrists are doctors, Samantha dug into the sherbet as sounds of coffee preparation emanated from the kitchen. Ellen's going into the kitchen was the result of a genuine liking for Hattie and a desire to help out. With Odin, there was an element of force about it. As though, despite a carefully cultivated 'common touch' that made him a natural politician, Odin felt he was to the manor born. But even at the height of his fame, Odin had walked through life with a noblesse oblige

that would have suited a much older person. Samantha could never look at the younger man without smiling. There was just something about him.

"Dr Blake, would you mind if I just quickly checked with my office?"

"Not if you call me 'Bill'."

"Bill. Bill, would you mind?"

"No, I'll just sit here and admire your dining room. It's magnificent."

"My husband's father had excellent taste," Samantha said, slipping out to the hall phone to check in with her office. She had left word with Black and Grady to find either Calvin Jenkins or Matt Helprin and push for the mailbag.

No, the answer came back, no sign of them so far.

Leaving instructions to stay on it, Samantha hung up to find herself face to face with Abel Larsen.

"Abel," she said, "I didn't hear you come in."

"Sorry I startled you, sweetheart," Abel said, "but I wanted to get a private word with you before the others came back."

"Okay. In the library?"

Abel followed Samantha down the hallway. The last door across the hall from the dining room opened to Daniel Bentley Sr's spacious library, lined with floor to ceiling bookshelves. It was a repository of the world's great literature that Bentley Sr had never read. His son, however, went through most of it and had been able to quote long passages from many of the works. What had been a pretension in the father became a passion in the son.

Snapping on one of the small, goose necked reading lamps on the huge oak library table, Samantha

sat in an overstuffed, black leather-covered chair. Abel, looking as out-of-place as always, sat gingerly next to her and clasped huge, gnarled hands between his knees.

"Honey, I don't know how to tell you this."

"Oh, Lord. Is it that bad?"

"It could be, yes."

"Okay, Abel, just tell me. I'm a big girl. I can take it, whatever it is."

"Well, you made a pretty powerful enemy up at the mine that day. The day you found Dolly."

"Dan Murchison?"

"The same. Ayla was very unhappy with you. She's been saying around that you were extremely disrespectful to a member of the council."

"Abel, I wasn't. I just told the damned ghoul he couldn't tramp into the mine and gawk at poor Dolly, that's all."

"I know that, angel," Abel said, "But you know what a pompous fool Dan is, and that wife of his is ten times worse."

"So what's going on?" Samantha asked.

"I think Dan has Myra Hendry. He hasn't got me, he'll never get me. But if he can get Hal Hashimoto, he has us three to one."

"I gather we're talking my job," Samantha said glumly.

"Dan is saying that this case proves you're in over your head, Sammi. He's saying the village is growing and big city crime is moving in. We need a man with a big city police background to handle big city problems. Honey, we need an arrest here, badly. If we get an arrest, then I can probably keep Dan from getting Hal,

no matter what he offers. He'll keep Myra because she's very tight with Ayla Murchison. That'll deadlock things and John will have to vote to break the deadlock. John's always been a huge fan of Odin's, so I think he'll come down on our side. If it comes to that. Maybe a quick arrest will back Dan off."

Abel, who had been cracking his huge knuckles, pulled the cigarette pack half out of his shirt pocket, then, catching Samantha's disapproving look, let it drop back.

"So we're saying that if I don't arrest someone, I'm going to be dumped, is that it?"

"Honey, you've got me. I can maybe hang onto Hal for a while. John will want to vote with us but he's a political animal. He knows his mayoralty could hang on this as well and he won't go to the wall for you or anyone else. If we really look bad on this, I don't think we can hang on."

"You mean if I really look bad on this."

"Yes," Abel sighed. "I'm sorry, Sammi. I know how much you've put in to this community. I think it would be a huge mistake to fire you. But Dan Murchison is your enemy and he can hang on to Myra Hendry. Hal, I don't know about. He's usually on my side, but I think maybe he could be bought. Nip Street comes to mind. Dan's been opposing that initiative, but he could offer to drop his opposition in return for a yes vote on kicking you. Wouldn't do it right now, I think I can promise you that, but if we don't get someone behind bars for this, I could lose Hal."

"And I could lose my job."

Abel got to his feet and pulled out his deck of smokes. "It would be good to get an arrest, Sammi," he

said, extracting a cigarette as he walked to the door. "I'll see you in the dining room in a bit."

Samantha sat alone for a few minutes after Abel had gone. She had no doubt the Tipple town council was aligned exactly as he had outlined. Murchison, her sworn enemy now, had one councilor in his pocket for sure. If Abel could maintain control of the other, her fate was in the hands of mayor Johnson Harley, a bluff, waddling Falstaffian caricature of a baby-kissing ward heeler. He'd be a hundred per cent for her until he wasn't. Then he'd slit her gills and file her over the side without a second thought.

It didn't look good.

All those years of training courses, often paid from her own pocket. All those years of night shifts and shit details from Chief Starkey, who had resented the little rich bitch foisted on him by an Abel Larsen-dominated council. All about to go down the drain if she didn't produce results.

She hadn't realized until this moment how important the job was to her. How important it had become to the daughter of a coal miner to make amends for generations of rapacious Bentleys, including her own husband, who had greedily sucked the blood of this tiny community. And, far more important, to make amends for *that day*.

At last she wearily re-entered the dining room to find Ellen had set out the coffee service. Odin was limping in with the large, silver coffee pot. Hattie came to the door behind him, caught Samantha's eye, raised her eyebrows and smiled. What could she do? Samantha returned the smile.

A moment later, Abel came back in. Dinners with Abel were like that. On and off.

"So," Odin said casually, stirring cream and sugar into his coffee, "does anybody know what ever happened to Mailman Mel's mail? I guess it didn't get delivered that day."

Well, Samantha said, it wasn't really a very active case, so she could say she asked about Mel's mailbag and had been told the old lady had never seen the mailbag after her son went missing.

"Emily said Mel was a fanatic about the mailbag," she said, "he considered his letters a sacred trust. She said he would never, never abandon it."

Indeed, the old lady had said, Mel Manson delivered those letters, rain or shine, on his battered old bicycle, which he had received from his father and her as a Christmas present when he was twelve years old. There were tears in her eyes and Samantha had suddenly felt like crying herself.

Samantha, noting the case of Mel Manson was before her time on the Tipple PD, said she was away at Berkeley when it happened, but wasn't the bicycle located the day after he went missing? That was a complete lie. It had been well before her time on the Tipple PD, but Samantha had not been at Berkeley that year. She just couldn't bear to have this old woman know the truth.

Yes, Emily had said. It had a flat tire. Apparently the result of being hit by a pellet. Mel had gone up towards Lookout Point for reasons only he would have known, since nobody lived up that way, and left his beloved bicycle chained to a tree.

Then she had asked where her son's remains had been found.

"There's a little meadow overlooking the lake, about two hundred yards up the mountain from Lookout Point," Samantha had said.

Tears had run down Emily's face. She knew about that place, she said, although she had never known exactly where it was. It was where Harry Manson, her husband, had taken young Melvin for a picnic one day. It had been such a happy day, she recalled. Her boys had spread their blanket out in the shade of a big, flat rock and had a gorgeous view of the whole valley. They had told her what they had done, but not exactly where it was. It was their 'guy thing', they had said. Harry had once promised to take her and Mel there when Mel got home from Vietnam, but died of cancer while his son was still away.

Emily asked if Samantha was going to give her Mel's suicide note.

"There was no note," Samantha said.

"Yes, there was, young lady," Emily had responded. "My boy was like that. He would never do a terrible thing like that without an explanation. You go back and get the note. And the mailbag. Those folks should get their mail. Even twenty-three years late."

"So you think there's still a mailbag?" Odin asked.

"Well, I'll say this much, since most of the valley probably knows it by now," Samantha said, "I have my people out looking for Helprin or Jenkins."

"You think they know about the mailbag?" Odin persisted.

"I don't know. I don't really think so. Mel was despondent and probably just dropped it somewhere. Wouldn't be much left of it now."

"Those damn kids ought to be asked a good deal more than that," Larsen said, "like why they killed Dolly Jenkins?"

"Well, I'm not going into particulars," Samantha said, "but there's no hard evidence right now linking anyone to Dolly's death."

"God, Sammi," Larsen said, "I'm not one to tell you how to do your job, but it's so obvious. What about that damn sign on the mine wall? How much do we need?"

"Odin," Samantha sighed, "I thought I told you guys to keep a lid on it."

"Mom, I just told Dad," Odin laughed, "he can keep his mouth shut. But I did think it was a pretty clear indication that Dolly was dumped on Helprin's territory."

"A sign?" Blake asked.

"Helprin has a tattoo," Odin explained, "SS runes on his left shoulder and a strip of barbed wire encircling his left arm. He leaves a drawing of it to mark his territory."

"Odin, where did you hear that, anyway?" Samantha asked. "Helprin denies it."

"I heard it around, I guess," Odin said easily, "you know, one of those things you just hear from the kids. Probably heard it at football practice or somewhere."

"Maybe it's a guy thing," Ellen said, "talking about it, I mean. I never heard it from any of the girls."

"I asked some of the kids and they said they'd heard about it, but only recently," Samantha said.

"I don't know, honestly," Odin laughed. "Maybe he just started doing it. Maybe I'm more up on the gossip than most of the kids."

"This is getting off the point," Abel said. "Those rotten little bastards killed Dolly. She did a strip act for them, they wanted more, she wouldn't go for it, they raped and beat her over the head and dumped her down the shaft."

"How do you know about a strip act?" Samantha asked.

"It's pretty common knowledge around and about."

"Sure, Mrs B," Odin chimed in, "just about everybody knows that."

Samantha sipped her coffee with a look of disgust. In a place like Tipple, it was just about impossible to keep anything quiet. Obviously Darlene had given one of her friends her daughter's information and now the whole valley was buzzing with it.

"It's pretty clear what happened," Odin said, "like Dad says. Dolly went up there to do her strip act and they killed her. Then they panicked and stuck her in the mineshaft. I'm just kind of surprised they didn't take her to Number Three Gallery. There's a vertical there that goes a good hundred feet down."

"You seem to know a lot about the mine," Samantha said.

"Oh, hell, I used to hang around there all the time when I was a kid. Just about everybody goes through that phase. It's a neat place. I probably know it as well as anybody."

"Well, I didn't go through any such phase," Ellen said.

"Only because I'd have grounded you for life if I ever found out you were in there," Samantha said, "that place is dangerous. That's why it's boarded up."

"Not that boarding it up ever kept anyone out," Abel said, "it sure didn't keep those rotten kids out."

"Is that the common thinking around?" Samantha asked.

"No question," Abel said, "Sammi, folks around are just wondering when you're going to move in and arrest these little delinquents."

"I've been kind of wondering that too, Mom," Ellen said.

"*Et tu, Brute*. Well, we're working on it. I'm not going to discuss it any more, other than to say we have to have evidence before we go scooping people up. Right now all we want from Jenkins and Helprin is the mailbag. If they have it."

"What do you think about all this, Dr Blake?" Ellen asked. "You must be getting a pretty dim view of your prospective new home."

"Call me Bill, please. You mean the area or the people?"

"Well, this murder and everything."

"Honey," Samantha said, "Dr Blake probably doesn't want to discuss Dolly Jenkins. He's probably heard enough Dolly Jenkins to last him a lifetime."

"No place is safe from murders, I'm afraid," Blake said, "but, with all due deference, Sammi, I do find it somewhat fascinating."

"You see, Mom?" Ellen said.

"Not the murder itself, but the reaction to it," Blake elaborated. "You have, in this young man, ah, Helprin, is his name? You have a classic scapegoat and a classic mob mentality building. We have a group of good, stable citizens who would never in ordinary circumstances dream of committing murder

themselves, talking about purchasing a length of rope from Mr Larsen here and saving the courts a job of work."

"You must have been talking to some of the people around here," Samantha said.

"Well, let's say they were talking to me. But I wouldn't have needed their input, to tell the truth. It's an inevitable line of thinking in cases like these. Each individual on his or her own is capable of weighing the evidence and concluding there simply isn't enough to establish guilt. But together, they cannot do that. When they get together in a group, they reinforce each other and lose their ability to reason."

"The herd mentality," Ellen said.

"Exactly," Blake nodded. "If this were the old west, I suspect your Mr Helprin would be hanging from a wide oak tree at the edge of town. Or whatever can pass for an oak tree around here."

Headquarters, Tipple PD

Thursday, July 16, 1998

Early the next morning, when she arrived at police headquarters to find a single red rose in a tall cut glass bud vase on her desk, Samantha was told Jenkins and Helprin had still not been located.

"Night shift guys looked everywhere," Steeples said, following her in to her office and flopping on her old couch, "even made a night time run to the mine."

"So what do you think?" Samantha asked, opening a card attached to the vase.

"I think it's just a *little* suspicious," Steeples replied. "We have a murder, they're implicated, they blow town."

"I don't know. This isn't all that uncommon for those two to take off, is it?"

The fact was, Helena Helprin had no control whatsoever over Matt and the Jenkins didn't care where Calvin went. The two quite often hitched rides over to Seattle where they probably hung around with street kids. Doing drugs, maybe a little selling themselves. Maybe even a little Doc Martens theft or two.

"So what's with the rose, Chief?" Steeples asked. "Secret admirer?"

"Not so secret," Samantha said, scanning the card, "a really nice doctor from Seattle. Had him over for dinner last night."

"Not that guy who's been looking at the Delvecchio place?"

"That would be the one."

"World's tallest man."

"Oh, Harlan, come *on*, he isn't."

"So, what's his story?"

"Nothing much. Widower. Two grown kids. Doesn't like the crowding in Seattle any more, so he's poking around a few small communities. Looking for something nice."

"Did he meet the locals?"

"You mean Abel and Odin? Yes, they were there, why?"

"No particular reason. With Abel there, I suppose he got a good dose of local gossip."

Harlan's sour expression at the mention of Odin's name was something of a mystery to Samantha. It was probably just jealousy. Harlan Steeples had graduated high school several years ahead of Odin and had missed being part of the Larsen legend. Prior to Odin, Harlan, a wide receiver, had been the youngest ever to play for the Coal Miners. He'd been a local celebrity until eclipsed by the incredible saga of Odin Larsen.

"He got a lot of gossip, thanks to Ellen and Abel," Samantha agreed. "Seems he appreciated it, even though all he heard was Mailman Mel and Dolly Jenkins."

"Typical for around here these days," Steeples said. "So, what are we going to do about our two little jerks?"

"Oh, Jesus, I don't know. I don't know if I want to make too much of a fuss right now. Get all the tongues wagging. People have enough to talk about as it is."

"We ought to do something."

"But right now we just want the mailbag, Harlan. We don't want these kids for anything, really. If we issue a bulletin on them it'll be all over the valley in a half hour and they'll be convicted. God, most of the town already wants to hang Matt Helprin for it."

"I'm getting some really bad vibes around town," Steeples said. "Seems just about everybody knows about that graffiti up at the mine. Wouldn't be the worst idea I've ever heard to string that little bastard up."

"Harlan!"

"Just kidding. Honest."

"Lord, I hope so," Samantha said as the ancient intercom buzzed. "Go ahead," she said, pushing the speak button. God, what a relic the thing was. It really did belong in a museum rather than in a modern police headquarters. Samantha still blushed at the laughter of Pierce County sheriff Bud Collins when he'd dropped in and caught sight of it.

"Just got a call from Frank over at the Log Cabin," Mabel Murphy said, voice rendered fuzzy and scratchy by primitive electronics, "he says those two are hanging around over there."

So Helprin and Jenkins had drifted back into town and promptly become ensnared in the unofficial Tipple dragnet. Village residents had taken to reporting Helprin's every move, and taking incessant calls was becoming a burden for Mabel and her nighttime counterpart, Burton Jenkins. The truly amazing thing was how much traveling Helprin actually did.

"Mac's on duty for another half hour," Steeples said, "I'll radio him and get him over to the Log Cabin. You know, they probably don't know anything about the mailbag or they'd have been showing it all over town."

"Or they wouldn't have dared touch it, more likely" Samantha said. "After all, it's Mailman Mel's bag."

Steeple's shrugged and went to make the call to Mac Grady. At that moment Samantha's phone rang. She talked for a few moments, then, grim-faced, walked out to the reports desk.

"Did you get Grady?" she called.

"Yeah," said Steeple's from his office, "he's on his way."

She heard Steeple's' chair squeak and he appeared in his doorway. Picking up the microphone, she called Grady. "Call in on a land line," she instructed when Grady responded.

She got back to her office, followed by a puzzled Steeple's, just as her phone rang.

"Any luck with our friends?" Samantha asked, picking up the receiver.

"Nope, sorry, Chief," Grady said. "I'm at the Log Cabin. Looks like they moved on, but they can't be too far away. I saw Helena at work earlier, so they probably went over to the Helprins."

"Okay," Samantha said. "Is John still talking to Mrs Pearlman?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Hortense Pearlman had called in a report of a prowler around her back window early that morning. It was not a high priority with the Tipple PD, since she reported prowlers about four nights out of seven. Still, every report had to be handled, and she did make the best sugar cookies and brew the best coffee in Pierce County. It was no accident that Grady or Black, whichever happened to win the coin toss, took her statements at coffee time.

"Okay, get him out of Hortie's coffee. Meet us here, ten minutes. Step on it."

"Jesus, Chief, what's going on?"

"Let's just get on it, Mac," Samantha said, hanging up.

"I thought you didn't want to even issue a bulletin on them," Steeples said.

"We just got a call from the crime lab," she explained. "The DNA match between the blood in the Kleenex we got and the semen from Dolly was positive."

"Well, what do you know?" Steeples smiled. "It's two-for-one day. We roll up both of the little bastards."

"No, just Helprin. We'll bring Jenkins in for questioning, but we won't be arresting him. Not right now, anyway."

"Why not?"

"Well, we don't have anything on Jenkins. The lab said the only match they got was to the blood on the Kleenex. The kids agreed the blood on the Kleenex belonged to Helprin. That gives us evidence against Helprin, but not Jenkins. And besides, if we don't arrest Jenkins, he won't get a public defender. We might be able to coax some information out of him. Let's get ready. I'm betting those two went to the Helprin's place."

Helena Helprin owned a ramshackle cracker box house near the end of Adit Street. Heading towards the mountains, there were only a handful of other homes, each one sorrier than the last. Most were in states of complete disrepair and Helena's wasn't much better, despite her best efforts.

As Grady and Black pulled in to the parking lot, Samantha and Steeples were surreptitiously loading bulletproof vests and shotguns into the trunk of a cruiser.

"Okay, here's the plan," she said when the men had gathered around. "I don't want to turn this into a major theater production. I want it quick and surgical. We're going over to the Home Depot parking lot. There are some stacks of heavy timbers in the corner nearest the old dump. We'll change to our vests there. Harlan, you and I will go over the fence and use the trails to get behind Helprin's."

The area around the old dump and between the few houses at the end of Adit Street and Salal Drive was heavily networked by trails. A major path ran right along the foot of the mountains and several others crossed bush land behind the Helprin's, which was the third house from the dump. The Home Depot was a relatively recent addition, built to serve the village and a surrounding area in the throes of a population explosion, and construction had removed a significant portion of the youth trail network.

"Mac, John, you guys will give us exactly fifteen minutes to get into position behind the Helprin place. Then you get over and take the front. Use your lights and make a lot of noise. I'm guessing our boys will come out the back heading for the trails. Okay?"

"Going to look a little odd to have the whole department in one car," Grady said.

"We aren't going to be in one car," Steeples said. "The Chief and I in this one, you guys in your own. Got your vests in back?"

The two nodded, looking excited. This promised to be a bit more fun than taking fictitious burglar reports.

"Okay," Samantha said, "you guys head over there by Sandstone and Azimuth. We'll go straight down Nip. Make it look casual, or we'll attract an audience."

"We've already sort of got one, Chief," Steeples said, nodding at the Dairy Queen directly across Sandstone. A small group of teens stood in front of the restaurant. Several were eating cones and at least one had a large chocolate sundae. All were gazing at the cops.

"Okay, guys, let's yuk it up," Steeples said, laughing uproariously and slapping Grady on the back. The other two officers promptly laughed and Black punched Steeples hard on the shoulder. "If you do that again," Steeples laughed, "I'll kick your ass."

Samantha laughed and said, "I'll go into the station for a couple of minutes. You guys have a good laugh and get going."

She strolled off as Black and Grady got into their car, still laughing. They pulled out at a sedate pace and headed down Sandstone. Teens, concluding there was nothing out of the ordinary going on, went back to talking animatedly.

Samantha waited a couple of minutes while Steeples fussed around the cruiser, then strolled out and got in. They pulled out of the parking lot, signaling a right on to Nip Street. In the rearview, Samantha could see the Dairy Queen kids were paying them no further attention whatsoever.

They found Grady and Black waiting in the southeast corner of the Home Depot lot behind a huge stack of four by fours. With the Salal Highlands

development going in there was a sudden market for decking supplies and Home Depot had lost no time in taking advantage. In the stifling heat of afternoon there was nobody on hand to see the four pull on flak jackets and helmets.

Once watches were synchronized, Samantha and Steeples went over the fence, a hot and heavy bit of work, and moved west along a well-worn trail nearly as wide as a sidewalk, strewn with the usual collection of fast food containers and candy bar wrappers, paper cups, cigarette packs, used condoms, bottles and cans.

"Jesus, what a pigsty," Samantha said, hustling along the sun-dappled trail, "no wonder the council is pissed."

Glass crunched and Steeples cursed.

"What?" Samantha said, not looking back.

"Stepped on a needle, I think," Steeples said.

"That's what being a growing community does for you," Samantha replied, veering on to a much smaller trail running roughly northwards.

It took them less than five minutes to find their way through the maze to a little cul de sac that abutted the Helprins' back yard. The yard was surprisingly neat; undoubtedly Helena's work, and highly fenced on both sides. The bottom end was open to heavy bushes concealing Samantha and Steeples.

"Pretty quick, now," Steeples said, glancing at his watch, "I make it twelve minutes and counting."

"We cut it kind of fine. I thought we'd get over here quicker than that."

"So did I. Guess I'm not a kid any more."

The Helprin house, a two-story dirty white clapboard box with window and door trim in pale green, seemed

deserted. The back porch was enclosed, but an opening, evidently intended to let someone use the clothesline, afforded a view of a back door with a boarded-up window. The kitchen window to the side was dark and bare of curtains.

Samantha racked a shell into her shotgun chamber and Steeples followed suit.

"They'll probably just give up and we'll be out here holding our, ah ... well, just holding on and looking stupid," Steeples said.

"I don't think so," Samantha said, "I'll lay two to one they come out like a couple of scalded cats."

"Buck?"

"You're on."

"Okay, we got fifteen," Steeples said moments later. "Here we go."

Seconds later they heard a car approaching very fast from the front. There was a swish of tires and squeal of brakes. The engine cut off and car doors slammed.

Almost instantly the back door burst open and Helprin lunged out, taking steps three at a time, followed by Jenkins, who appeared to be in a similar hurry. Helprin, cursing and naked from the waist, was zipping his fly and hopping as he tried to get runners on properly. Jenkins was barefoot but seemed not to notice the sharp gravel.

Waiting an instant for the pursuing officers to appear on the porch, trapping the teens in the backyard, Samantha and Steeples stepped out, shotguns to shoulders.

"Far enough, guys," Samantha called as the pair skidded to a halt.

"Wh... what the fuck?" Helprin bleated. "You can't point those fuckin' guns at us, man."

Jenkins, not sure what the Tipple PD could or could not do, spun, only to face two more shotguns aimed at him from the steps. He stopped dead and raised both hands straight above his head.

"You too, Mr Helprin," Steeples said, shotgun never wavering. Helprin grudgingly raised his hands.

Getting the pair to the station proved remarkably easy. With one in each car and taking different routes, nobody they passed took any obvious interest. Once they had Helprin and Jenkins at headquarters, Samantha called both mothers.

Samantha had Jenkins installed in Steeples' office while she fingerprinted Helprin and bagged his effects. Then she placed him in her own office with Grady standing guard.

Molly Jenkins arrived, only moderately drunk, followed closely by Helena Helprin, pale but composed, still in her pink uniform.

"Sammi, if this is about those boots, I'll swear I bought them for him," Helena said, drawing Samantha aside. "I haven't got the receipt, but I'll swear on a stack of Bibles ..."

"No," Samantha said, gently placing a hand on Helena's arm, "you don't have to swear to anything. I'm afraid this isn't about boots."

"W-what, then?" Helena asked, eyes showing fear as she drew away. It was clear from the demeanor of the officers, not to mention the bulletproof vests both still wore, that this was no ordinary burglary problem.

"I'm sorry," Samantha said, "but I'm holding Matt on suspicion of murdering Dolly Jenkins."

"What?" Molly shrieked, overhearing the remark. "What? That little bastard killed my Dolly? I fuckin' knew it!" Jowls quivering and murder written in piggy little eyes, she advanced on Helena. Samantha quickly stepped between them as Helena shrank from the dreadful sight.

"Harlan," she said to Steeples, "take Molly into your office. I'll deal with things here."

"Samantha, please," Helena said, "Matt didn't do anything like that. My Matt isn't a perfect kid, but he wouldn't kill anyone. He *wouldn't*."

There were tears in her eyes and Samantha felt like crying along with her. Helena was a single mother and, by all accounts, tried to be a good one. But ex-husband Mike, a pudgy, unemployed alcoholic, had been providing no help whatsoever. In fact, Helena had been to court several times in a futile effort to make the man ease up on his drinking and make even a token support payment or two. Now, in harsh morning light, she looked worn out, old beyond her years and very vulnerable.

"Okay," Samantha said, "I'm going to take you in to see Matt. Helena, you have to get a grip, okay? You aren't going to be able to help if you're coming apart at the seams."

She wasn't sure how much of the message got through, but Helena straightened up and the tears stopped. She wiped her face with a handkerchief as Samantha led her to the office where Matt, under the watchful eye of Grady, sat sullenly in a hard-backed chair.

"Okay," Samantha said, sitting on the edge of her desk and motioning Helena to the couch, "I'm going to read you your rights again with your mother here."

Hauling a Miranda card from her hip pocket, Samantha read Helprin his rights in a loud, clear voice, carefully enunciating each syllable. She didn't want any subsequent claim that Helprin had not clearly heard the warning.

"Okay," she said as she finished, "do you understand your rights as I've read them to you?"

"Yeah," Helprin mumbled, staring at the floor.

"Helena, do you understand them?" Samantha asked.

"I can't afford a lawyer," Helena said.

"You're entitled to a public defender. Do you guys want one?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, we do," Helena said.

Pressing the intercom button, Samantha asked Mabel to call the public defender's office. A few moments later Mabel called back to say they had been assigned Barry Clarkson, who had recently taken over public defender cases in Tipple.

"He's pretty good," Samantha said. "I've had some dealings with him before."

While waiting for Clarkson, Samantha went down the hall to Steeples' office. There she found a nervous, pale Calvin Jenkins pacing under the baleful glare of his mother. The boy's cheeks looked suspiciously livid and Samantha immediately regretted leaving him with Molly.

"Calvin," she said, motioning the boy to sit down, "I'm a little curious about July fourth. Dolly's strip tease, remember?"

"What fuckin' striptease?" Molly demanded, face flushing and big, meaty hands balling into fists. "*What* fuckin' striptease?"

"Molly," Samantha warned, "please stay out of this. Calvin?"

"My sister wasn't there," Calvin said, voice shaky, "she never come up there."

"That's odd. We have a witness who tells us Dolly was last seen headed for the shack to do a strip tease."

"She didn't do no strip," Calvin said, casting a furtive glance at the glowering Molly.

"But she was there."

"She mighta bin," Calvin said, "I don't remember."

"You just said she never went up there."

"I din't mean *never*, never," Calvin said, "I just meant never like on, ah ..."

"July fourth."

"Yeah, that."

"Calvin, you already told us Dolly was there July fourth, remember? You and Matt both said so. Remember? The night we came up to the shack?"

"I ... I got it fucked up. She wasn't there, man."

"What about our witness? We have a witness, Calvin."

"It's bullshit," Calvin said with no great conviction.

"We have a very good witness who said Dolly was on her way up to the shack to do a striptease," Samantha said patiently. "When Deputy Chief Steeples and I talked to you and Matt that night, the two of you admitted she was in the shack that day. Right?"

"She mighta bin," Calvin said after a pause. "I can't remember."

"Calvin, we know two things," Samantha said, deciding to gamble, "we *know* that Dolly was in that shack on July fourth and we *know* that she did a strip tease."

Calvin looked at her, stricken. Then he cast another furtive glance at his mother's mottled, enraged countenance. This was not something he really wanted to share with Marvelous Molly Melons.

"She ... she mighta bin," he said.

"We *know* she danced for you. On *that* day."

"She mighta."

"Not 'mighta', Calvin, *did*," Samantha said.

"She wannit t'be an exotic dancer, like Mum," Calvin blurted.

Molly relaxed and Calvin, encouraged, said his Mom had been the best, man. Just the best fuckin' stripper in the world, and Dolly just wanted lots of practice 'cause she figgered it was the only way she could even get to be *half* as good as Molly. Maybe she couldn'ta bin even half as good. Maybe not even a fuckin' *quarter*, man.

"I used to be damn good," Molly rumbled, beaming at the praise. "My babies never saw me dance, but they seen the reviews and all. I still got it, too."

"We know, Molly," Samantha said, "everybody is still talking about how good you were. Now, Calvin, let's go over the ground again. Did Dolly strip all the way for you? Did she take off everything?"

Samantha had meant the question as a general inquiry. Did Dolly habitually go right to the buff for the boys? But Calvin evidently took it to mean just July the fourth.

"It was just that one fuckin' time, man," he said, looking faintly sick. "She only done it that *one* fuckin' time. We already told you that, remember?"

"So what you said that night is correct. She stripped for you guys more than once," Samantha said.

"Yeah, but only down to her bra and panties. It was just that once she done it all the way."

"What do you mean yer sister got buck nekkid for that shitty little Helprin bastard," Molly growled as the enormity of the thing upset her finer sensibilities.

"Ma, Matt wasn't supposed to be there," Calvin said. "He just kind of showed up, y'know?"

"Molly, quiet down," Samantha said, "I'm not going to say it again."

Molly, who had been working herself into a new rage, subsided, casting baleful glares at her son while muttering about her darlin' baby girl and that shitty little Helprin muthafuck.

"It was just once, then, all the way."

"Yeah. Just that time, man."

"So why did she go all the way on that particular day, Calvin?" Samantha asked.

Too late, Calvin realized he had opened a can of worms. He glanced around the office as though to find some inspiration in Steeples' bulletin board, fishing pictures or softball trophies.

"That was a very special day, wasn't it?" Samantha said.

"Nuthin' special," Calvin muttered.

"But yes, it was. You just said it was. You said Dolly only once took off all her clothes. That day. Why not the day before? The Monday before that? The Saturday before *that*? Why *that* day, Calvin?"

"She wannit the fuckin' letters," Calvin said at last, voice conveying carloads of reluctance.

"What letters?" Samantha asked, guessing the answer even as she framed the question.

Calvin, with another nervous glance at his formidable mother, who was still muttering about her darling and that bastard Helprin kid, said he and Helprin had found Mailman Mel's bag and, thinking there might be money in some of the letters, had taken it back to the shack. But there wasn't no money in none of the letters, man. There *wasn't*. They didn't take no money.

"Why keep it a secret?" Samantha asked. "You guys told the whole valley you found Mailman Mel's skeleton. Why keep the letters secret?"

"Matt said it was a crime to open someone else's mail," Calvin said, reluctantly, "but we was just lookin' fer money. We didn't read none a' them letters. An' Dolly, she only read the ones she took. Honest."

"Okay, let me see if I have this straight," Samantha said. "Dolly stripped to the buff on that one occasion *only*, because she read some letters you guys had found and she wanted them."

"Yeah."

"How many letters did she read?"

"Two."

"Dolly read two letters, and you guys forced her to strip naked before you'd let her take them, right?"

"Helprin done that. Helprin tol' her she couldn't have no letters till she took off everything," Calvin said.

"That muthafuckin' skullfuck!" Molly exploded, then clammed up at a look from Samantha.

"What did she do with the letters?" Samantha asked.

"Stuck 'em in her dress and took off."

"In her dress?"

"Waist, like."

Samantha had found no letters in her search of Dolly's room, but there *had* been that fragment of envelope found with the body. "Was that all you guys found in the mailbag?" she asked. "Just letters?"

"Yeah. Except there was a note from Mailman Mel. About he didn't do all that shit with them girls an' all."

Prying from the frightened boy the fact that the mailbag was hidden under a sheet of corrugated steel at the edge of the mine yard, Samantha left the office to dispatch Steeples to recover it and all remaining letters. Including Mel's final note, which an old lady in Seattle would certainly want to see. She returned to find Jenkins snuffling and teary-eyed. His face was puffy and red on the left side and a thin trickle of blood came from one nostril. Molly was sitting where Samantha had left her, but her famous melons were heaving.

Dammit. Samantha suppressed a surge of anger. Things were going well and she didn't want Molly suddenly demanding lawyers or telling Calvin not to answer questions.

"Okay," she said, ignoring Calvin's discomfort, "what happened after Dolly did her strip tease?"

Nothing, Calvin said sullenly. Nothing much. She took the letters she wanted and left.

"Why did you get into a fight with Helprin?" Samantha asked.

"I didn't," Jenkins said, then appeared to suddenly realize he had contradicted Helprin's story.

"No," he said quickly, "I did. Yeah, I did get into a fight with him. Yeah, that's right."

"You just remembered, right?"

"Yeah. Like that."

"Why?" Samantha asked, "Why did you and Matt get into a fight?"

"Can't remember," Jenkins said, looking helpless.

"This is pretty odd, Calvin. You know, I've heard Matt is a pretty nasty customer. Big, too. I'd say he goes about five foot ten and one seventy-five or so, wouldn't you? What are you, Calvin, about five foot five and a hundred and twenty?"

"I'm bigger than that."

"Not much. So you're saying you took on an older, bigger, heavier, stronger boy and bloodied his nose? And you're saying that not only did you *not* get beaten to a pulp, but you can't even remember what the fight was about?"

Calvin gazed at a picture of Steeples at Hatwich Lake with a beautiful, leggy young brunette and a very large lake trout. Neither girl nor trout offered inspiration.

"You stop this fuckin' nonsense right fuckin' now, mister," Molly suddenly growled, "or I'm gonna talk to yer fuckin' father an' we'll see if he can beat some fuckin' sense into ya."

Calvin looked positively sick. Seeing if his fuckin' father could beat some fuckin' sense into him was clearly *not* something he wanted on his personal order sheet.

"Matt fucked Dolly," he said quickly. "Afterwards we got into a fight, me an' Matt. He was gonna go after her an' kill her, an' I was gonna stop him."

"That little skullfuck *fucked* my baby?" Molly screeched.

"Molly," Samantha warned, "I'm not going to tell you again. Be quiet."

Eyes nasty little slits hidden in pouches of fat, Molly glowered at Samantha and snorted heavily through flared nostrils.

"Calvin, did you stop Matt?"

"Slowed him down, some," Calvin said with a trace of pride. "I got him inna nose, then he got me inna gut a couple of times. I kinda went down an' he took off after Dolly."

"Did you go out after him?"

"Yeah, a bit," Calvin said.

"What do you mean, a bit?"

"I was fuckin' *hurtin'*, man. I done all I could. I got t'the fuckin' door but I was hurtin' too much."

"What did Matt do?"

"Picked up a piece of pipe. Then he run after Dolly. I didn't see him no more after that."

"On July fourth."

"Yeah, that day."

"When did you next see Matt Helprin?"

"Day after. I asked him if he killed Dolly an' he said he did an' I'd get the fuckin' same if I didn't keep my fuckin' trap shut."

There it was. Matt Helprin had picked up a piece of rusty iron pipe and had set off to kill Dolly Jenkins. Dolly was never seen alive after that and her skull had been crushed by a piece of iron pipe. Samantha closed her notebook.

It was a solid case. She could probably ask for a better witness than Calvin Jenkins, but his account, coupled with the forensics, should be enough to send Helprin to Walla Walla for a very long time.

"You two can go," she said to Jenkins and his mother, "but I'd prefer it if you hung around town, Calvin. I'm probably going to want to talk to you again. And Molly, I'd prefer it if Calvin didn't have any more accidents, understand?"

"I don't know what the fuck yer talkin' about."

"Yes, you do," Samantha said. "Yes, you *do*."

She left the two in Steeples' office and went back into the main station to find Clarkson had arrived and was waiting in her office with his new client. She was just heading in when Clarkson emerged with Helena Helprin.

"Sammi, can Matt leave now?" Helena asked. "We'd really like to go home."

"I'm sorry, I don't think so," Samantha said. "Barry, is your client ready for questioning?"

"I can't say that I'm going to advise him to answer a lot of questions right now," Clarkson said, "not until I have a chance to go over everything."

"Fair enough. Helena, I'm going to have a talk to Matt and then I'm going to have to hold him, at least for a while. I'm sorry, but I can't release him until I check with the DA later today. I have to know whether they'll want to proceed. I'm really sorry, but I'm going to hold him on suspicion of murder. Do you want me to get in touch with Mike?"

"That fat, drunken fuck?" Helena said. "Not a chance."

"Okay," Clarkson said, "let's do it."

They trooped into the office to find a nervous Matt Helprin, face so pale scattered freckles stood out like measles, sitting by Samantha's desk under the watchful gaze of Grady.

"Can I have a smoke?" he asked.

"Go ahead." Samantha pointed to the silver cigarette case she kept on her desk for visitors who were that way inclined. It was illegal in the State of Washington to smoke in a public building, but that was one law Samantha was willing to break if it meant helping a suspect relax and become talkative.

Helprin's manacled hands trembled as he selected a cigarette, tamped tobacco on his thumbnail, then lit it with the plastic butane lighter sitting beside the case. He took a deep drag and sat back, visibly trying to calm shattered nerves.

Sitting behind her desk, Samantha turned on her tape recorder and opened a new notebook.

"This is Tipple PD chief Samantha Bentley, in an interview with Matt Helprin, the date is July 16, 1998, time is 11:10 am," she said into the mike. "Matt, do you know why you're here?"

"Yeah, but I never killed nobody."

"Where were you on the afternoon of July fourth?" Samantha asked.

"Mine cabin."

"You were at the mine cabin?"

"Yeah."

"Who else was there?"

"Calvin."

"Calvin Jenkins?"

"Yeah. Calvin."

"Who else?"

"Dolly Jenkins, for a little while."

"Did Dolly Jenkins do a strip tease for you and Calvin Jenkins?" Samantha asked.

"No. Wasn't nuthin' like that," Helprin said sullenly.

"Calvin Jenkins admitted it, Matt," Samantha said.
"Want to try again?"

"Did you read Jenkins his rights?" Clarkson asked.

"No," Samantha said, "he isn't under arrest. He's cooperating. He says that Dolly came to the shack because she thought Matt would not be there. In addition, Dolly told another friend that she was going to the shack to do a strip tease. Matt, want to try again?"

Helprin looked at Clarkson, who nodded.

"Okay, yeah, she did a little dance," he said.

"Did Dolly know you would be there?"

"Come on, Sammi," Clarkson said, "there's no reason my client would know what was in another kid's mind and it's irrelevant anyway. She was there."

"Tell me about it," Samantha said to Helprin.

"She sorta danced, y'know. Just a fuckin' strip tease," Helprin said grudgingly, using both hands to raise his cigarette and taking another deep drag. The smoking ritual appeared to be settling him down. His color was returning to normal and his voice was becoming sullen. Which was also normal.

"Did she take all her clothes off?" Samantha asked.

"Yeah."

"Then what?"

"She said she hadda go someplace, so she fucked off. That was it."

"Where did she have to go?"

"Don't know."

"She never said where she was going?"

"I don't see where this matters," Clarkson cut in. "My client has answered the question. Dolly Jenkins didn't say where she was going and it was not the

responsibility of my client to be aware of where she was going.”

“Fair enough,” Samantha said. “Matt, did Dolly take anything with her from the shack?”

“Yeah, she took two fuckin’ letters.”

“What was in them?”

“I don’t fuckin’ know, man. I don’t give a fuck what was in ’em. Just a coupla fuckin’ letters.”

“Did you rape Dolly Jenkins?”

“Fuck *no*, man!”

“Did you have sexual relations with Dolly?”

“What?”

“Did you have sex with her?”

“You mean did I fuck her?” Helprin said, evidently enjoying the use of the word. “No, I never fucked her, okay? I never touched the fuckin’ bitch.”

Helena, tears running down her cheeks, gasped and put a hand to her mouth. Samantha sighed and turned her attention back to Helprin. “Are you sure?” she asked. “Are you sure you never had sex with Dolly Jenkins?”

“Chief,” Clarkson said, “my client has answered the question.”

“So he has. Barry, we have a DNA match between Matt’s blood on some Kleenex and semen found on Dolly’s clothes and in her vagina.”

“Holy shit. How do you know the blood was Matt’s?”

“Come on, Barry, both boys claimed it was in front of two police officers. I’m sure I can get a court order for a DNA test to prove the blood on the Kleenex belonged to Matt. Now, Matt, did you or did you not rape Dolly Jenkins?”

“I never fuckin’ raped nobody,” Helprin said.

"So how did your semen get into Dolly Jenkins and on her panties?"

"Just a minute, chief," Clarkson said, walking over to the corner of the office and motioning Helprin to join him. They held a whispered conversation that lasted about three minutes before Helprin resumed his seat and pointed to the cigarette case.

"Go ahead," Samantha said, waiting while Helprin helped himself to another cigarette and lighted it.

"Okay," Helprin said, "so I fucked her. So fuckin' what? She got really hot doin' the strip an' she fuckin' wanted it, man, so I give it to her."

"How did you, ah, have sexual relations with Dolly, Matt?"

"With my dick," he said, looking confused.

"I meant did you go to a bed, or have a mattress on the floor, or ..."

"Hey, I fuckin' knew she wanted it, so she got down on her hands and knees and I give it to her. That's all."

"She got down on her hands and knees pretty hard," Samantha said. "There were pine slivers recovered at autopsy."

"Matt, don't respond to that," Clarkson advised.

"Did you pursue Dolly when she left the shack?" Samantha asked.

"What?"

"Pursue. Did you go after Dolly Jenkins?"

"Fuck no. I didn't go after nobody. Why would I fuckin' go after that bitch?"

"Calvin Jenkins says you went after Dolly with a piece of iron pipe and that you later told him you had caught up to her and killed her."

"Whoa, hang on a second," Clarkson said, "that's total hearsay. Matt, don't answer that."

"I never fuckin' caught up to nobody," Helprin said, "I was just bullshitting Jenkins, y'know? I just wantit t'scare him."

"Did you go after Dolly?"

"No, I just sorta ran down the road a ways."

"Before you ran down the road, did you pick up a piece of pipe?"

"I didn't pick up nuthin'."

"Calvin Jenkins says you did."

"Jenkins is full of shit. I never picked up nuthin'."

"Why would Calvin say you did if you didn't?"

"Sammi, you're badgering my client," Clarkson said, "he's answered your question. Now, is there anything else?"

Samantha was about to press on with her line of questioning, then decided that she was not going to get much further with Helprin on that one. Clearly he was not about to admit he went after Dolly Jenkins with a piece of rusty pipe. If she couldn't link him to a piece of pipe, there wasn't much use asking about rust flakes. Perhaps it would be better to hold that back until she got better leverage.

"What do you know about muriatic acid, Matt?" she asked instead.

"What is this?" Clarkson asked.

"Just another line of questioning. I want to know what your client knows about muriatic acid."

"Fuck all," Helprin said helpfully.

"Why is it important whether my client knows anything about muriatic acid?" Clarkson asked. "I don't see where this is going."

"Did you put muriatic acid in the Davisson's Koi pond?" Samantha asked Helprin.

"*Fuck*, no. I never even seen their fuckin' fish pond."

"Your sign was sprayed on the rock."

"Oh, *fuck* that sign bullshit," Helprin sneered, "I never put no sign on nuthin'. Everybody's sayin' my fuckin' sign was in the mine and on that *fuckin'* rock and that's just *bullshit*, man. I never put no fuckin' sign on nuthin'."

"Just a minute, here," Clarkson said, "what's this sign business?"

"Like this," Helprin said, turning his left shoulder to Clarkson. He was wearing a denim vest with no shirt, so Clarkson could get a good look at the SS runes and barbed wire. "Everyone is saying I leave this fuckin' mark on things. Well, I fuckin' don't. I never did."

"Why is everybody saying you do, then?" Samantha asked.

"I don't give a fuck what they say."

"Look," Clarkson said, "I think that's enough on this topic. You've asked my client whether he left some sort of drawing on the mine wall where a body was found and on the rock next to a pool in which some fish were killed. He's denied it. I suggest we move on and I suggest, before you turn this into some marathon session, that you remember my client is a juvenile. Are there any further questions?"

"Not right now," Samantha said, turning off the tape recorder. "Matt, we've got to hold you. I'm sorry, but this case is far too serious to allow you out. We're going to transfer you to Tacoma and you'll probably get a court hearing this afternoon."

As they hustled Helprin out the back door, Samantha found a small but hostile crowd had gathered to watch her prisoner taken off to Remann Hall, the Pierce County juvenile jail in Tacoma. Several villagers carried pieces of corrugated cardboard bearing words like 'killer' and 'pervert' written in felt pen. Watching the mob as Helprin, cuffed and in leg irons, was taken out to a cruiser by Steeples and Grady and driven off, Samantha got a feeling for the hell that Helena had to be enduring. It was clear that Tipple had already held Matt Helprin's trial.

"Harlan called in," Burton Jenkins said, sticking his head out the back door. "He's got the mailbag. Listen, I don't want to say anything bad about my brother and his wife and all, but I didn't like that look in her eyes when she went out of here. I seen that before."

"Okay," Samantha said, "when he gets in I'll ask him to go out to Juke's place and make sure everything is chilled out."

"Fair enough. Thanks."

"So what's all the interest in Mailman Mel's bag?" Clarkson asked as the door closed behind Jenkins.

"No big deal," Samantha said, "the boys recovered the bag and went through the letters looking for money. We just want to get the mail on its way. To any recipient who's still alive, anyhow."

"Okay," Clarkson said, not appearing really satisfied with the answer, "I'll be checking with the DA later on."

"I think they'll be laying charges," Samantha said.

"I think so, too," Clarkson responded, walking out.

He had been gone only a few minutes when Steeples returned with the mailbag.

"Well, at least we'll deliver the mail," Samantha said, staring at the heap of old letters on her desk, "Harlan, can you run a check on the Jenkins? Make sure things are quiet?"

"Already did that," Steeples said. "I was coming past the Jenkins place just as Molly got there with that little puke, Calvin. Thought I'd better tuck them into bed, so I went in."

"Good work. Did you tell Juke to sit on it?"

"No, but he won't be a problem for awhile. He was too drunk to even know his own name. Probably won't even know his kid was questioned. Unless Molly tells him."

"Well, he was worth questioning," Samantha said. She told Steeples about the sexual encounter and about Matt's running after Dolly with a rusty piece of iron pipe. "I have a feeling she wasn't seen after that," she concluded.

"Jesus Christ," Steeples breathed, elated, "we've got the little puke. We have *got* the little puke. And this time it isn't just a pair of fucking boots."

"Yeah, well, I guess I'd better tell Helena before somebody else does."

"Going to give her a call?"

"No, I'll catch her coming off shift. I'm going over to Tacoma to see what happens to Matt, so I'll know by then what the DA is going to do and what court he's going to be dealing with."

It was just past four pm when Samantha, who had been sitting in her cruiser in the Red Lantern parking lot next to Helena's beaten up old Toyota, spotted her quarry leaving the restaurant. As Helena crossed the lot, Samantha gave a quick blast of her horn. Helena

looked up, then altered her course. Samantha pushed open the cruiser's passenger door.

"This isn't going to be good, is it?" Helena said, sliding in.

"No, I'm sorry," Samantha said. "The DA has just laid a first degree murder charge against Matt. Albright has waived the case to criminal court. Matt's going to have to stay in jail pending a grand jury hearing."

"Oh, God," Helena shuddered, biting her quivering lower lip and staring at the lot, baking under a late afternoon sun, "that bitch never liked Matt. Never."

'That bitch' was juvenile court judge Hanna Albright, who, over the years, had seen quite a lot of Matt Helprin and his friends. It had seemed to Samantha that there was a certain amount of relish in the older woman's voice as she filed the problem of Matt Helprin on to another judge in another court.

"I don't think that's true," Samantha lied, deciding not to tell Helena about Albright's whispered aside to the DA that she was finally rid of 'that little toad', "I don't think she hates Matt. She pretty much had to do that, Helena. I'm sorry, but Matt is really pushing the juvenile envelope anyway, and this is a very serious charge. I don't think she really had much of a choice."

"Not with this whole fucking place against Matt," Helena said. "That bastard Larsen was in the place today. He was telling everyone that you caught the killer. That the council picked the right police chief. Looks really good for you, doesn't it?"

"I'm not concerned with myself," Samantha said, "I'm concerned with Matt."

"Like fuck you are," Helena said. Samantha gasped in surprise. In all the years she had known Helena, she had never heard this tone.

"Helena ..."

"Don't give me that *shit*, Samantha," Helena said, "don't *do* it."

"Look, you're right about the village," Samantha said. It was impossible to deny. Everywhere she had gone that afternoon, villagers had been congratulating her on the swift capture of a brutal sex killer. Several women had said their daughters were being allowed out again now that the pervert had been arrested. Men suggested a piece of rope from Larsen Hardware would spare the state the expense of a trial. Everyone had concluded that Matt Helprin was a nasty piece of business and, if things went well, could spend the next twenty years in Walla Walla. Hell, if things went *really* well, he could maybe get the hot shot. Better living through chemistry for the entire valley.

"Damn right. I'm right about you, too. You're just one of them," Helena said, getting out. "Well, fuck you, Samantha Bentley. Fuck you and fuck all you bastards around here. My Matt didn't kill anybody and someday you're going to figure that out. Someday you're going to be sorry for this."

She slammed the passenger door behind her and started to walk off, then turned back as Samantha reached for her ignition key.

"Why don't you just throw a rock at him, Samantha?" Helena asked, lips curling in disdain, "That's your answer to everything. But, in a way, that's exactly what you're doing, isn't it?"

Why don't you just throw a rock at him, Samantha?

What a cruel thing to say. Yet she couldn't be angry with Helena, who had been just lashing out with the most potent weapon in her arsenal.

Helena hadn't thrown the rock.

**Council Chambers,
Tipple municipal hall
Thursday night, July 16, 1998**

“What’s the topic, Chief?” Steeples whispered, sliding in next to Samantha at the Tipple council chamber table reserved for the police department. Attending council meetings was an onerous chore that fell to the police chief and deputy police chief. Which meant half the department got its ass bored off twice a month.

“Nip Street,” Samantha whispered back.

“Oh, Christ, not again. Listen, before I forget, Ellen called just before I left the station. She’s over at the Hamptons, wants you to go over there right after the meeting.”

“Why?”

“Didn’t say. Just said for you to go over there.”

“Oh. Okay, listen, we better shut up.”

On his feet behind the horseshoe-shaped councilor’s table, Hal Hashimoto glared at the two officers. “Now,” he said, “I’m not going to drag this out tonight ...”

“That’ll be a change,” Steeples whispered.

“... but we’ve been on this far too long. It’s a simple matter calling for a simple solution. Our canvass came back with fifty-three percent in favor of change. That’s a simple majority on a simple issue and I’m sure we can find a suitable, alternative name.”

“The point is,” Daniel Murchison said from the other side of the table, “there are forty-seven percent who are

not in favor. And it's *not* simple for residents of Nip. They'd have to change all their stationery, notify friends and family, put in address change cards at the post office, Lord, it goes on and on. It is *not* simple."

"If I may," Abel Larsen said, "I can see what Hal is saying. If we want Japanese people to come into our area, and perhaps even invest here, we should think about doing something about this name. On the other hand ..."

"For God's sake, Abel, it's just a name," Murchison said, picking up a piece of paper and scanning it, "a Nip is ... a device at the end of a trailing cable of a mining machine, used for connecting the trailing cable to the trolley wire and ground. Perfectly simple. It has nothing to do with our fine residents of Japanese descent."

"Oh," sneered Hashimoto, "and I presume the fact that the road was originally built past Sanjiro Sakamoto's old farm was just a coincidence?"

"Jesus, all the other streets have mine names," Murchison said, "the majority, anyway. It's tradition."

"If you ask the Tamato family, you'll find they don't think much of your traditions. They don't care for living on Nip Street," Hashimoto said. "Imagine having to send mail to their friends with Nip Street as a return address."

"Well, we know the Tomatoes don't like it, they were the ones who originally complained," councilor Myra Hendry broke in.

"Tamatos," Hashimoto said with a glance at the public benches where Ed and Sally Tamato sat in the small crowd. "Tah-ma-toe, not Toe-may-toe."

"Oh, goodness," Hendry said, flustered, "I'm sorry. Oh, I'm truly sorry. I ..."

"I think John's asleep," Samantha whispered to Steeples.

Steeple peered at Mayor Johnson Harley, who sat elbows on desk, chin on hands, projecting an air of absorption in the proceedings. "I believe he is," Steeples sniggered.

"Look," Murchison was saying, "we are not discussing going through the laborious exercise of changing the name of one of our streets, a name derived from the noble heritage of our town, I might add, because ... because ..." He seemed to lose his train of thought.

"People find it offensive, Councilor Murchison, and possible investors might find it offensive," Hashimoto said.

"Yes, that's exactly it," Murchison said in triumph, "you are proposing we go through the laborious exercise of changing the name of one of our most honored streets, against the will of forty-seven percent of the residents, I might add, for the sake of being politically correct."

"And you're saying that we should dogmatically cling to an offensive name simply because of tradition."

"No, because it's the damn name," Murchison said, "we didn't name it. Our forefathers named it. I'm sure they honored Mr Sakamoto, as we all do, as one of the founding members of our community ..."

"Whose descendants were thrown into prison during the war," Hashimoto said.

"Of course that was wrong," Murchison replied, "but it has nothing to do with the name of a street. It was given a mining name, in keeping with our proud tradition."

"It wasn't a proud tradition then," Hashimoto said, "and besides, even if you're right, how many people on the outside are going to know that? What if Sony, or Sanyo, or Toshiba wanted to locate a factory here? What would they see? An honorable tradition of naming streets for mine things? Or just plain old offensive Nip Street?"

"If I might interject here," Hendry said, evidently having recovered composure from the Tamato gaffe, "if we're going to consider changing Nip Street, maybe there's a few others that could do with changing."

"Uh oh," Samantha whispered, putting her head in her hands. This was a new wrinkle to the Nip Street debate and she didn't welcome it. Tipple council meetings could easily drag on to eight or nine pm as it was, without new riffs on Nip.

"What about Gob Street? How many people want to send their mail from a Gob Street address?"

"I've heard some people refer to Skid Street as Skid Row," Larsen said helpfully.

"Well, if we're going to do that, why not change our town name, too?" Murchison said. "After all, Tipple?"

"And Kettle Bottom Road," Hendry said, ignoring Murchison, "how would you like to live on Kettle Bottom?" Harley suddenly appeared to wake up, blinking blearily in subdued council chamber lighting. "With all due respect to your honor," Hendry added hurriedly.

"Well," Harley said, "um, living on Kettle Bottom is, ah ... well, I've never thought of it. I don't suppose I mind all that much. Besides ..."

"Your honor," Hashimoto implored, "can't we deal with this question? We have the votes. Let's get on with it."

"I suggest," Larsen said, "that we draw up a list of possible names, in keeping with our mining theme, and put them to the residents of Nip Street. Perhaps we can get a consensus on an acceptable new name. Perhaps an attractive new name might appeal to the forty-seven percent who are presently not in favor of a change."

"Brilliant, Abel," Samantha breathed, "that will take a couple of years, anyway."

"Yes, that would be a good way to go about it," Harley said. "Do I have a motion?"

"So moved," Larsen said.

He drew a quick second from Hendry and the motion passed 4-1. Even Hashimoto had to go along. The only dissenting vote was Murchison.

"He might be a ghoul, but I'll give him this," Steeples whispered, "he sticks to his guns."

He might, but Samantha knew that Abel had been right. The Nip Street battle was quite likely the trading chip Murchison would have used to oust her as police chief. Looking at Hashimoto's disappointed face, she realized how close she had come. Without Matt Helprin in jail, Hashimoto would likely have gotten his name change.

Harley, meanwhile, eye on the clock, was calling for new business and Larsen was on his feet.

"Your honor," he said, "fellow councilors, and fellow Tipple residents. On the fourth day of July ..."

"Uh oh," Samantha whispered.

"... a dreadful, dark shadow fell upon this community. One of our beloved young people was

taken from us. A young life full of hope and promise, of dreams and dates and prom nights was ended by a brutal beating at the hands of a depraved murderer. Now ...”

Larsen suddenly started coughing. He turned away from the councilor’s table, almost doubled up, face red and eyes streaming. The mayor and other councilors gazed at walls or table, except for Murchison, who theatrically stared at the ceiling. Larsen at last hacked a mass of phlegm into a handkerchief and pocketed the mess.

“He’s getting pretty bad, isn’t he?” Steeples whispered.

“Yes, he is. We’re all pretty worried,” Samantha whispered back.

“Now,” Larsen said, “a young, promising life came to an end in a manner that made us look at our own neighbors with questioning eyes. Fear stalked our quiet streets, stilled our playgrounds, forced us to keep our daughters inside at night ...”

“Other reasons for *that*,” Steeples whispered, grunting as Samantha’s elbow dug into his ribs.

“But thanks to the prompt action of our own Tipple police department, under the very capable command of Chief Samantha Bentley, this specter has been banished from our midst. Thanks to brilliant police work and an uncompromising effort by Chief Bentley, a vicious, depraved young killer is this moment languishing in Remann Hall, awaiting his justly deserved fate. Thanks to Chief Bentley, this town is no longer the prisoner of fear. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Chief Bentley and, indeed, to all

members of our fine police force, and I move we issue an official commendation.”

“Bravo,” Hendry said, beaming, “I second that and I just couldn’t have said it better.”

The motion passed, 5-0, to the applause of the public gallery. Even Murchison, who looked sour, was forced to vote for it. Samantha, to cries for a speech, got to her feet and mumbled that she couldn’t have done it without the wholehearted support of the townspeople and a superb effort from the men of her department.

After fighting her way through a small but vociferous congratulatory throng that mobbed her following the meeting, Samantha arrived at the Hampton’s on Spad Street shortly after eight pm.

Meeting her mother at the door, Ellen whispered that she had been teasing Marvin, who fancied himself a big, tough boy who didn’t need a sitter. He had been telling her what he’d do if a girl took her clothes off for him.

“I was just kidding him, so I said he wouldn’t know what to do with a naked girl. He said he would, too, because he was at the shack the day Dolly stripped. He said he was outside, looking through a knothole, and he saw what Matt Helprin did to Dolly. He said he could do the same thing, easily. I thought you should talk to him, so I called and got hold of Harlan.”

“Good. I think I’ll make you a constable.” Samantha walked into the living room where Marvin sat engrossed in *The X-Files* on TV. He seemed surprised to see Samantha, so he must have missed Ellen’s call to Harlan Steeples.

"Hi, Marv," Samantha said, putting her tape recorder on the coffee table, "mind if we talk for a while?"

"I guess. I seen this one before," Marvin said.

"Can I turn my tape recorder on?"

"Why?"

"I want to ask you a few questions and it's important that I have a record of the answers," Samantha explained. "You're not in any trouble, okay?"

"I ... I don't know nuthin'."

"You know, Marvin," Ellen said, "what we were talking about? About Dolly?"

"I never said nuthin' about Dolly," Marvin said, face going pale.

"Look, honey," Samantha said, hazarding a guess, "Matt Helprin is not going to hurt you, okay? We won't let him touch a hair on your head. Ever."

"P-promise?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"Marvie, come on," Ellen cajoled, "you're making me look bad. Mom won't let Matt hurt you."

"Okay, I guess," Marvin said, doubtfully.

"Can I turn on the recorder?" Samantha asked.

"I guess. I mean, I don't give a fuck."

"Okay," Samantha said, pushing the record button, "I hear you've been around some."

"What?"

"Up to the shack," Ellen said, "like you were telling me?"

"Oh, yeah," Marvin said, "I was there. I seen Dolly Jenkins."

"How did you see her, Marvin? Were you in the shack?"

"Naw. I seen her ... through a knothole. Yeah, a knothole."

"If I take you up there, can you show me the knothole?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"So you saw Dolly do a strip tease," Samantha said.

"Yeah, I *said*."

"Then what did you see?"

"I saw Helprin put the fuckin' blocks to her," Marvin said proudly.

"You saw Matt Helprin have ... have relations with Dolly Jenkins?"

"I saw him *fuck* her, man."

Ellen sniggered and covered her mouth. Samantha glared at her daughter and Marvin looked pleased with himself.

"Did she resist?" Samantha asked. "Put up a fight?"

"I dunno. He just sort of got behind her and pushed her and she went down on her hands and knees. Then Matt got out the bad news and gave it to her."

"She was on her hands and knees?"

"Yeah, I said. Matt got down on his knees and fucked her. I could do that, you know."

"I don't doubt it," Samantha said. "Then what, Marvin? What happened then?"

"She got her clothes on, I guess, then come runnin' out. Then she turned around and told Matt to fuck off, you know. That's when she dropped the letters."

"The two letters she took?"

"Yeah, two fuckin' letters. They come out of her dress and fell onna ground. I seen them."

"Well, that's pretty interesting," Samantha said to Ellen, "but we knew about the letters."

"You don't know who they were going to," Ellen said.

"Marv?" Samantha asked, turning back to the boy, "you know who they were addressed to?"

"Yeah, I'm fuckin' sure, I read the addresses," Marvin crowed.

"You read the addresses? Just when they were on the ground?"

"Yeah, I'm a fuckin' good reader."

That much, Samantha understood from Marvin's mother, was correct. For all Marvin's use of gutter talk, the boy was a superb reader. In fact, he had to struggle at school to get grades bad enough to impress his friends.

"Who were they addressed to, Marvin?"

"You should fuckin' know," he said with a self-satisfied smirk, fear of Helprin evidently now forgotten.

"Marvin, why should I know who a couple of twenty-three-year-old letters were addressed to?"

"Because one of them was you."

"See?" Ellen said.

"See?" Marvin mimicked.

"One was to me."

"Yeah, I fuckin' told you."

"And the other?"

"Mrs Larsen."

"Celia Larsen?"

"Yeah. Her."

"One was addressed to me and the other to Celia Larsen."

"Yeah, I *said*."

"Who were they from?"

"Couldn't see," Marvin said.

"You couldn't see the return addresses?"

"Yeah, I *said*. It was too fuckin' small and, besides, Dolly grabbed them up right away and took off with them. It was neat. Her skirt flew up and I could see her panties and all. Then Matt and Calvin got into a fight. You shoulda seen it. It was *great*. Calvin hit Matt right in the snot box, man. Then Matt, he pounded the piss out of Calvin. Then Matt come runnin' out and took off after Dolly."

"Marvin, did Matt pick up anything when he went after Dolly?"

"Just a pipe that was layin' there," Marvin said, "he couldn't find the fuckin' knife."

"What knife?" Samantha asked.

"I told you, man. *The bad news*."

"I thought you meant Matt's, ah, member," Samantha fumbled.

"What?"

"His penis."

"Oh, his cock. Naw, he's not so great."

"He had a knife?"

"Yeah, I told you. He pulled out the bad news and held it against Dolly's neck, like. Then he put it to her."

"The knife?"

"No, his *cock*. He fucked her."

Ellen, red-faced, got up, mumbling something about needing to get some water, and bolted from the room.

"Okay," Samantha said, wishing she'd had something to throw at her daughter, "he held a knife to Dolly's throat while he had sexual relations with her, then he couldn't find it. Where did it go?"

"Fucked if I know," Marvin said. "He just couldn't find it, man. He was runnin' around in there lookin' for it."

"You're sure that when Matt came out of the cabin after Dolly, he didn't have the knife?"

"Naw, he didn't have it."

"Was Dolly running?"

"Naw. Just kinda walkin' fast."

"Did Dolly see Matt coming after her?"

"Naw, she was already outa sight when he come out. She didn't see nuthin'."

"So Dolly walked fast across the mine yard and went down Mine Road. Then a bit later Matt Helprin came out, picked up a piece of pipe from the mine yard and went after Dolly Jenkins with it."

"Yeah. I *said*."

Ellen walked Samantha to the door when she had finished with Marvin. "Mom? Why would Dolly take a letter addressed to you? And one to Odin's mom?"

"I'd be guessing," Samantha said.

"Anyhow, was it helpful?"

"Very. Listen, you better cut down Marvin's sugar ration. And get him on saltpeter."

Ellen laughed as she opened the front door.

"It's kind of neat, though," she said. "I mean, a twenty-three-year old letter to you."

"Oh, I know what that was," Samantha said, "I realized it as soon as Marvin told us about it."

"Well? Are you going to share?"

"Nothing much to share," Samantha laughed. "Celia spotted an ad one day for a night school course in broadcasting. She thought it would be a hoot and talked me into applying with her. We sent in money orders to register and didn't hear anything more. After a few weeks we got back in touch and they said the class

was full and they had returned our money. We never got the orders back so we had a big fight with them.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. It wasn’t a huge amount of money for either of us, so we eventually forgot about it. I guess Dolly found money orders those two rocket scientists missed and took them to cash them in.”

“So the school really did refund your money.”

“Looks like it. If they were still in business I’d call them up and take back all the nasty things I called them.”

As she wheeled her cruiser out of the Hampton’s narrow driveway, Samantha was struggling to control rising excitement. The story, though from a juvenile, absolutely corroborated Jenkins’ version. Samantha now had two witnesses to a sex assault and at least the start of a pursuit that had culminated in murder.

And yet there was something about Marvin’s account that bothered her.

**Police headquarters,
Tippie, WA
Friday, July 17, 1998**

It was the following morning, going over her notes from the night before, when Samantha realized what had been bothering her about Marvin's story.

According to Marvin, Dolly fled the shack after the sex assault, then turned to curse at Matt and dropped her letters. Samantha found the place on her tape and played it back.

"Yeah, I *said*," Marvin's belligerent, cocky little voice filled her office. "It was too fuckin' small and, besides, Dolly grabbed them up right away and took off with them. It was neat. Her skirt flew up and I could see her panties and all. Then Matt and Calvin got into a fight ..."

Samantha stopped the playback.

Her skirt flew up and Marvin could see her panties and all.

Calvin had said that, too. He had said that Dolly had put the letters in the waistband of her *skirt*.

But Dolly's body had been dressed in jeans. Helprin had been running down the mountain after her. She wouldn't have been aware of the pursuit, so she probably wouldn't have been running. The fight between Helprin and Jenkins probably hadn't lasted very long, so Matt Helprin *must* have caught up to Dolly on the mountain.

Samantha contacted Clarkson and arranged to take him to Remann Hall with her. There was something definitely missing from the puzzle. She could probably ask the question in a conference call with Helprin and Clarkson, but it was an important point and she wanted to see Helprin's face when confronted with Hampton's story.

In the facility, a half-hour away from Tipple by car, they met Helprin in an interrogation room. The boy seemed smaller in his orange coveralls, and his arrogant demeanor was conspicuously missing.

"Matt, Calvin Jenkins told us you went after Dolly Jenkins with a piece of rusty pipe," Samantha began.

"I didn't chase after that bitch with no fuckin' pipe."

"We've been through this," Clarkson said. "Don't tell me you brought me all the way down here to go over this same ground."

"Look, Matt," Samantha said, "I want to get at the truth here and you're not helping. If you really didn't kill Dolly, you won't hurt yourself by telling me the truth. You have your lawyer right here and he'll stop things if you're getting into trouble, okay? Do you trust Mr Clarkson?"

"Yeah, I trust him. I guess."

"Matt, another boy was up there. You know that. You know who it was. He has corroborated Calvin Jenkins, right down the line."

"Corr..."

"Agreed with him. Okay? The other boy agreed with what Calvin Jenkins said."

"Wait a minute," Clarkson said, "I don't know anything about this."

"Last night I spoke to Marvin Hampton," Samantha said, "he was up there that day. He saw everything."

"He's a kid. He's not a reliable witness."

"I know, but he still corroborates Jenkins."

"I think we should end this right now."

"Okay, Barry," Samantha said, "we can do that if you like. On the other hand, you might learn something. We both might."

Clarkson thought it over. "Okay," he said at last, "Matt, if I hold my hand up, just don't answer, okay?"

"Okay."

"Matt," Samantha said, deciding not to mention the knife, "we know you had sex with Dolly that day, and we have two witnesses who say you picked up a piece of rusty pipe and went after her. The blood from the Kleenex was yours, you and Calvin said that. The blood matches semen recovered from Dolly's body and there were flecks of rust in her hair. The autopsy showed she was struck from behind, possibly with a piece of rusty iron pipe. The grand jury is going to deal with your case this afternoon and I think it will come to the same conclusion. So why don't you just tell me when and where you murdered Dolly Jenkins?"

"I think we won't answer that," Clarkson said, holding his hand up.

"I think we fuckin' *will*," Helprin said. "Okay, I caught up to her. I wanted to kill her because I was afraid she was gonna scream rape. I never fuckin' raped her. She fuckin' *wanted* it, man. That's the fuckin' truth."

"Matt, that's enough," Clarkson said.

"No, man, I got to tell my side of it," Matt said, suddenly looking like a scared little boy. As though the precariousness of his position had suddenly filtered in

to him. "Okay, yeah, I caught up to her. I was afraid she was gonna lie about that stuff because she was kinda pissed, you know? Like she liked it but then she didn't wanna admit it? But she fuckin' did, man. I done enough chicks to know *that*."

"So you thought that, even though she willingly participated in the sex, she would claim she was raped and that's why you had to kill her?" Samantha asked.

"Matt ..." Clarkson said.

"Shut the fuck *up*, man!" Helprin yelled.

"Go ahead then, son, put a noose around your neck," Clarkson said, looking chagrined.

"I was afraid nobody would believe my side of it, man," Helprin said. "Who would believe *me* around that fuckin' place?"

"All right, so you caught up to her," Samantha said.

"Yeah, but I didn't fuckin' kill her," Helprin said, "I couldn't. She was my fuckin' *friend*. Look, I run after her, right? She was goin' down the road around the switchback, so I just cut through the trees, see? I went down through the trees and then I got on a big fuckin' rock by the side of the road. When Dolly come down I jumped out onna road."

"Did you still have the pipe?"

"Yeah."

"What were you going to do with it?"

"I was tryin' to scare her," Helprin said.

"Then what happened?"

"She was real fuckin' scared, so she ran down the hill heading for the lake."

"Off the road?"

"Yeah, she wasn't on no road. I ran down after her and grabbed her dress. It kinda ripped, and she fell down, kinda on her hands and knees."

Helprin said that Dolly had been crying and pleading for her life and he had found he could not bring himself to hit her with the pipe. "She was my friend, man," he repeated. "I let her go and she took off. That's the fuckin' truth. I didn't see her no more after that. Never."

"How far off the road were you when you caught up to Dolly?" Samantha asked.

"Down the hill. Not very far. I'm pretty fuckin' fast."

"Did Dolly get down to Lake Road?"

"Naw, I caught up to her way before that."

"When you grabbed Dolly's dress, did she fall in a bunch of ferns?" Samantha asked.

"There weren't no ferns around," Helprin said, "I don't think so, anyway. Maybe there were. I don't remember."

"Where's the pipe?"

"Fuckin' threw it in the lake," Helprin said. "I was walkin' down there later and I just threw it in. Didn't need it no more."

"Where in the lake?"

"I don't fuckin' remember. I just threw it, man."

"Where are the letters Dolly was carrying?"

"Took 'em with her."

"Even though she was afraid for her life she held onto the letters?" Samantha asked.

"She didn't wanna let go of them."

"Did you wonder what was so important about them?"

"No, there wasn't no money in them," Helprin said. "We already looked."

"Do you know who they were addressed to?"

"No."

"Are you sure you don't know who were the intended recipients?"

"He already said he didn't know," Clarkson said, evidently discomfited by revelations so far.

"I don't fuckin' *know*," Helprin confirmed.

"So you didn't see Dolly any more after that," Samantha said.

"That's what I fuckin' said."

"What did you do then? After you threw the pipe away?"

"Went home to watch TV."

"Was your mother there?"

"No, she was off somewheres. I don't fuckin' know where. Work, maybe. She wasn't at home."

"What time did you get home?"

"I don't know."

"Six, seven?"

"I don't fuckin' *know*. Maybe seven."

"What did you watch on TV?"

"I don't remember."

"What time did Helena get home?"

"About eleven."

"So you were alone from about seven pm to eleven pm. Four hours."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Did anyone see you?"

"No, I was alone. I was just watchin' TV."

"Describe Dolly's skirt. The one she was wearing when you last saw her."

"What?" Helprin said, caught flatfooted by the abrupt change of topic.

"What sort of skirt was Dolly wearing? The one you ripped?"

"It was short. White. With little blue flowers."

"The same one she was wearing when we found her body in the mineshaft."

"If you say so. How would I fuckin' know?" Helprin said.

Leaving Matt to the mercies of the grand jury, which would almost certainly return a murder one indictment, Samantha and Clarkson returned to Tipple. They spent the first part of the drive in strained silence. Clarkson was evidently not pleased with the way his client had ignored his advice.

"So," Samantha said at last, "are you going to try to plea bargain? Maybe murder two?"

"No. My client is totally opposed to any plea bargain."

"No? We've got a pretty strong case."

Clarkson stared out the window. They were in mountains now, where the highway wound through a narrow pass beside a small, white-water river. "Nice try with the skirt," he said.

"Oh?"

"Sure. You wanted him to correct you. Tell you that Dolly was wearing jeans when she was found. Well, he didn't know."

"Or he's a really good liar."

"You have a logistics problem, Sammi," Clarkson said. "She was wearing a skirt when your witnesses last saw her and jeans when she was found. When did she get to change?"

"Well, you're going to find out anyway, so I guess I can tell you I recovered the skirt from Dolly's room,"

Samantha said. "Matt must have been telling part of the truth. He either let her go the first time or he just never caught up to her. She went home and changed into jeans. Then he caught up to her later and killed her."

"That's just your theory," Clarkson said, "and you're a long way from proving it. That change from skirt to jeans breaks your direct link between my client and Dolly. You'll have to establish a whole new link after Dolly changed. I'm pleading my client not guilty."

"Pretty risky," Samantha said.

"I think we have a good chance. I think you know it, too. From what I hear around, if the case against my client falls through, you've got some problems with the council."

**YMCA field
Tippie, WA
Friday, July 17, 1998**

“Okay, guys, three laps and hit the showers. And I don’t want to see anyone dogging it.”

Eleven boys took off like so many greyhounds, sprinting around the football field in the searing afternoon heat. Odin Larsen tucked his whistle into his pocket and limped over to Ellen Bentley, standing in bleacher shade. He paused at the bucket to fill a ladle and pour icy water over his head.

“Woah, Jesus!” he shouted, shaking water off like a dog, “That feels goo-ood.”

“What about those poor boys?” Ellen laughed as he walked up and kissed her.

“This is good for them,” Odin said, looking at the group, now strung out over a quarter of the field, “builds character. I had mine built, now they get theirs.”

“I see. So, are you going to shower, too, coach? I hope.”

“Never miss a chance to shower with the boys,” Odin said with a leer.

“Nice guy.”

“I try to be.”

“Okay, nice guy, I’ll tell you what. My group got canceled, so I’ll buy you a tall cold one. How’s that?”

“You’re on. Coke or Sprite?”

“Your choice. Meet me at the DQ.”

Ellen turned away, but was stopped by Odin's hand on her arm.

"What?" she asked, puzzled.

"Um, look, I've been meaning to talk to you," Odin said, looking uncomfortable, "about that, ah, that guy your mother had over to dinner the other night?"

"Dr Blake?"

"Yeah, him."

"What about him, Odin?"

Odin looked down the gridiron. The leaders in the three-lap marathon were starting to straggle off behind the bleachers on the far end of the field, headed for the YMCA across the parking lot. And the relief of a cool shower.

"Odin?"

"Look," Odin sighed, "I don't know how to say this. There's just something about that guy."

"What about him?"

"I just don't like him."

Ellen's eyes widened. Taking an instant dislike to someone was not vintage Odin Larsen. Usually he could be depended upon to see the good side of people. At least until proven wrong.

"Honey, what about him?"

"Oh, hell, I don't know," Odin said, kicking a small rock. It bounded across the asphalt path beside the bleachers and disappeared in darkness underneath. "Just a feeling I have. I'd be happy if Sammi didn't have him around any more."

"I think she likes him."

"I read people pretty well, wouldn't you say?" Odin said.

"I would say. I suppose you do."

"I do. Well, I was putting out the coffee and I happened to catch him looking at your mom."

"Not too surprising. He was a guest and she was the hostess."

"No, I mean looking at her in a way I didn't like. She didn't see it, but I did. I know he saw me watching him, too."

"I don't understand."

"Guys know these things, Ellen. I was looking at his eyes. He looked at Sammi and I could see something really predatory in them. Then he looked at me. It was just a glance, you know? But I saw what was there before he could shield it. There's something wrong with that guy, I'm not kidding."

"Oh, Jesus, Odin."

"I'd really be happy if your mom wasn't planning to see a lot more of that guy. I don't think he likes me."

"Odin, everybody likes you."

"He doesn't. I see through him. You mark my words."

"Well, maybe it wouldn't hurt you to have one person in the world who doesn't like you. Sort of like that guy that used to ride with the Roman emperors? You know, at their triumphs in Rome? The guy who used to say 'remember, you are only a man'? Maybe Dr Blake could ride in your yellow sex machine and say 'remember, you are only a man'."

"Ellen, this isn't funny, damnit!"

"Odin ..."

Ellen was shocked. It was the first time she could remember hearing that kind of edge in Odin Larsen's voice.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said, "I'm just concerned about that guy, that's all. You know, I think your mother is kind of vulnerable, despite her tough police chief act. I think this guy could take advantage of her pretty easily."

"Odin, Mom is pretty damn smart."

"I know. I'm not saying she isn't. But she's been living alone a long time. Well, you know ... She could be ready to reach out, emotionally. And this guy is wrong for her. He's just plain wrong."

"Oh, God, I don't know," Ellen sighed, "I don't know what to say. I think Mom likes him. I think he's the first guy she's liked that way since Dad died. Maybe you just don't like him because he looks like ... oh, you know ... that guy in Shane. The bad guy gunslinger."

"I didn't even notice that," Odin said. "Looks don't mean anything. I read eyes, Ellen. Look, talk to Sammi, will you? If you need help getting rid of this guy, I'll talk to him. I can take care of him, bad leg or no."

"I don't think it's going to take a duel, sweetheart," Ellen said.

"Okay, no duel," Odin laughed. "But tell me you'll talk to Sammi, okay? I don't want that guy around."

"God, you really don't like him, do you?"

"No, I don't. Catch you in a half hour or so."

Odin turned on his heel and limped off along the front of the bleachers, headed after the last member of the football class, pudgy Allan McElroy. McElroy had made it in just under ten minutes, a personal best.

Ellen stood watching Odin until he was lost to sight. Maybe there was something to it. Odin just never took such a dislike to anyone, never mind on a first encounter.

But nothing had happened. Dr Blake had been quite pleasant. A charming guest, in fact. His face was a little off-putting, the sort you wouldn't want to see coming towards you in a dark alley, as they say, but he couldn't help that. He hadn't done or said anything out of line. In fact, he'd been very patient, sitting there listening to the Dolly Jenkins story. And then the saga of Mailman Mel. Lord, he must be re-thinking his proposed move to Tipple. He must consider the place a total loony bin.

And yet, now that she got to thinking about it, he had seemed to pay very close attention whenever Odin spoke. Did he look so intently at Abel or Mom, or her? She couldn't remember. Perhaps the man had been just interested in what Odin was saying. Most people listened in rapt attention when Odin Larsen spoke. Maybe Dr Blake was a football fan and remembered Odin's brilliant high school career and short time in the university limelight. Anyway, she'd mention it to Samantha first chance she got. At least tell her that her future son-in-law didn't like her new friend.

But that Ellen *did* like him.

Meanwhile, Samantha, realizing that the skirt/jeans question could well be the lynchpin of Helprin's case, was once again searching for the murder site while Steeples was busy interviewing every teenager in and around Tipple in an attempt to find someone who saw Dolly after Helprin's attack on her. Somewhere, Samantha and Steeples believed, there was someone who could establish that Helprin was in contact with Dolly later on July fourth, at the time he claimed to have been sitting home alone, watching TV. Grady and Black

were handling routine work day and night, and billing hefty overtime. The Dolly Jenkins investigation was definitely kicking a hole in the Tipple PD budget.

Today she had decided that, rather than renew her search along the lake, she would attempt to retrace Matt Helprin's steps on that fatal day. If she could find the spot where he'd had his confrontation with Dolly, she might be able to infer where he'd gone from there. He must have cached the pipe somewhere if he used it on Dolly later. Come back later, picked it up and taken it to the murder scene. After killing Dolly, he'd have to dump it and he'd probably do that pretty quickly. It was a thin hope, she realized, but her search so far had been totally fruitless. Leaving her cruiser parked at the side of Abel Larsen's fishing shack on Hatwich Lake, she started up Lookout Point Road. Once she left the shade of trees overhanging the narrow gravel road leading in to the shack, she suddenly felt as though she were in an oven on broil. Waves of sweat poured down her face and her uniform shirt plastered to her body. Ray-Bans kept sliding down her nose and her feet felt encased in hot iron.

Maybe it would be a better idea to go back and get the car. But trail signs might be subtle and impossible to spot from a moving vehicle. There was only one way to do this search, and it was this way.

Fortunately for Samantha, it was not destined to be a long search. About two hundred yards up the road, she noticed a large, flattened rock, nearly hidden by blueberry bushes, at the top of the cut near the switchback. It was similar to dozens of others but, seen from this angle, it matched Helprin's description of the rock from which he leapt to confront Dolly. Dolly would

have come around the switchback while Helprin headed her off at the pass, as they said in old spaghetti westerns.

Samantha scrambled to the top of the rock. Dirt and pine needles had been disturbed. About a yard up slope there was a gouge in the soft forest floor and a dry, withered pine branch had been broken off a fallen tree. It seemed likely the gouge was a heel print made by a leaping Matt Helprin. He'd have come through here, clearing the tree trunk and breaking the branch. His boot would have landed right there, just on the other side of the tree, and the next jump would carry him to the edge of the rock. One more would put him on the road. It was quite a drop, probably five feet or so. Must have jarred him pretty badly when he landed.

Well, that just showed how anxious Matt Helprin had been to shut Dolly Jenkins up. Being careful not to disturb the marks, Samantha moved on, looking for evidence of Helprin's passage. She had to be sure this was *the* rock. A few yards away, she came to a fallen tree that afforded a sort of natural park bench. In detritus under the tree were at least a dozen cigarette butts. Someone had been sitting there, smoking, and perhaps waiting. This could be the answer to her time problems. Helprin had failed to catch up to Dolly, but knew she would have to come back for her bicycle. He'd sat here and smoked and waited. There were thirteen butts. He'd probably be smoking conservatively. He wouldn't want to risk running out of cigarettes before his victim showed up. If he took five minutes to smoke a cigarette and five minutes between smokes, it would account for about two hours. So Helprin had probably waited here for at least that long.

Two hours would be enough time for Dolly to change and hang around home until she figured Helprin was gone. Samantha made her way back down to the road, eschewing the Matt Helprin route off the top of the flat rock. Helprin's back might take the impact, hers certainly wouldn't.

Okay, he'd waved the pipe and Dolly had panicked. She'd taken off running. Samantha crossed Lookout Point Road and started working her way up the other shoulder. If Helprin were street smart, he'd have waited till Dolly went past his place of concealment. That would cut her off. Her only hope then would be to make it down to Lake Road and flag a passing motorist. If she were lucky enough to find a motorist at all, never mind one who would actually stop for her. But she would probably angle away from Helprin, so she'd be quartering across the hill. In her panic, she'd be taking the path of least resistance, so she'd probably move down any shallow gullies.

Failing to spot signs that anyone had run from the road, Samantha decided to arbitrarily pick a starting point. She left the road and made her precarious way towards the water, trying to ensure she was following the path of least resistance. Boots skidded on soft earth, dried grass and layers of pine needles and she was forced to pick her way around large rocks. Lord, Dolly Jenkins had *run* down this slope?

About a hundred yards above Lake Road forest closed in and it became progressively more difficult to move. Dolly couldn't have gone through this tangle with any speed. Helprin would have caught up to her long before this. Turning her back on the road, Samantha started moving uphill, scanning rough terrain for signs

of a struggle. It was blistering work and she found herself yearning to just walk straight down the hill, across Lake Road and into Hatwich Lake.

She was on the point of giving up when she found a couple of fresh marks on a trembling aspen, as though someone had struck it with a pipe, pulverizing and abrading strips of bark. What looked like rust flakes were deeply embedded. Samantha carefully took samples. If she could ever find the pipe, she might be able to prove ... what? That Helprin bashed a tree? Well, maybe there would be traces of blood or flesh on the flakes. She spent another half hour searching the scene but, other than a couple of freshly broken branches that might have been snapped off by Helprin as he made his way to the lakeshore, she came up with nothing of value.

By the time she finished, valley shadows were long and deep. Time to collect the cigarettes. A saliva test would match Helprin's DNA and establish that he'd spent some time sitting in the forest. Pretty circumstantial, but a jury might believe he'd waited there on *that* day. Long enough for his victim to change into a pair of jeans.

Heading back into town, butts safely in a paper evidence bag, she decided to stop off at Larsen Hardware to pick up light bulbs. Hattie had told her that morning their supply was dwindling rapidly. Not for the first time, Samantha thought of selling the huge Bentley house and moving into something more manageable. But the house had been in the Bentley family ever since 1895 and Danny had loved it dearly. No, Bentley Manor was her personal albatross, and that was that.

Larsen Hardware, located in one of the original brick buildings on Sandstone Street, was a dark, cavernous store with twelve-foot ceilings and oiled wood floors redolent of solvents. Incandescent lights in conical shades hung on long cords. A profusion of shelves and racks turned it into a rabbit warren and stock was a hopeless jumble. If you were a customer, as Abel was fond of saying, you knew where everything was. Straightening things up would just confuse people. In fact, that was probably true. Abel had a small base of fiercely loyal customers who would rather fight than switch to one of the home improvement marts springing up all over Pierce County. Unfortunately for Abel and Odin, the loyal customer base was aging and not being replaced. Over the years the store had gone from being a bustling enterprise with a half dozen employees to this marginal father-and-son operation.

She opened the door to the familiar bell that would alert Abel if he happened to be napping. Several shoppers wandered aisles and a couple of Abel's fishing buddies sat in the rod and gun section in back. It had always seemed to Samantha that, since they spent so much time drinking Larsen's coffee, they could at least dust off the collection of firearms that had been there so long they were near-antiques.

Spotting her, Odin Larsen came beaming and clapping from behind the counter where he'd been reading *Sports Illustrated*.

"Hail to the Chief," he said loudly. "Hail to the *Chief!*"

Lord, what was *this* about? Samantha's face grew hot.

"Let's hear it for the *Chief*," Odin said, still clapping. Customers joined in as they gathered around and Abel, loudly clapping as well, came hustling from the back.

"Okay, okay," she said, laughing in spite of herself, "now what's this all about?"

"You haven't *heard*?" Odin asked, throwing an arm around Samantha's shoulder. "The grand jury just returned an indictment on that little puke, Helprin. Murder one."

"Just sensational work, Sammi," Abel said, holding out a huge paw for her to shake. "It's just absolutely first class. Getting that creep behind bars so quickly. I'm damned proud of you and I'm making damn sure the council doesn't forget about it."

"I think you already did," Samantha said dryly.

"Yeah," Odin said, "my Mom-in-law, well, soon, anyway, knows what she's doing. No question at all."

There didn't seem to be any question in the minds of the other shoppers, including the two old cronies of Abel's, who actually creaked their way over to congratulate Samantha. For Walter Thurgood and Henry Walker, this was an unheard-of concession. Soon there was a tight little group of beaming sycophants shaking her hand, patting her back and saying over and over how great it was to see Matt Helprin behind bars where he belonged.

Poor Helena. She was right; villagers hated her son with a passion.

"I've heard the DA might go for the death penalty," Odin said, smiling.

That probably wasn't news to anyone in Tipple, but the group beamed and nodded as though it were a late-breaking bulletin. Obviously the idea of Matt Helprin

strapped to a prison Gurney held a quaint charm for just about everyone.

"I doubt that," Samantha said, a bit queasy at the thought of anyone, even Matt Helprin, being coldly and calculatingly killed, "He's too young."

"Well," Odin smiled, "just ask me if I'm proud to have the Chief here as a future mother-in-law. Just *ask* me."

He seemed sincere, but Samantha wondered if he wasn't teasing her, just a *little*. There were times when he liked to pull her leg. Times when that smile seemed more ironic than genuine. It reminded her of something, but she could never put her finger on it.

"Well, Chief," Thurgood said, "let's have a speech."

"Good idea," Abel seconded.

"Okay," Samantha smiled, "a speech. Here it is. Abel, I need a half dozen hundred-watt light bulbs."

There was a chorus of "no", "come on" and "speech" from the little group.

"Nope, that's it," Samantha said, "light bulbs."

"Hey, no problem," Odin said. "If my Mom here doesn't want to make a speech, she doesn't have to."

Hobbling on his damaged knee, he went over to a nearby shelf and returned with two boxes of bulbs.

"Here's eight," he said, "on the house."

"You know I don't do that," Samantha said, smiling despite sudden irritation, "I'll pay."

"No, not this time, Mom," Odin smiled.

"This time is no different from any other."

"Yes, it is. This time you're the conquering hero."

"Tell you what," Abel said, moving in quickly, "we'll just stick it on the tab and we can discuss it later. Maybe over dinner?"

"Abel, I'm paying for these and that's that," Samantha said, "but yes, perhaps we can all get together on the weekend. But not to discuss this."

Odin rang up the bulbs and Samantha headed back to the station. She found herself feeling guilty about accepting praise. She had not caught the murderer. Just a suspect. But everybody around her clearly accepted, as a foregone conclusion, the eventual conviction and, they fervently hoped, execution of Matt Helprin.

Back at the station, a jubilant Steeples told her that the grand jury had returned an indictment against Helprin.

"So I hear from half the town," she said, "but this isn't the end of the line, Harlan."

"No, that's true, I guess. Got to tie up loose ends before the trial. Want to make sure that little puke goes down *big time*."

"Yeah," Mabel said from her post at the radio, "big time. Everybody hates that little bastard, you know. Everybody is just so happy. They're even congratulating *me*."

"Without you, Mabel," Steeples said, "we'd never keep our shit together."

"That's right, isn't it? God, it just feels so great. My son said just this morning how wonderful it will be around here without that little asshole."

Using a word like 'asshole' was totally out of character for Mabel. It seemed like the whole village was going completely off the rails.

"Don't get too happy yet," Samantha cautioned, "this is a long way from a slam dunk."

Going in to her office, Samantha placed a call to Clarkson, catching the man before his afternoon court session, and asked him to telephone Helprin with a question. Then get back to her. Clarkson, after considering the ramifications, agreed. Whether he'd be willing to discuss what his client said would depend on the answer.

Samantha's next call was to Hattie Clarendon to tell her the light bulb mission had been accomplished and she would be on time for dinner. For a change.

"I just want to say how wonderful you've done on the Dolly Jenkins thing," Hattie said. "It's just wonderful you caught that little bastard. He's just terrible, you know. Elwood had an awful run-in with him last month."

"What run-in?" Samantha asked. Elwood Clarendon, Hattie's husband and Bentley gardener for the past dozen years, was far too old for 'run-ins' with anyone, much less the likes of Matt Helprin.

"Oh, it was *awful*," Hattie said.

It seemed that Elwood had been going downtown to pick up a pound of baking sugar for Ellen's birthday cake.

"He went over to look in on Harriet Quincy, so he went past the Helprin place."

Al Quincy, who had died the year before, had lived across Adit, three doors down from the Helprin home. Quincy and Elwood Clarendon had both worked for years for Bentley Bituminous before the mine shut down, and Elwood had made a habit of checking up on Harriet.

"He was walking past that Helprin place," Hattie said, "and that awful Helprin boy was sitting on the front steps. He had his door wide open and there was that

awful rap music playing inside, real loud. Elwood said it sounded like it was right out there on the street. He said you could hear it all over town. It was mutha you-know this and mutha you-know that. There were kids playing in the yard next door and Abigail Jones was walking little Benny-baby in the stroller, you know. Lord, it was awful. So, anyway, El just called out to that little bastard, you know, real courteous and all, and asked him if he could turn the music down. Well, that horrible little punk got up and ran at El. Grabbed him by the shirtfront, right in front of everybody, and threatened to beat the, well, you know, poo poo out of him if he didn't shut up and, um, go away. There was a time, you know, when El wouldn't have stood for anything like that."

That time was certainly long past. Imagine rickety old Elwood in the grasp of that cold-eyed little killer.

There. She'd thought it herself. Cold-eyed little killer. Well, likely that was exactly what the little bastard really was. There was probably a perfectly rational explanation for each and every one of her misgivings.

"Hattie, why didn't you and Elwood tell me about this?" Samantha asked.

"Oh, honey, El didn't want to bother you with it. There's already so much going on about that kid and these days it's just so difficult to do anything. We know your hands are tied. El just thought that if you couldn't do anything about all the other stuff, what could you do about an old man getting threatened?"

As Samantha hung up, a call came in on her other line. It was Clarkson, who, true to his word, had phoned Matt Helprin and asked him if he had anything to add to

his account of his confrontation in the forest with Dolly Jenkins.

"Okay, well, did he?" Samantha asked, her voice clearly conveying distaste.

"Not much," Clarkson said, "it was pretty much what he said the first time."

"Okay, just thought I'd ask," Samantha said.

"Oh, there was one thing."

"Yes?"

"He said that after he caught up to Dolly, he smashed a tree with the pipe. A couple of times, just to show her what could happen. But he swears he didn't touch Dolly with it. Ever."

"Anything else?"

"No, not really. Said that was the last time he saw her and he went down to the lake to think things over and threw the pipe into the lake somewhere."

"He still doesn't remember where."

"No, he said he doesn't. Look, I don't find that really unbelievable. He was upset and probably on autopilot, you know? Probably really doesn't know where he threw the pipe."

"Pretty convenient lapse of memory," Samantha said.

"I can see it happening just that way," Clarkson said dogmatically. "The fact that my client hit a tree with a piece of pipe doesn't make him a murderer. You telling me *you* never hit a tree with anything?"

"No, it doesn't prove he's a murderer. But it shows a state of mind, I think. Is the arraignment tomorrow?"

"Bright and early."

"How are you going to plead him?" Samantha asked, already knowing the answer.

"Not guilty. Right down the line."

"Has the DA offered anything?"

"Yes, in fact they have. Murder two," Clarkson said.

"No deal?"

"No deal."

"Well, it's a good downwards drift. Maybe you'll get it down to manslaughter."

"Won't matter, Sammi, believe me. I've been over this more than once. He's a stubborn little bastard, I'll give him that. It's no deal, no matter what the state offers. Period."

"Jesus, Barry. Does Matt know if he refuses and goes on trial for murder one he could get the death penalty? Or at least life in prison?"

"Don't tell me my job," Clarkson said, "of course he knows. I've told him about a jillion times. But believe you me, it is *no* deal. Matt is absolutely adamant. He didn't do it and that's that. He won't plead to murder two, manslaughter, anything. I doubt he'd even go for a parking ticket."

Samantha hung up the phone. Obviously, Helprin had initially withheld the tree-smashing episode, thinking it would make him look bad. So it would, in the hands of a capable prosecuting attorney. Maybe now he'd had time to think about it and realize that the police might find the tree damage. Maybe his admission was just a pre-emptive strike.

Red Lantern Inn
Tipple, WA
Wednesday, July 22, 1998

On the job early, Samantha stopped in for a morning coffee at the Red Lantern. It wasn't something she relished, but she felt she should be available in case Helena Helprin wanted to talk.

Not much chance of that, it seemed. Helena, face cold, put a mug of coffee in front of Samantha and, without a word, retired to the far end of the counter where she busied herself wiping down an already-immaculate cappuccino machine.

John Clarney and Buck Hancock, dressed in rough logging clothes, left their stools and walked past Samantha to the door, muttering congratulations as they passed.

"You guys still working?" Samantha asked. "I thought all logging was shut down."

"It is," Hancock said, "we're on fire watch."

"Everything's set to blow, Chief," Clarney said, "one match, one lightning strike and it all goes up. Never seen it like this."

"You guys better make sure none of those kids are fooling around in the woods," Hancock said, "a damn pop bottle could do it. Just anything." Raising his voice, he added: "Good thing you got that little bastard Helprin out of circulation. He'd probably have started one just for the hell of it."

"Damn right," Clarney said, "I heard what Abel said at the meeting. I'd sure have seconded that one, Chief. Abel hit the nail right on the head."

Samantha, smiling woodenly and thanking the men, thought the speech had been laid on a bit thick. And, so far as she knew, Matt Helprin had never bothered Abel Larsen. Not with Odin around. Well, Abel had probably figured it was a good time to drive a spike into any plans Murchison might have had to reach a deal with Hashimoto as well as butter up his son's future in-law. It certainly seemed to have put a crimp in Murchison's campaign to get new blood in the Tipple P.D command structure.

As Hancock and Clarney pulled out of the parking lot, Samantha found herself alone with Helena. "I'm sorry for what those guys said. How's Matt doing?" she asked, voice unnaturally loud in the empty coffee bar.

"Just how do you think he's doing?" Helena hissed. "How the fuck do you *think* he's doing when he could get the death penalty for something he didn't even do? And he has to sit in that rotten jail because I can't afford to bail him out? How can I come up with a hundred thousand dollars? Nothing to you, but some of us have to work for a living. How would you like it if your precious Ellen was in jail and you couldn't get her out? *Fuck* you, Samantha Bentley."

She spun on her heels and crashed through the swinging doors to the kitchen, leaving Samantha alone. With a heavy sigh, she tossed two dollars on the counter and left the Red Lantern. The sun was just coming over mountains and it would be several hours before shadows retreated, but there was not a trace of cloud and heat was already almost unbearable. It was

going to be another searing, record-breaking afternoon, the forty-fifth without a drop of rain. There was a hot pine and pitch smell everywhere and the forest seemed to crackle in desert-dry air.

As she unlocked her cruiser door, she heard a crunch of footsteps and turned to face a tearful Helena Helprin.

"Sammi, I'm sorry," Helena said, clutching Samantha's sleeve, "I'm really sorry. I know you're doing what you have to do. But please, please don't stop investigating. Please don't. Don't be like all these other people and just think Matt did it. Please don't leave it this way. Don't let my Matt die for something he didn't do. Oh, God knows he's no angel, but he doesn't deserve to die. He *doesn't!*"

Helena broke into a fit of weeping and Samantha put her arms around the other woman. "I think he's too young to get the death penalty," she said, realizing how clumsy it sounded. "I'm going to keep looking into it. I promise."

"Even if it gets you in trouble with the council, Sammi? Will you still keep looking?"

"I'm going to keep looking until I'm satisfied the right person is in jail, Helena, whoever it turns out to be."

As she left the Red Lantern she could see Helena in her rear view, standing forlornly in the middle of the parking lot with rail-thin arms crossed on her chest. A stray breeze blew hair across her face and tears glistened in the rising sun.

Samantha arrived at the station just as Constable John Black was leaving. With a sour smile, he handed over a couple of interview reports.

"Nothing new, boss."

She already knew what the reports would say. Members of her little department were not particularly pleased with her, since they regarded the case closed. They'd gotten their guy and they'd gotten him in excellent time. They were the envy of police departments all over the state, and they liked it that way. They didn't like interviewing everyone around Tipple and writing endless reports saying the undersigned spoke to so and so who did not recall seeing Dolly Jenkins after July fourth but couldn't be sure. This was a total waste of time. Matt Helprin had killed Dolly Jenkins. If he hadn't killed her July fourth, he killed her a day or so after. Whatever.

But Samantha still needed a provable explanation for the discrepancy between what Dolly had been wearing when she'd been seen running from the mine area, pursued by Helprin, and what she was wearing when she was found. Clarkson, she knew, would use that to score big points for the defense. It broke the forensic chain and showed Helprin didn't kill Dolly during the only mountain encounter the state could come *close* to proving. All the DNA match proved now was that there had been sexual relations between Helprin and Dolly Jenkins. And the only proof that relations were not consensual was the testimony of a ten-year-old who couldn't say what had happened to the knife. If there had even been one. The cabin search certainly hadn't turned one up, but Helprin could have found it sometime after the incident with Dolly.

A saliva test on the cigarette butts could prove that Matt Helprin had smoked them. But it couldn't prove that he had smoked them on the day Dolly was

murdered, or that he had been sitting in the forest waiting for her to go back for her bike.

It was going to be a good deal tougher than the delighted citizens of Tipple thought to put Matt Helprin in a cell at Walla Walla.

On Samantha's desk were several messages, including one from a Seattle caterer. She had been helping Ellen plan her wedding, so this one was fairly urgent.

It was odd, though. All didn't seem quite right between the two young people. Not strained, not hostile, just not quite right. Like a pair of gears that were just not meshing at a time when they should be. Ellen seemed more and more withdrawn, while Odin seemed to be trying harder and harder to be the model everything to everybody.

Samantha sighed heavily. She really did like the young man. Always had. There had always been something about him she found immensely appealing. Well, maybe it was just premarital jitters and things would settle down after the ceremony.

"Oh, Sammi," Mabel said, leaning in Samantha's doorway, "I forgot, there was a letter this morning from that guy you had in to dig up The Mailman?" She tossed a letter on Samantha's desk and went back to her beloved radio.

The letter was short and to the point:

Chief Bentley:

Done with the forensic workup. Bones are consistent with an adult male, aged approximately 35 to 45. As we discussed, the cranium shows a hole in the right temporal plate and massive expulsion of bone on

the opposite side consistent with the entry and exit of a bullet. The phalange recovered with the automatic weapon, and the position in which it was recovered, makes it probable that this was a suicide. In addition to the skull, partial pelvic girdle, one femur and one ulna, we recovered the fourth and sixth cervical vertebrae, the second, fifth, sixth and seventh thoracic vertebrae, and the third lumbar.

All bones were X-Rayed. All were normal save for the sixth thoracic vertebra, which showed a hairline fracture not consistent with animal gnawing. No healing was evident, indicating this injury occurred shortly before death. It is possible that this injury was sustained during the fall from the rock, but not likely.

Thank you for the opportunity to become involved in this case. It was an invaluable learning experience for my students and an excellent opportunity for me to engage in some fieldwork again. If there's anything else I can do to help you, don't hesitate to call.

Yours,

Mark Stanley, BSc, MSc, PhD

Department of Anthropology

University of Washington

With a dismal, sinking sensation, Samantha reread the penultimate paragraph. Mel Manson had sustained a hairline fracture to his sixth thoracic vertebra shortly before death.

She walked to her bookshelf and pulled out *Gray's Anatomy*. She'd bought it years before, thinking it would be invaluable to a police officer, little knowing that she'd be mostly dealing with noise complaints, garbage complaints, family disturbances and traffic

violations. In fact, this was the first time she could remember actually referring to the ponderous work. She blew dust off before opening it. As she had suspected, the sixth thoracic vertebra was located right between the shoulder blades.

Her vision blurred. A tear fell on the color plate and she absently wiped it away.

**Police Headquarters
Tipple, WA
Thursday, July 23, 1998**

It was midmorning and Samantha was halfway through the daily no-sighting reports on Dolly when her phone rang.

“Chief Bentley,” she said, cradling the receiver on her shoulder while scanning the next report. At least there wouldn’t be too many more of these. There weren’t that many people left in Tipple who hadn’t been interviewed at least once.

“This is David Singh over at the university, Chief Bentley,” her caller said.

Samantha, who instantly remembered seeing a picture spread in the Seattle Times a few months back concerning one Dr David Singh and something to do with insects and genetic tampering, was surprised to detect no trace of an accent. Evidently David Singh was purely a local product.

“What can I do for you, Dr Singh?” she asked.

“Not Dr Singh, please, just Dave. Dr Singh was my father.”

“Oh. Okay, well, call me Sammi, then. Everybody else does. So, what can I do for you?”

“No, it’s what I can do for you, ah, Sammi. Congratulations, you’re a mother.”

“What?”

It was, Singh explained, the maggots Samantha had sent in for analysis. A male and two female adults had

emerged from pupal cases that very morning. Or overnight, to be more precise.

"The larvae you sent us were all in a stage of development we call third instar," Singh said. "We thought at the time they were probably a little devil called *Lucilia sericata*, but we couldn't be positive. Since it's kind of important with these guys, we waited till the adults emerged. Well, we were right. *Lucilia* it was. Sorry for the delay."

"It's okay," Samantha said. "Why is it so important? Length of time it takes to develop various species?"

"Well, yes, that certainly varies widely," Singh said. "Also it tells us something about the body. I understand this girl was found down a mineshaft?"

"Yes, she was. A hundred feet or so."

"Well, she wasn't killed there. She was killed somewhere else."

"We sort of thought that. What makes you sure?"

"*Lucilia* flies only in sunlight," Singh said. "If you take any notice of blowflies outdoors, you'll probably have noted that the ones you see in the shade are mostly an iridescent blue and the ones you see in sunny places are an iridescent green? Bluebottles and greenbottles?"

"Well, I never really looked at flies that closely," Samantha said, trying to recall what that course in forensic entomology had said about bluebottles and greenbottles, "just the ones in the house and I only look at them down the barrel of a Raid can."

"*Musca domestica*," Singh laughed, "important fly if a body has been kept indoors. If some of the larvae you sent over turned out to be *Musca* we'd have reason to believe the body was kept in a house or barn somewhere, but we're reasonably sure the remaining

pupae will come out *Lucilia* as well. The development times all suggest *Lucilia*.”

“So the body had to have been in sunlight?”

“For a short period of time, at least,” Singh said.

“Could it have been during transport to the mine?”

“Oh, absolutely. *Lucilia*, if present, would probably find the body within a few minutes of exposure. In fact, given that all the larvae are within a few hours of each other, that’s what we think happened. Somebody moved that poor girl from one location to another. Or killed her in direct sunlight. During the brief time of exposure, *Lucilia* oviposited.”

“Ovi...”

“Laid eggs.”

“And you don’t think she was kept in a house or barn?”

“Nowhere *Musca* could get at her, and that’s just about anywhere inside,” Singh said.

“Okay, can you give us a time?”

“Time of death?”

“Yes.”

“Not necessarily death. We can take what we think is a pretty good guess at when the flies found her, though. As I said, the larvae were in third instar when you recovered them. We made the last check of the day at ten pm July eleventh. Sometime between then and eight am the next day, these guys went prepupa. This gives us a ten-hour window of uncertainty, of course.”

Singh went on to explain that he and his fellow entomologists considered the cool cave would retard larval development and development times would

accelerate once larvae were taken to a warmer environment.

"We incubated your friends at normal lab temperatures, so the development was considerably faster than it would have been in the mine," Singh said, "but we had to go with conditions that would give us fairly reliable development times. Figuring the unfortunate young lady was placed in the shaft a short time after ovipositing so the initial stages took place at about fifty degrees Fahrenheit, we get a hundred and forty-two hours, plus or minus the ten-hour window. That would make the time of ovipositing anywhere from eleven pm July fifth to ten am July sixth."

"But you said this fly doesn't, ah, fly at night."

"Yes, that's true. *Lucilia* is a sun lover, so it would be after sunrise wherever she happened to be."

"In the mountains?"

"I would think. What's the area like around that mineshaft? How soon would it get direct sun?"

"Not till the afternoon," Samantha said.

"I think we can rule it out, then. The body picked up *Lucilia* eggs someplace else. If I were a betting man and had to put my money down, I'd put it down on ovipositing at nine am July sixth. Plus or minus a few hours depending on the sun. That's not necessarily a time of death, mind. If the body was kept away from flies for a while, it would throw things off. Take it as the last time the body was exposed to sunlight."

Singh hung up, promising to fax a report on his findings.

Samantha promptly called Helena Helprin to ask if she knew where Matt had been the morning of July sixth. Helena's voice was so emotionless that

Samantha felt a pang of sympathy for her. The poor woman had obviously been through a tremendous amount of stress, and it was only going to get worse. Unfortunately, Helena was unable to help her son. She had some foggy recollection that he might have been in the pool hall that day.

"Sammi, have you got anything?" Helena asked.

"No, not yet," Samantha said. "I'll keep you posted if anything turns up."

Her next call was to Clarkson and he wasn't much more helpful. Calling back after contacting his client, Clarkson could only say that Matt Helprin was possibly fishing in the Elaho River that day, which was what he did on most summer days. When he wasn't watching strip shows at the mine shack or threatening elderly gardeners or raping and killing nubile teenagers. Or doing a thousand other socially unacceptable things that were suddenly the talk of the town.

"You think she was killed on the sixth?" he asked.

"No. Well, we don't really know," Samantha admitted. "Fly eggs were probably laid on the sixth, according to the university people. But that doesn't necessarily mean that's when she was killed."

"Quite a bit after my client allegedly went after her with an iron pipe," Clarkson said.

"Not allegedly. He did it."

"Okay, he chased her. But he let her go. She went home and changed. Now you're saying she could have been alive for two days after that?"

"She could have been kept somewhere for a couple of days, then moved," Samantha said. "We just don't know that right now."

"I'd say your case is looking weaker and weaker, Sammi."

"Don't bet on it," Samantha said. "Has the DA gone down to manslaughter yet?"

"Not yet, but it won't matter."

"He's still sticking to his guns?"

"He says he didn't do it and he won't plead to anything connected to it."

"How about sex assault?"

"Is that what you're going to settle on?"

"It's still murder one so far as I'm concerned," Samantha said.

Hanging up the phone, she pulled over three neat stacks of Mailman Mel's letters that had been sitting on her desk and started leafing through them. Most could be delivered eventually, since intended recipients still lived in and around Tipple. A few had died, and Samantha had separated those from the main stack to be eventually returned to the senders, if *they* were still alive. She wished she could deliver the damn things immediately, but they were still potential evidence and the DA's office had refused to release them.

She sighed and looked through her Venetian blinds at the Red Hot Video across Gob Street. A small group of pre-teens horsed around on the sidewalk. Probably all members of the Future Matt Helprin Club. Maybe Matt would even be around to lead them. Clarkson was right. Her case was dangerously weak. And if it collapsed, her tenure as police chief could be extremely short.

The next item she considered was Mailman Mel's suicide note:

As God is my witness, I did not kill them poor little kids. I am innocent. Today they throwed rocks at me an Elmer Carver, he tryed to run me over in his car. Now they shot my tire. I can't no longer live this way and I'm going to be with Dad. I pray to God to forgive me. To anybody what finds me, please deliver these here letters. I love you Mom.

Lord, how did this man ever get through the civil service exam? Well, his mother said he had come back from Vietnam a changed man. Maybe the changes included regression to the verbal level of a slow ten-year-old. She had been in her mid-twenties and a young mother when Mailman Mel was in the valley. She could picture him so clearly: An eccentric, spindly, ragged figure pedaling along on his battered old bike, face shielded by a heavy, hooded jersey he wore summer and winter. She had never spoken to the strange man, nor had anyone else. Like others, she had bathed in fear and revulsion when little Becky Nordlingson was found raped and murdered. And eviscerated, so village gossip went. And later, when Thea Marsten disappeared and was found in the same condition, word had flashed around that Mailman Mel was the prime suspect.

Today they throwed rocks at me ...

It was that day. It had to be. That had to have been Mel Manson's last day on earth. And she had played a part in it.

"Back at the letters, Chief?" Steeples' voice intruded.

"Back at the letters," she sighed. "I guess you're going to tell me Dolly didn't cash anything, right?"

“Not that we can find out, and we’ve done all the banks and businesses in this area.” Steeples sat on Samantha’s old office couch, coffee mug in hand. Grady had been assigned to check everywhere anyone could think of in hopes of finding that Dolly had cashed a couple of money orders or checks before she’d been killed. But Helprin had been adamant he had found no money in any of the letters, and that would have to include the ones from the radio school to Samantha and Celia. Well, he was clearly wrong about that. Dolly had found money.

“Morning checks are all done,” Steeples added, referring to the Tipple PD’s new morning rounds that included checking all known kid spots for any evidence of village youth in the forest. The fire danger was now beyond critical. The forest service had ordered all campgrounds shut and all non-essential personnel out of the woods. A forest fire had broken out in the mountains behind Six Mile Chevron and, though promptly extinguished by a fire watch crew, left a strong smell of wood smoke in the village.

“No sign of activity from the natives?” Samantha asked.

“Mac said it looked like some fresh activity up by Big Foot. Couple of burger wrappers that weren’t there yesterday.”

“Damn. We’ve got to keep those kids out of the woods, Harlan.”

“I know, but what can we do? Our overtime bill is going to kill us and we’ve all got to sleep sometime.”

“I don’t know,” Samantha sighed. “I’ve asked Odin to pass the word. I was hoping his influence might help.”

"Yeah, maybe," Steeples said grudgingly, "this was the first sign of activity all week."

"I'll ask him again. The footballers make a pretty effective little police force. Peer pressure is a wonderful thing."

"Trouble is, it concentrates them in the town," Steeples said. "We've got a couple of noise complaints overnight and there was a fight outside the DQ. And I've noticed we have some little friends across the street."

"Lord."

"Yeah, good thing we got that little puke Helprin off the streets. He's normally at the bottom of most of this stuff. It'd be a lot worse if he was hanging around."

"I suppose."

"Sammi, what are you trying to do here, exactly?" Steeples asked suddenly.

"Meaning?"

"With Helprin. We've got the little bastard. He killed Dolly Jenkins and we got him for it."

"I don't know."

"He *did*, Sammi, how can you doubt it? The little puke is a murderer, pure and simple. He's a murderer, he's going to go down for a long time, and the whole damn town is better off for it."

"We're rid of him," Samantha said. "It's really convenient for everyone, isn't it?"

"You can't want him back here."

"Harlan, that isn't the point. No, I don't want him back. If I had my way, Matt Helprin would leave town and we'd never see him again. I detest him as much as anyone else. But if he didn't kill Dolly Jenkins, we can't put him away for it. And we have to find out who *did*."

"Do you really think he's innocent?"

"He might be, I don't know," Samantha said. "I don't have real proof that he's guilty. We have to prove it, Harlan, or he'll go free anyway. Period."

"There's enough damn proof for me," Steeples said, walking out, "and there's enough damn proof for everyone else in this town, too. There's going to be a lot of very unhappy people around here if that little slime winds up back on the streets. Maybe you should think about that, Sammi."

She looked again at Mailman Mel's anguished suicide note.

The town of Tipple had been absolutely convinced of *his* guilt, too. Villagers had closed ranks against the pitiful, damaged man, whose only crime was to have come back from Vietnam suffering post traumatic stress syndrome. Ostracism had turned to outright abuse, both verbal and physical.

Today they threw rocks at me ...

Samantha knew all about that day. That searing afternoon when she'd been walking along the railroad tracks that ran beside Snoqualmie Way, returning with a group of friends from a day at the lakeshore. Including Mike Helprin and Helena Sullivan, who had just started their ill-fated relationship. Ellen, barely walking, had been toddling along, holding her hand. Thank God her daughter had been far too young to remember what happened.

She could still see the look on Ray Carver's face as he shaded his eyes against the sun and peered down the highway.

“Would you look at *that*,” he’d said in a voice laden with contempt and hatred, “I can’t *believe* that asshole is still around this place.”

Coming towards them, stick-like figure shimmering in heat waves radiating from baking asphalt as he pedaled along the gravel shoulder, had been the strange, lonely figure with his blue post bag. Old gray jersey with the hood pulled up, head down so nothing could be seen of his face and the horrible scars they all knew were there.

On and on he came, looking neither right nor left, oblivious to jeers from Samantha’s friends as he rolled past, slow cadence unchanged, infuriating Carver and Helprin. She could still see Carver picking up an egg-sized stone. Ray Carver, once a starring high school baseball pitcher, winding up and letting the stone go. And missing The Mailman by a country mile.

She could hear the renewed jeers of her friends, this time directed at the hapless Carver, and see the second stone, lying near where Carver had found the first. Picking it up and feeling it nestled in her right hand, smooth and heavy. Hear her friends yelling, “Come on, Bentley” and “one in the zone, Sammi.”

And, “Come on, Bentley, forget it, you throw like a girl,” from Ray Carver.

But no daughter of Harry Miller threw like a girl. She had thrown like a man, with a full windup, and the rock struck The Mailman between his shoulders with a puff of dust and a hollow thump. She could still feel the now-hated flash of exultation as her victim arched in agony, then wobbled and crashed into the ditch, spindly legs in ridiculous short pants sticking straight up, for one hilarious moment, from dense grass and brush.

They had nearly died laughing as the scarecrow figure pulled himself together and, without so much as a word or look in their direction, climbed back on the ancient bicycle and resumed his slow progress, finally disappearing around a highway bend. There had been such a feeling of satisfaction that they had struck a blow for decency and justice against a perverted murderer. Samantha Bentley was a heroine. She had, in some small measure, redressed the scales by inflicting pain on one who had inflicted pain.

Word of the rock incident had spread like wildfire through the tiny community, touching off a wave of righteousness. The universal opinion had been that Samantha Bentley, though evidently a better pitcher than Ray Carver, needed a bit more practice.

Jesus, if she couldn't smash the bastard's skull at that range ...

Samantha, a young widow, had been visiting her parents that night because her father was a union man through and through and would not set foot in a house that had belonged to the Bentleys. She could remember his hosting that strange meeting of grim-faced men around the kitchen table, then putting on a jacket, kissing her, her mother and baby Ellen and telling them not to worry, that they were going to finish what she had started. Samantha had known at once what he meant, and, to her ongoing shame, had stood aside and let the men leave, feeling more relief than anything else.

But with the dawn a tired, disheveled Harry Miller had returned with word that Mailman Mel could not be found. They'd discovered his ratty old bicycle chained to a tree on Lookout Point Road, but there had been no

trace of the man. Somehow he had gotten wind that they were coming for him.

Days had turned to weeks. A new postal carrier began making Mailman Mel's rounds and the valley breathed a collective sigh of relief. But on Halloween night, six-year-old Becky Thurgood, trick or treating with a group of playmates, went missing. Nobody could remember where she had last been seen. At one house she was there, wearing her Casper the Friendly Ghost costume, and then it seemed she was just not with the group any more.

The next morning searchers with dogs, combing the forests around Hatwich Lake, found the little girl wrapped in her costume and covered with branches and leaves. Like the other two, she had been sexually assaulted, mutilated and eviscerated. But, for the first time, there was a clue. And to everyone's surprise, it didn't point to Mel Manson. It was a watch lying under the little girl's body. The back of the case was engraved with the name of the owner. Samantha could still feel her shock and horror when she learned the real killer was not the weird, reclusive Mailman Mel, but handsome Harvey Granger, the most popular boy in her graduating class.

The trial had been a nightmare, especially for the Tipple PD, since much of the evidence that sent Harvey Granger to Walla Walla for the rest of his life made it clear investigators should have known all along that Mel Manson was not their man.

That was when Samantha Bentley, a rich young widow with a daughter to raise and a terrible sin on her conscience, decided she needed to atone. And decided to dedicate her life to being a cop.

An errant breeze made her Venetian blinds clatter and she suddenly wondered why she was sitting here in gloom. Part of the benefits of being chief was a large, south-facing office that got plenty of sun. She pulled the blinds open, allowing a shaft of brilliant sunlight to illuminate her far wall and cast her poster of Mount Everest into sharp relief. Sometimes she wondered why she had framed it and mounted it where she could see it every day. The view showed the infamous South Face, where her husband had vanished in a crevasse on the ill-fated Bentley expedition. He had joked about having an expedition named after him, though it was in fact named after British mountaineer and expedition leader Nigel Bentley, who was no relation. As she stared at the South Face, another memory came bubbling to the surface. That last letter from Danny, arriving several days after word that he had been killed.

It had been a strange and very brief note. Yellow and brittle with age, it was folded into one of Danny's Everest books packed into an old steamer chest in the attic. It wasn't necessary to dig out the letter, for Samantha had long since committed it to memory. She could close her eyes and see the words, written with black ink in that forceful, heavy hand:

Sweetheart

We begin the assault on the south face tomorrow. I hope you'll wish me luck despite the anguish my last letter must have caused you. When I get home, I promise I'll deal with the situation. I hope you'll forgive me and we can move ahead with our lives together.

*I love you,
Danny*

There had been no homecoming. Just a telegram informing her that her husband had fallen into a crevasse two days after the postmark on his last letter. There followed, some weeks later, a lengthy letter from Nigel expressing condolences and telling her that Danny had been a wonderful man and a superb mountaineer and that he probably had not suffered. Well, he probably *hadn't*. Certainly not as much as his widow and young daughter, anyway.

Samantha, on reading her husband's final letter, had gone to the penultimate note and found nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing that could have caused the upset to which Danny seemed to be referring.

The only anomaly, now that she thought of it, was a two-week gap between the next-to-last and last letter. The date on the page bearing Mailman Mel's suicide note was Friday, July 1, 1975. What had turned out to be Danny's last letter was written July 4 and had reached her July 11. The one before that had reached her in late June. Since Danny had been writing once a week, it would be reasonable to think there might have been a letter for her in Mailman Mel's pouch. A letter she had never received. And, to judge by Danny's last words, a letter she would not have wanted to receive.

But there had been two letters that had interested Dolly, not one. The letters from the radio school, which must have contained checks or money orders.

But where would the letters have gone? If she believed Helprin, Dolly still had them when she left Helprin near the mine road, sometime around 8 pm on July 4. But the only trace of them was a tiny piece of one envelope flap found with Dolly's body in the mineshaft.

What had Dolly done with them and where had she cashed the rebates?

Hatwich Lake
Near Tipple, WA
Monday, July 27, 1998

It was well past noon when Samantha, who had taken to combining forest patrolling around Hatwich Lake with a search for the murder site or weapon, decided she was too hot and tired to continue. She would have rounded up the search and rescue team and her own department to make a sweep of the lake, but the fire hazard was far too great. The fewer people in the forest, the better.

She picked her way through dense brush along the lake, taking advantage of fallen trees or rock outcroppings to get high enough to see lake bottom through powerful field glasses. The water was crystal clear and she felt there was a good chance she'd be able to spot a disturbance in sediment where the pipe had come to rest, provided Helprin hadn't thrown it into one of the areas that shelved off precipitously to blue-black depths.

It had been a long morning's sweaty work, and she'd found nothing of value. Just a couple of very dark places in the lake within a few hundred yards of the damaged tree. If Helprin had thrown it in either of those places, which were probably more than two hundred feet deep, that would be it for recovering the pipe. She'd need hard hat divers and she could just see getting the village to agree to *that* expense on the off chance that Helprin threw a piece of rusty pipe in there.

Especially a piece of pipe that might actually corroborate his alibi.

Bill Blake had certainly nailed that one. Nobody except his mother was interested in seeing Matt Helprin vindicated. In the Old West he probably *would* have finished up hanging from an oak tree, and long before now.

It was odd how Odin had taken such a dislike to Blake. There certainly hadn't been anything in the dinner conversation that could have triggered that sort of antipathy. The only really tense moment had come towards the end of the discussion, when Abel had asked Blake point blank whether he thought Helprin, who was still refusing any plea bargain, was guilty.

"On the balance," Blake had said, "and based purely on what I've heard about the case and about him so far, I'd say he'd be receptive to plea bargaining if he were guilty. I think he's sticking to his plea of innocence because he *knows* he didn't do it and he expects that to be proven somehow. I'd bet you don't have your killer, Sammi."

Odin nodded thoughtfully, but Abel had become quite upset, declaring that only an imbecile could fail to see that Matt Helprin was a murderer. That, especially from Abel, had been shockingly rude and unexpected. Well, he probably didn't want to be questioned on the topic after his ringing endorsement at the council meeting. Probably didn't want to have to defend Samantha's job, either, if Helprin were freed.

Perhaps that had been the turning point. Feelings against Matt were at a fever pitch in Tipple. Blake wouldn't win himself any friends by championing the

teen's case. Which, come to think of it, had been his point.

Eventually, uniform plastered to skin, covered with pine needles, cobwebs and dirt, dragging a half ton of lake mud on her boots, Samantha made her way along the weed-infested shoreline to Abel Larsen's fishing shack. Her cruiser, parked hours before in shadows, was now baking in the full glare of summer sun. She'd have to open doors and wait awhile, but outside air wasn't much better than the oven inside. Her back was sore and her legs ached. Sweat prickled on her forehead and a trickle went down her back, making it itch.

"Hello?" she shouted, "anybody in? Abel? Odin?"

Fat chance of that. Hers was the only car parked by the cabin and evidently nobody had walked to the lake, either. The public beach at the east end had been closed for more than two weeks and the lake, so far as she could see in either direction, was deserted. Far away in the forest a raven cawed. There was a flap of wings from somewhere nearby and then the blast furnace day became still again. Not a breath of wind, not a fish, not a frog disturbed the flat green surface. The level was as low as she could ever remember it, and air was suffused with the smell of water and rank vegetation drying in searing heat that turned the sky almost white. Larsen's floating dock was, for all but the last three feet or so, resting on cracked mud and several crows picked at a fish skeleton. Distortion caused by heat waves turned the scene into a Salvador Dali painting and Samantha felt faint.

Lord, she could use a cold drink. Badly.

At one end of the verandah that ran along the entire front of the small shack stood a large fish locker. Samantha remembered Abel's building it years before. It was heavily insulated and Abel and his friends stored a good deal more than fish in it. Maybe someone had been up here during the last day or so and maybe there was ice in the box. Maybe there was a cold can of beer or two on the ice. Yes, there had to be. There'd be a big mound of shaved ice and cans of cold beer. She could just see moisture beading on tin as she plucked it from the cooler, just like a beer commercial. She could hear the snap and fizz as she pulled the tab. Taste it and feel it going down her parched throat. Every cell in her body would soak it up like a tiny sponge.

Feeling as though she were trudging a desert, but motivated by her unrealistic expectation of a cold drink, Samantha mounted the steps.

Since Abel was soon to become a member of her family, she couldn't see how he'd mind if she borrowed a beer. Maybe even two. Spirits lifting at the prospect and ignoring the fact that the lake was closed so nobody should have been up here to leave beer, Samantha, boots hotter than a griddle, heaved the heavy lid open.

Despite the unreality of her expectations, it was a crashing disappointment. The fiber-glassed locker was completely dry and empty. Then she remembered Abel's saying a few months before that he now had power in the cabin so he wasn't using the old fish locker any more. He had been offering to sell it to someone with a shack further up the lake, but Samantha couldn't remember who. At any rate, it was

going to be a blistering drive into town before she could get a beer.

As she turned away she nearly stepped on her own bootlace. It had worked loose and must have been trailing behind her when she'd walked to the water's edge a couple of times. At least to judge by the amount of mud caked on it. Enough to make it look like a skinny wasp nest. Just what she needed. And she had an audience, too, she discovered as she went to one knee to remedy the problem. Regarding her from the depths of a knothole a few inches from her foot were eight obsidian eyes belonging to one of the largest spiders Samantha had ever seen. A knothole didn't seem like the most promising place to put a web, but the spider obviously disagreed. There was enough silk for a pair of panties and a monogrammed handkerchief.

Come to think of it, a *lot* of spiders probably disagreed. She'd seen small holes in things like boxes packed with spider silk so thick it looked like cotton batten.

Just not in the fish locker.

Forgetting about her laces, Samantha re-opened the locker. Yep. Four good-sized drain holes but no spider webs. Abel must have cleaned it in preparation for the sale. And yet, that was months before. It looked as though someone had cleaned this quite recently.

Hitting the deck on her knees, she peered into the one- inch gap between the locker and the porch. Lord, what was *that*? Using her pen, she gently teased out a crinkly brown object.

Forgetting her weariness and the deadly heat, Samantha raced to her car to radio Steeples.

She was about to tell him to get the ident kit and come up to the Larsen fishing cabin when she remembered the police scanners of the valley.

"Do you know where I am?" she asked instead.

"Yeah, sure I do. You're ..."

"Don't say it," Samantha said, quickly. "It's a surprise for, ah, Ellen."

"Okay," Steeples came back after a second, "did you, ah, get a good price?"

"Sure did. You're going to be impressed. Need something to hide it in, though. Listen, you know that big black kit bag of mine?"

"I know it."

"Could you get it and come over here?"

"Okay, be there in a few minutes," Steeples said.

He made it in less than fifteen, which was pretty fast driving.

"What have we got?" Steeples asked, hauling out the ident kit.

"About half the valley right behind you if anyone saw you ripping up here at *that* speed," Samantha said. "You didn't have the lights on, did you?"

"No, no flashers. And I slowed down going past houses. I don't think I was followed."

"We can only hope," Samantha said, extracting the can of Luminol from the kit.

"Obviously you've found something," Steeples said. "Where?"

"Over here," Samantha answered, leading him to the old cooler. She pulled the lid open and sprayed the interior. "Oh, damn. Forgot the black light," she said.

"Got that right here," Steeples said, handing it over.

Under the ultraviolet light, the Luminol fluoresced in streaks and swirls.

"Somebody's done some housecleaning," Samantha said, bemused.

"Well, *yeah*," Steeples said, "blood in a *fish locker*? Nice going, Sherlock."

"Not that much," Samantha said. "Abel takes the heads and tails off and guts them before he brings them back. They're pretty much bled out by the time they get here."

"So you just thought it would be a lark to spray Luminol in Abel Larsen's fish locker?" Steeples asked. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Underneath those drain holes are some pine needles and dried bits of fern leaf," Samantha said. "Probably washed out when someone cleaned the locker. And remember the contact marks? I'd bet we've found where Dolly's body spent at least some of its time."

"Yeah, being squished in there could account for contact marks," Steeples agreed grudgingly. "Okay, maybe we have a winner. Helprin killed her around here and stored her for a while. But what about a warrant?"

"Damn. You're right. But I don't think Abel would object."

"Why did you look in this thing, anyway?"

"I wanted a beer, Steeples. You got a problem with that?"

"Not sufficient probable cause," Steeples said, laughing.

"No, I can just see floating that one. Your honor, I was thirsty and it was so hot, so I had cause to go into

Abel Larsen's fish locker to steal a beer and guess what I found?"

"So, what do we do?"

"We search," Samantha said.

"Search? We don't have a warrant."

"I doubt we need one for this place. Why would Abel object? These cabins are all on federal leases, so far as I remember, and I don't think the leases cover much more than the land they're sitting on, so we can search around them without any warrants. If we're really lucky, we can find something that will point to one of them. If not, well, we'll just have to try for warrants to search all these cottages. Maybe say we're looking for Helprin's piece of pipe."

"That would never fly."

"We'll have to think of something."

As it developed, they didn't have to exercise creativity. About twenty yards east of the shack, a small, seeping black water creek emptied into the lake, creating a boggy little delta overgrown with cattails. Further inland was a thick stand of ferns.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Steeples asked.

"Well, they *are* ferns," Samantha replied, walking into the forest, following the tiny stream on the uphill side. About fifty feet in she paused, gazing down at a tiny, natural amphitheater formed by the roots of two large fir trees and the slope of the forest floor. The depression, open to the boggy stream on one side, was choked with ferns. And in the middle was a patch of new growth.

"Look here, Harlan," Samantha said. "See those?"

"Yep," Steeples said, "lot of stuff is smaller and shinier. Lighter green, too. I'd say someone kicked the shit out of that patch a few weeks ago."

Samantha took a soil sample and a piece of fern leaf. She would turn them over to the university botanists, but she was already certain of the results. The soil sample would match and so would the fern leaf. She had found the spot where Dolly Jenkins spent her last moments.

"Okay, so, Dolly had her encounter with Helprin, then went home, changed into jeans and came back out, right?"

"Only way it could happen," Steeples said. "She changes, then comes out here for some reason, and Helprin jumps her. *Yeah*. He's had second thoughts about letting her go, so he's watching her home. She comes out, he gets between her and home. She runs here looking for someone to help her. Nobody home. She tries the door, maybe, then jumps off the verandah and runs this way. Probably heading for the Wilkinsons' cabin. She doesn't make it. End of story."

"Okay, two things," Samantha said. "Number one, why would she run in here? There'd be no way to escape. She'd be better off staying on the path. At least there, even if Helprin caught her, she'd have a chance of being seen by someone. She could scream, attract help."

"Hell, Sammi, she was panicked. Poor kid, she could have done just *anything*. She wouldn't have been thinking rationally with that homicidal little asshole after her."

"Possible. But number two. Say she jumped into those ferns. Helprin jumps in after her. This scene

doesn't look sufficiently disturbed for that. There ought to be a lot more damage to the plants and the ground. Think about it. We have a strong, young, terrified woman fighting for her life. And a strong young man determined to kill her. They'd rip up these ferns for yards around and the earth would be churned worse than an Iowa cornfield."

"Well, Dolly wasn't banged up, was she? She just had her head bashed in and she was strangled."

"That just proves my point, Harlan. Except for this one small area, the ground isn't disturbed and, other than the strangulation and head injury, Dolly wasn't badly hurt. It's like she came here with someone she trusted. Would she have trusted Matt Helprin, especially after the incident with the pipe? Young Mr Helprin doesn't have the winning ways that would make a woman trust him after *that*, believe me."

"Maybe he snuck up on her. Maybe she didn't see him coming at all."

"That would leave us trying to explain why she was here," Samantha said. "Why she came in here to sit in these ferns and wait for Helprin to show up and kill her."

"For *chrissakes*, Sammi, you're starting to sound like Clarkson. Like you want that little bastard back on the street."

"If he didn't do it?"

"He did it."

"But what if he didn't, Harlan? Then not only do we have the wrong person in jail, but we're letting the real killer walk around free."

"If that little puke gets out, we'll be walking around too, without jobs. Maybe that's okay for you, but I have to work for a living."

"What are you talking about?"

Steeple used his sleeve to wipe his forehead. A fly buzzed near his face and he brushed it away. Sighing, he put his hat back on and shoved hands in back pockets. "Nothing, I guess."

"Harlan, it's something. What is it?"

"I've heard the buzz," Steeples said at last, "I'm identified with you, Sammi. Remember at the mine, when I told that asshole Murchison that he'd better listen to you? He's been putting it out that the department needs change in the entire command structure, not just the chief. That means me. He's gunning for me, too. You go, I go. If Helprin doesn't go down, you're toast and so am I."

"Oh, Jesus, Harlan, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get you into anything."

"If we send that little bastard where he belongs, I'm not into anything," Steeples said.

"What about the truth?"

"The truth is that Helprin is a nasty little bastard who killed a sixteen-year-old girl right here by smashing her head in and strangling her, and he's going down for it. We got him. That's the truth."

"Maybe it is," Samantha said, "but we're going to keep open minds, Harlan. We're not going to convict Matt Helprin, not while I'm Chief. That's a job for the courts."

"Then why in hell don't we just let the courts do it?"

"Job over?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, job over. We've found where he did it. He sat there in the forest and waited for her. He chased her down here, then he killed her. He hid the body in Larsen's locker till it was safe to move it, then took it up to the mine. Washed out of the cooler to get rid of pine needles and fern fragments. We've got enough."

"I say we don't," Samantha said, "I say there are holes here that Clarkson could drive a truck through. I say there *are* things that make me wonder if we do have the right person. I'm sorry if this jeopardizes you, Harlan, but it jeopardizes me, too."

"You can afford it."

"No, I can't. It's not about money. It's about something else. I *need* to be a police officer, Harlan."

"Then why don't we just shut this down and we'll both *stay* police officers."

"Because I have another need. I need the truth. I need the right person behind bars, not just someone that everyone hates."

"We're doing Tipple a favor by taking that little puke off the streets."

"*Jesus!*" She suddenly grabbed Steeples by the shirtfront. The man's eyes widened in shock and surprise as Samantha, with startling strength, actually shook him. "Listen," she said, "I've *been* there, understand? I've been there. I am *not* going there again. I'm a police officer because I can do it better. I can do it *better*, Harlan!"

"Okay," Steeples said, grasping Samantha's wrists, "okay ..."

Samantha let go. "I'm sorry, Harlan," she said, "this doesn't have anything to do with you. I know how you feel. It has to do with me. I have to be sure we have the

right person in jail, that's all. I have to be very, very sure."

"For my money ..."

"I know what your money says. You're happy with what we've got. If we had answers to a few questions, I'd be happy with it, too. But we're not the court. We can just gather evidence. Anyhow, I think this gives us probable cause to search the shack. Why don't you go over the area and see if you can find any blood splatters on the leaves?"

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to see Svenson and get a warrant."

"Why not just ask Abel?"

"Harlan, I know Abel would let us search the cabin, but our case against Matt is really on shaky ground," Samantha said. "And maybe it should be. I want to do everything, and I mean *everything*, by the book."

'Svenson' was Judge Edgar Svenson, who would likely be presiding at the trial of Matt Helprin. He was a tough drill from the old factory, known to favor the state in questionable warrant cases. By 3:30 pm, as she had anticipated, Samantha was back at the little clearing with a search warrant in her pocket. She was greeted by a grinning Steeples, who held up one thumb. He had found blood splatters.

"What have you got, Harlan?" she asked, sliding down to the fern patch.

"Some pretty good ones. Unfortunately they're on leaves, so we don't really have a good pattern, but I think it looks like the results of swinging a bloody pipe around. The splatters kind of fan out in an arc from the new growth. And I've also got a couple of pretty good footprints down here." Steeples gently pulled fronds

aside to show the clean, sharp impressions of boot soles. "Dolly was wearing sneakers and these sure as hell ain't sneakers."

"Lord, no," Samantha agreed, "I think we can get a pretty good cast, no?"

"Pretty good."

"How heavy would you say the guy was who made these?"

"Got to wondering that myself," Steeples said, "so I went over the other side of these roots and made my own print. These are about an inch deep, and mine were about the same. I weigh a hundred and ninety."

"Helprin doesn't weigh one ninety," Samantha said.

"Helprin standing still weighs about one seventy or so. Helprin jumping can weigh a hell of a lot more," Steeples countered. "I think the little bastard made these when he jumped down from that." He pointed to the exposed roots of a nearby cedar.

"Yeah, I guess that looks about right," Samantha said. "Harlan, we'll have to get Abel up here to open the cabin for us. Did you remember your cell phone this morning?"

"Yeah, for once."

"Get on it and invite him, okay? We don't want everybody in Tipple knowing we think Dolly Jenkins was killed near his cabin."

It took the pair about a half hour to get the site prepared and plaster ready for mixing. Steeples was about to add water from an old milk carton when a crunching of tires announced Abel's arrival.

"Company," Steeples said.

"You go ahead here and I'll go have a look at the cabin," Samantha said, heading down to the trail. She

reached the cabin as Abel climbed from his Grand Cherokee.

"My God, Sammi," he said, face ashen as he lit a hand-rolled cigarette, "what in hell is going on?" He doubled over in a fit of coughing that brought streaming tears. Samantha patted his back until the fit eased.

"Abel, we think Dolly Jenkins was murdered over there in some ferns by that little swamp," Samantha said.

"My God ... " Abel began coughing again, but managed to stifle it. Wheezing, he took a shaky drag on his cigarette. "I know ... Harlan told me ... so?"

"So we want to search your cabin, Abel," Samantha said, "I'm sorry, but the proximity of the murder scene ... "

"I understand," Abel said.

"We have a warrant."

"You didn't need to do that, Sammi, I'd have let you in."

"I know, Abel. It's just procedure, that's all," Samantha said, feeling miserable at Abel's expression. He probably knew it wasn't really procedure at all. She could have asked his permission, then, if he refused, left Steeples to watch the place while she got a warrant. The fact was, she had just wanted the warrant.

"Is there a problem with Helprin?" he asked.

"I can't discuss the case, you know that," Samantha said, "but it might help us to have a look at the cabin."

"I want this case to succeed, Sammi," Abel said, fishing in his pocket for the key, "people want that little monster off the streets and locked up where he belongs. If he walks, we have a very big problem, you and I."

"I know," Samantha said, "that was my reason for getting the warrant. Everything by the book. *Everything.*"

Despite the shack's weathered exterior, the lock and hinges were well oiled and the door opened soundlessly. It was typical of anything Abel Larsen owned. When he had been around, things *worked*. The interior of the shack was sparsely furnished, but neat as a pin. There was a selection of old *Field and Stream* magazines in a hand-built rack near an old, overstuffed chair. A large sofa under front windows was covered with a neatly woven throw that Samantha remembered Celia Larsen making shortly before her accident. There were four chairs around an old trestle table and pinups from the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue adorned the walls. But even the pinups looked like someone had gone to work with a carpenter's square and plumb line. In the middle of the cabin an old iron potbellied stove sat on gleaming tiles with a rack of brushes and a scoop nestled beside it. It was so clean it dazzled in a shaft of sun through crystal clear windows.

The inside of the stove had been neatly swept, but right in the center was a small pile of white ash. Just about enough to account for two letters.

"Abel, what's this?" Samantha asked.

"What?"

"These ashes. They aren't from a regular fire."

"My God, I don't know," Abel said. "Might have happened when we had that break-in, but ..."

"What break-in?"

Abel doubled up in another fit of coughing, but managed to point to one of the glass panes in the front door. The glass was freshly puttied.

"Couple of weeks back," Abel said when the attack subsided. "They didn't get much of anything."

"I don't remember any break-in."

"We didn't report it, honey," Abel said. "They didn't do much damage and I didn't want to add to your troubles. We decided to just let it lie."

Samantha went back to her inspection. In the cupboards, as she had suspected, everything was immaculate and neatly stacked. Cups hung by handles, a silverware drawer contained knives, forks and spoons, all sparkling clean. Hinges all worked without squeaking and latches clicked into place with a satisfying snick.

"Good God, it's so awful she was killed so close to here," Abel said, slumping on the couch and lighting another cigarette from the stub of the first. "What an awful tragedy. If only I'd been here. Or Odin. Somebody." He dropped the butt and stamped it out with his boot heel before picking up the flattened tube, carefully tearing it open and dropping loose tobacco back into his pouch. Then he crumpled the paper into a tiny ball and dropped it. It bounced and rolled almost to the little smudge of soot and tobacco shavings.

Abel smoked steadily, oblivious to the paper and mark on the floor.

"Odin really keeps this place immaculate, doesn't he?" Samantha said, hazarding a guess.

"Yep, you know him. Always was a neat little bugger, right back to when he was a kid. His room looked like ... oh ..." Abel chuckled. "You got a point there, Sammi. I better not mess up Odin's handiwork."

His large, callused hand caught ashes and dumped them into the top of his boot. After a moment's thought,

he picked up the paper and dropped that into his boot as well. "It'll keep there till I can dump it," he said.

"Abel, was Matt Helprin ever here?" Samantha asked.

"Yes, he was, as a matter of fact. He likes fishing, you see, and sometimes I took him out with me. Oh, I wasn't fond of the boy, you understand, but I accommodated him. I thought a positive role model might do him some good. I was certainly wrong about that, wasn't I?"

It was odd that in all the time Samantha had known Abel, which was virtually all her life, he had never mentioned running into Helprin here at the lake. Much less taking the youth fishing. Still, it was not beyond believability. Most Tipple kids wandered around lake trails from time to time and Abel had always been known as a soft touch. An association with Matt Helprin wasn't something you'd brag about, anyway.

She asked Abel if he could remember being at the shack between July fourth and sixth.

"I might have been," Abel responded after another bout of coughing, "came up here one day around there somewhere with Henry Walker. It was a day or so after the fourth, I recall. I think Henry came up a bit later, though, that day."

"Did you notice anything unusual?"

"Just that some little bugger had broken in. Spent most of the morning fixing it up."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if Larsen had noticed anything about the fish locker in particular, but Abel's loose mouth made Samantha hold back. Better not to have it all over the valley that the body of Dolly Jenkins had spent some time in Larsen's fish locker.

"No, should I have? Sammi, I just don't understand this warrant thing."

"This is a murder investigation," Samantha said, "we can't leave anything to chance. I can't give Barry Clarkson any more to shoot at than he already has. Trust me on that."

"I just don't understand it, Sammi," Abel said, lighting another cigarette, "you've got the guy who did it. You got him and you got him in record time. I don't see why you're still pursuing this."

"Just tying up loose ends, I guess," Samantha said, "the more evidence we gather, the better."

"Don't you think you have enough?"

"No. I think that, right now, Matt Helprin could beat the charge."

"I see," Abel said, getting to his feet and shambling over to the door. "Well, I'll leave you to it. I just hope, honey, for your sake, that this all works out. The sooner that little bastard is in Walla Walla, the better."

"Abel," Samantha asked, "remember that night you and Dad went after The Mailman? With those other guys?"

Larsen paused in the doorway, taking a deep drag. He exhaled in a stream that seemed to go on forever. "I remember," he said at last.

"What if you'd caught him that night, Abel? What if you and my father and all those other good citizens had lynched an innocent man? Could you have lived with yourself all these years?"

"Lock up when you leave, honey," Abel said. She heard him clumping across the porch. A moment later his Jeep started and she heard the crunch of tires going back up the lane. Was she the only person in

Tipple who cared about a long dead, eccentric mailman? Or cared whether Matt Helprin was really guilty?

Leaving Steeples to finish the cast of the footprints and get them on their way to the FBI crime lab, Samantha drove back into town to check with Henry Walker. She found the grizzled old man right where she knew he'd be, tending his rose bushes. Walker's fanaticism about his roses was legendary in the valley. Watered with a passion, carefully dosed with fertilizers and never touched with any insecticide more potent than hot soapy water, they consumed almost all of Walker's waking moments. Except on the rare occasions he could be persuaded to go fishing with Abel Larsen or sit in Larsen's hardware store.

Age might have bent Henry Walker's back and slowed his gait to a shuffle, but it hadn't dimmed his memory.

"Yep," he said, pausing in his never-ending pursuit of insect life on his prized flowers and wiping his streaming brow, "I remember that morning. It was the sixth. I was talking to Abel sometime around nine. Went over to Gandy's to pick up an acidifier, and ran into him over there. So it had to be about nine."

"How do you know for sure it was the sixth?" Samantha asked.

"I just told you. I bought five pounds of acidifier. If you don't believe me, I'll go get the receipt for you."

"No, I guess I believe you," Samantha said. She did, in fact, believe the old man. It was a point of great hilarity around the village that Henry couldn't remember his own birthday, but remembered everything he had

ever bought for his treasured roses, and each and every date on which a purchase had been made.

"Do you know if Abel went straight up to the lake?"

"Nope, but I don't think he did. I told him I'd be up a bit later, and I don't figure he wanted to just sit out there waiting on me."

"When did you go up?" Samantha asked.

"Got there maybe eleven or so," Walker said.

"Was Abel there?"

"Yep. Fixing a window. Some little bastards broke in there."

If Walker's times were accurate, Helprin would have had time to move the body from the cooler before Abel got there that morning. He could have killed her the night before and put her in the cooler. At first light he could have gotten the body out and taken it to the mineshaft. But that would present a logistical nightmare. Helprin couldn't drive and certainly didn't have access to a four-wheel drive even if he could. What would he do, use a fireman's lift to carry a putrescent body more than a mile up a steep, overgrown mining road? Then boogie back down, wash out the cooler and be gone by the time Abel arrived? Wait till Abel left for the day and *then* clean out the cooler?

She asked Walker if he had seen Matt Helprin in the area around that time.

"Yes," Walker said without hesitation, "think I did."

"When and where?" Samantha asked.

"Might have been on the trail over towards the Wilkinson's. Me'n'Abel were way out on the lake and I seen somebody on that trail. It was pretty damn far away, but I think it might have been that Helprin kid.

He's a damn bad one. You did good, Chief, to get that homicidal little runt behind bars where he damn belongs."

Red Lantern Restaurant
Tipple, WA
Saturday, August 1, 1998

“So how are negotiations going?” Samantha asked, pushing away her dinner plate.

“Pretty good. Almost done, in fact. I could close it just about any time,” Blake said, toying with his coffee cup.

The pair had to raise their voices to be heard, since the Tipple Tornadoes men’s softball team had picked that night to have a fund-raising dinner and celebrate winning the league pennant. The Red Lantern was, to put it mildly, jumping.

Sitting in one of the booths off to the side of the dining room, Samantha had been uncomfortably conscious all evening of surreptitious dark looks from the floor where tables had been combined in a long trestle to accommodate happy Tornadoes. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to realize why.

“I seem to be bad for your popularity, Sammi,” Blake said. “Other than you, the only smiles I’ve gotten so far this evening have been from Mrs Helprin and Ellen.”

Ellen, called in for a rare overtime night shift, was busy serving the Tornadoes while Helena looked after more sedate diners in wall booths. As Blake so astutely observed, they were the only people who had smiled at him and Samantha.

“Do me good to get a little disapproval,” she said, smiling. “I was getting a swelled head.”

"I have a feeling you're going to get a little more as time goes along."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been watching you when people have been congratulating you, and listening to your responses, and I've reached the conclusion that you don't think Matt Helprin is guilty. I think you agree with what I said at dinner that night."

"Well, I won't go into details, obviously, but I think there are some loose ends around. Things that just don't add up."

"I had that feeling. Anything you'd feel comfortable discussing?"

Samantha took a sip of her claret. Ordinarily she wouldn't discuss an active case, but there was something reassuring about Blake. Something that made her feel not only that she could open up to him, but something that made her *want* to open up.

"Doctor-patient privilege, of course," Blake said, smiling.

"Oh, Lord," Samantha sighed, "sometimes I think I want Matthew to be guilty as much as anyone else. He's such an awful kid. He's been a wretched little disaster all his life."

"But you can't let it go at that, can you?" Blake asked.

"No, I can't. Taking that kid off the streets would be a tremendous service to the community, but I can't see him go away for something he didn't do. I want him to be guilty."

"What's made you think he isn't?"

Samantha told Blake about the body in the cooler, and the difficulty Helprin would have had getting it from

there to the mineshaft. Not to mention the unlikelihood he'd take it to the mine in order to cast suspicion on himself.

"That does seem pretty unlikely, doesn't it?" Blake asked.

"That's not all," Samantha said glumly. "This morning I got the FBI report on the cigarettes I found."

"It was negative, wasn't it?"

"God, am I that transparent? You're right. I don't know who sat up there smoking cigarettes or when, but it wasn't Matt Helprin and it may have nothing to do with Dolly Jenkins. I'm back to square one."

She was about to explain the skirt-jeans issue when she became aware of a looming presence.

"Eve...ning ... Sheef," said a large, florid-faced man who had lurched over from the Tornadoes to lean precariously on the back of the booth. He had the careful demeanor of the very drunk.

"Evening, Buck," Samantha said warily, adding, "Buck, this is Dr William Blake. Bill, this is Buck Hancock. He plays second base for us."

"I know who ... whoafuck y'are," Hancock said, ignoring Blake's outstretched hand. "I hope y'aren't ... y'aren't listenin' ... t'this fuckin' bullshit, Sheef ..."

"Buck," Samantha warned, "this has gone far enough."

"Lissen," Hancock said, "ev'buddy aroun' here knows that li'l fuckin' cocksucker killed Dolly. Ev'buddy. An' I gotta tell ya, if it was my Becky that li'l fuckin' freak killed, he'd be hangin' from a fuckin' tree right now. An' I wouldn' give a flyin' fuck who trieda stop me ..."

"Okay," Samantha said, "that's it, Buck. I'm asking you to leave. Now."

"An' as fer *this* fuckin' freak," Hancock said, turning to Blake, "why don' you step outside with me an' gimme a fuckin' con... co'sultation?"

"Jesus," Samantha muttered.

Here she was, totally unarmed, wearing an evening dress and facing a large, powerful, mean drunk with a yen for a fight. If he attacked, there was no way she could handle him. On top of that, Buck Hancock was a well-liked, well-respected man and a prince when sober. Not to mention a lodge buddy of Murchison's. Jailing him would not go over well with the populace, especially if the trouble had started over Matt Helprin. Out of the corner of her eye, Samantha could see Helena Helprin wringing her hands. She didn't need more grief over her son.

"I'm not a fighter, Mr Hancock," Blake said casually.

Samantha noted that for all his gentility, Blake didn't appear particularly nervous, and was closely watching Hancock. He had surreptitiously drawn his feet under him. Perhaps the big second baseman had taken on more than he'd bargained for.

"Yer a fuckin' pussy," Hancock said, "comin' in here and spreadin' a lot of bullshit. You fuckin' asshole. That li'l fuckhead done it and ev'buddy aroun' here knows that. Excep' ... you, you fuckin' dink."

It had always been a rule in the Bentley home that what was said at the dinner table stayed there. Samantha was certain Ellen wouldn't pass around dinner table gossip, and neither would Hattie. That left only the Larsens. Evidently either Abel or Odin, or both, had been a bit loose-mouthed. Samantha felt betrayed.

"Look, Buck," she said, taking the napkin off her lap and placing it on the table, grimly aware that the little bit

of guerrilla theater had the attention and approval of the entire Tornadoes table, "I've had about enough of this."

Before she could slide out of the booth, however, a large, powerful hand dropped on Buck's shoulder.

"Buckie, good to see you," Odin Larsen said smoothly, flashing a broad smile, "hear you've been having a real good season."

"Oh, ah, hi Odin," Hancock said, peering at Larsen, "uh, yeah, good t'see ya too."

"Listen, why don't you go over there and get a couple of drinks?" Larsen suggested, gently but firmly turning Hancock towards the main table, "I'll come over and we can have a drink. Talk a little baseball. What do you say?"

"Uh, yeah ... I guess ... sure, Odin, what the fuck? I'm all done talkin' t'this pussy."

"Hi Mom, good evening Dr Blake," Odin said as Hancock, a conquering hero, lurched back to the revelry, "nice night for a dinner. Without Buck, of course."

"Of course," said Blake, rising to shake Odin's hand. He seemed surprised at the pressure of Odin's grip. "Would you care to join us?" he asked, regaining his seat, "I feel the least I can do is buy you a drink after you so adroitly defused a very highly charged situation."

"Is *that* what I did," Odin said with a quizzical smile. "Well, you'll have to excuse Buckie, but he's just saying what a lot of folks are thinking."

"Come on, Odin, slide in here with us," Samantha said. "Buck was just drunk. Let's forget about it."

"I'm, ah, not staying, Mom," Larsen said, "I just wanted to stop by and let Ellen know where I was going

to be. Nice meeting you again, Dr Blake.” With a wave to Ellen, Odin was off across the room towards her, shaking hands and accepting pats on the back as he went, still everybody’s all-American football hero. In a few moments he had disappeared around the partition at the front door. It was decidedly odd. When picking up Ellen, Odin always sat at the bar and had a coffee, hobnobbing with the locals. Why would he not have joined them?

“I don’t think your young man likes me,” Blake said, rubbing his hand.

“Bill, I’m really sorry about this whole thing. Coming here was probably not a very good idea right now.”

“Well, I chose to state my opinion, so I have to bear the consequences, I suppose,” Blake said, “even if it means being ostracized before I settle in.”

“Are you still going to settle in?” Samantha asked.

“I’m not sure. These things tend to blow over in time, but you never know. I’ve got my eye on a couple of other properties. Other places. Nothing I like as much as here, but it might be healthier.”

“I think you should go ahead,” Samantha said with an unaccountable regret at the idea that Blake might go elsewhere, “you’re right, these things do blow over. You don’t want to take people like Buck too seriously.”

“I don’t take Buck seriously at all,” Blake said. “Believe me, people like him would be the least of my worries.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing much. Just that blowhards are seldom the sort you want to watch out for. At any rate, he wouldn’t be a problem. I’d just borrow young Odin to defuse him. It was a masterful job.”

"What do you think of him, Bill? Odin?"

"He seems to be well-adjusted to his injury and status in life."

"You knew about it?"

"My God," Blake said, "you'd have to have been blind and deaf not to know about it. All the hysteria in Seattle when he was playing for the Huskies. Must have been awful for him to find all the scouts gone and the hangers-on hanging on to someone else. It's a very hard adjustment to make. Pro players find it very difficult. After the cheers and backslapping are gone and nobody cares any more. When there's a whole new generation getting the attention. Could be part of the reason Odin has stayed in Tipple. Where he's remembered. Where he's still somebody. I've seen other athletes do that, you know."

Blake launched into a long account of the troubles of an unnamed patient who had hung up his glove after ten years in the major leagues, lapsed into depression and alcoholism, and eventually moved back to his hometown where his pictures still hung in the barbershop and local bar. Blake was an entertaining raconteur, and it was only as Samantha was home and hanging up her coat that she realized he had not said whether he liked Odin.

Headquarters, Tipple PD
Monday, August 3, 1998

Samantha was still thinking about Odin and Bill Blake two days later as she settled into her office chair. Perhaps the two had just initially rubbed each other the wrong way. Perhaps they'd settle their differences in time. Well, Blake was dropping by the house that evening, perhaps she could go into it then.

Sitting on her desk blotter was a fax that must have arrived while she was at lunch, from the FBI crime lab. The one-paragraph results were circled in red ink from a felt pen and a pair of large exclamation marks adorned the left margin. It was easy to see why Steeples had found this report interesting. It identified two items of evidence, 98-7-102-1 and 98-7-102-2, as plaster casts of boot prints made by a Doc Martens ZBEN commando sole. The report immediately brought to her mind Steeples' exchange in the mine shack about Helprin's new Doc Martens boots.

When Helprin had been arrested he had not been wearing the Doc Martens. A search of the Helprin home had not turned them up, either. There had been several suspiciously new pairs of shoes, but no Doc Martens.

Calling Clarkson at his office, she asked him to contact Helprin and find the whereabouts of the youth's Doc Martens.

"Before I do anything like that," Clarkson said, "I'd want to know why."

"Shortly after Dolly Jenkins went missing, we saw Matt with a new pair of Doc Martens," Samantha said. "We found prints from a pair of Doc Martens at the murder scene and now we can't find Matt's pair. We want to know where they are."

"How do you know you have the murder scene?"

"We have blood splatters from fern leaves that we think will match Dolly's DNA, and I'd bet you a dollar to a donut that the ferns will be the same species we recovered from the head wound."

And from under the cooler, but she didn't mention that.

"Okay," Clarkson said after a thoughtful pause. "Without prejudicing my case in any way, I'll ask him. But I can't say whether I'll be relaying the answer."

"It's a question that'll be asked in court, Barry," Samantha said, "you might as well get the answer now. If we find the boots and there's no mud from that site in the treads, or the sole doesn't match our cast, well, it could help your client. But I have to know right away. I have to be able to get those boots before anyone else could get them."

"You don't have to explain chains of evidence to me, Sammi," Clarkson said, "and I don't tamper with evidence, anyway. I'll call my client and see if I can give you an answer."

The answer wasn't helpful to Matt Helprin.

"My client sold the boots," Clarkson said when he called back, "he said they didn't really fit right, so he sold them."

"Rather than taking them back to the store where he bought them," Samantha said.

"Rather than."

"Who was the lucky buyer?"

"He said he didn't know the guy. It was a guy he met at the pool hall. Said he'd never seen the guy again."

"You believe that?" Samantha asked.

"Surprisingly, I do," Clarkson said. "Frankly, and off the record, I don't think my client came by the boots honestly. I think he got a pair that didn't fit very well, and I think he sold them."

"The forensics are becoming a bit compelling here."

"Come on, Sammi, we're stipulating Matt had sex with Dolly the day she died. But the sex act was consensual and we can certainly prove the striptease was not an isolated event. The dirt could have come from the forest when Matt tripped her up. It could have come from the fern patch later on sometime. You don't have Matt tied to the fern patch at the time Dolly Jenkins was killed."

"I think he's linked to the fern patch. The Doc Martens, remember?"

"Come on, Sammi, half the valley owns Doc Martens."

"Yes, but these were new ones, Barry. Prints were razor sharp."

"So nobody has bought a new pair of Doc Martens for the past six months? Come on, Sammi, you don't have as much as you think. You know what? I think you're spooked about your job. You have to hang my client to keep your job and you're determined to do it."

"Have a nice day, Barry," Samantha said, hanging up.

Could there be a grain of truth in what Clarkson said? Was she trying to find the truth or just stop her case against Helprin from falling apart?

She certainly had proof of sexual activity, but, as Clarkson had pointed out, the defense would claim consent and the lack of sexual injuries other than a few pine splinters in the girl's knees would make rape difficult to prove. Calvin Jenkins had adamantly refused to corroborate Marvin Hampton's claim that Helprin had held a knife to Dolly's throat during the sexual encounter and, without corroboration, the word of a ten-year-old braggart and troublemaker like Marvin Hampton wouldn't fly in court.

Both Jenkins and Hampton had seen Helprin go after Dolly with a piece of rusty pipe, but both were juveniles and Helprin had at least a partial alibi, backed up by Dolly's change of clothes. He *had* let her go, and the state would have to prove that he had later gone after her again.

She was going to have to tell the DA's office about the change of clothes, and that might even lead to the charge being dropped. And that would revive Murchison's campaign to replace her and Harlan Steeples with 'some people who know what they're doing'.

Clarkson had been right about the Doc Martens. Half the valley owned them. A good prosecutor might be able to plant a few seeds in a jury's mind considering that Helprin had 'sold' them to a 'guy' in a pool hall. Circumstantial evidence could be effective, but it would be far better to have solid forensics.

The only line that made sense to Samantha was that Helprin, fearing a rape charge, went after Dolly but couldn't do the job. Later, after letting her go, he changed his mind, stalked her and got between her and home. He chased her down to the Larsen shack. She

tried to hide in the fern patch and Helprin, sneaking up on her, struck her from behind with the piece of pipe and strangled her. He put the body in the fish locker and got rid of the pipe. Maybe in the lake, maybe somewhere else. Still later, realizing he had left boot prints at the scene, he got rid of the Doc Martens. They were probably under a log somewhere in the mountains.

But there the case stopped making a lot of sense. Helprin put the body in the fish locker, perhaps in an attempt to implicate the Larsens, then, a couple of days later, took a tremendous risk in going back to retrieve the body and take it to the mineshaft where, especially coupled with his gang sign painted on the mine wall, it could only cast suspicion on *him*.

Why would he do that? Because he was one of the many valley kids who worshiped Odin Larsen? Wouldn't want to cause difficulties for his hero? Somehow, Matt Helprin didn't come across as a hero-worshiper. He seemed to be more likely to be envious of Odin Larsen. Maybe it was the classic need to be caught. A kind of cry for help. But now that he had been caught, he was claiming innocence and refusing to bargain down the charge. Even facing death, Matt Helprin was sticking to his guns. Samantha had grudging admiration for the youth's courage, if nothing else.

And then there was the matter of actually moving the body. She could see Clarkson making some points in court on that one. How could Helprin have carried a probably already-putrescent body from the locker to the mineshaft? Unless he had help? There was nothing at all to indicate a second person's presence. Certainly

not Calvin Jenkins. He'd tried to stop Helprin in the cabin. A jury probably wouldn't believe that a youth who took on an older, larger and stronger teenager in an attempt to defend his sister would subsequently help move her body from a fish locker to the mineshaft in order to cast suspicion on *himself*.

The body really had to have been transported from the cooler to the mineshaft in a four-wheel drive. There were lots of four-wheel drives in the valley, but Helprin certainly wouldn't have access. Unless he stole one.

And why wouldn't he just leave the girl's body in the fern patch? It would be found just as quickly in the mineshaft as the fern patch. Why put it in the fish locker? And why break in to the Larsens' cabin just to burn a pair of letters, if that's what he did? Why not just burn them in the woods somewhere?

And what had Dolly Jenkins been doing in the fern patch? She'd never have gone there with Matt Helprin.

Perhaps Dolly had been waiting to meet someone. And Helprin had stumbled on her and taken advantage of the situation. Yeah, right. Helprin had spotted Dolly Jenkins sitting in a patch of tall ferns more than fifty feet off the trail and behind a tree. Or maybe he'd been going into the forest to pee or something and there she was.

It was all just so totally improbable.

Maybe Samantha had been so fixated on Matt Helprin that she had overlooked the obvious. Suppose Dolly had gone to the fern patch to meet someone she trusted and suppose the mysterious someone then murdered her, stored her body in the locker and came back a day or so later to move it to the mineshaft?

That would certainly explain the lack of smashed vegetation and trampled ground at the murder scene.

But would it be worth that much exposure to cast suspicion on Matt Helprin and Calvin Jenkins? And why those two in particular? Because they were such easy targets?

And if not Helprin, then who?

It really had to be someone Dolly had trusted. She'd been a badly abused child, and abused children don't tend to trust many people. Samantha couldn't see Helprin or anyone in his crowd managing to get behind Dolly and take her unawares and it was certainly evident the girl had not been expecting the blow that had crushed the back of her skull.

Samantha sighed heavily. She had the tantalizing feeling that the answer to the riddle was in plain sight. Well, if it doesn't work one way, try it another. Ignore mysterious letters, strip tease and Matt Helprin.

What was left?

The size of the Doc Martens prints and the fact that Dolly's body had been carried to the fish locker and later to the mineshaft indicated the killer was a large male. Only a four by four could make the run to the mine yard, so it had to be a large male who wore Doc Martens and drove a four by four. And was intimately familiar with the area. And knew he could temporarily store the body in Abel Larsen's fish locker until it was safe to take it elsewhere.

And the killer needed to be someone Dolly trusted.

Samantha's stomach sank as she realized the wildly improbable answer was staring her right in the face.

Abel Larsen owned the fishing shack, the fish locker, and a Jeep Grand Cherokee. Abel Larsen was a

large and powerful man who could very easily have carried the body from the fern patch to the fish locker and later to the mineshaft. Abel Larsen would have had all the time in the world to clean the fish locker of blood, dirt and leaves. Abel Larsen was not as fanatic a cleaner as Odin and might leave a little pile of ashes in the stove.

Abel Larsen, so full of praise for the Tipple PD and so adamant they had the right person in custody.

Abel Larsen, so quick to tell Samantha there was pressure on her job, pressure that would vanish with the conviction of Matt Helprin.

Abel Larsen, who was like an uncle to everyone in Tipple and whom Dolly Jenkins would probably have trusted with her life.

Lord, why would she think these things?

She had known Abel all her life. He just couldn't be a murderer. How could gentle old Abel Larsen be capable of getting behind Dolly Jenkins and smashing in the back of her head?

Smashing in the back of her head.

Oh dear God, that was *really* why her thoughts turned to Abel Larsen.

Celia Larsen had been found dead at the foot of steep back steps at the Larsen home. It had been obvious she'd turned her foot on a loose top tread and suffered a fatal fall. Dr Ray Medley, drunk as usual, had quickly determined death by misadventure and signed the certificate. There had been no autopsy and cremation took place three days later.

But, in addition to not being a qualified pathologist, Dr Ray Medley was a very good friend of Abel

Larsen's. As good a friend to Abel as Samantha herself.

Perhaps, blinded by friendship on her part and alcoholism as well as friendship on Medley's, she and Doc Ray had been less diligent than they should have been.

Now she had a second body with crushing injuries to the back of the skull. Criminals tend to go with what has worked in the past, making *modus operandi* a powerful factor in investigations.

The records room was a tiny cubicle in the basement of the municipal hall and public safety building. It was reached by a steep, narrow, dusty flight of steps that squeaked under Samantha's boots. Several loose treads wobbled. In the stale, hot little room, sweat broke out on her forehead and she gasped at the delicate touch of a spider web. She fumbled in stifling darkness for the pull chain on the incandescent bulb that was the only source of light. Cardboard boxes were stacked on gray metal shelves floor to ceiling, with, mercifully, most recent at the front. Samantha pulled out one labeled "Jan 1/96–Dec 31/96" and carried it to the small table under the naked bulb. Sneezing in swirling dust as she lifted the lid, she quickly located a slim manila envelope bearing case number 96-6-38 and labeled 'Larsen, Celia'. She hurriedly left the broiling little room, taking deep gulps of cooler air in the stairwell.

Back in her office, still sneezing, she emptied the envelope. The contents were woefully lacking, considering the theory now in the back of her mind, and consisted of a police report signed by herself, a death certificate bearing Ray Medley's shaky scrawl,

statements by Odin and Abel Larsen and a small heap of eight-by-ten glossy photographs.

Adjusting her blinds to screen blazing sunlight and setting aside her possibly flawed report, she began a perusal of the pictures. The first shot was a front view of the Larsen house. It faced Snoqualmie Way just past the intersection of Tipple Drive. The small front yard was level, but land sloped sharply down the sides of the house, so that the basement door opened directly onto the back yard. The back door was a story above ground, accessed by a steep flight of stairs.

There were, Samantha recalled, seventeen steps. The top tread had been loose, turning under Celia's foot and pitching her to her death. Celia had been found on the walk at the bottom of the steps, feet outwards, head resting on bottom tread. There had been a great deal of blood under the body, with splatters here and there up the steps. Two large smears contained matted hair. It had seemed quite authentic the day she'd done the investigation while trying to console a weeping, nearly hysterical Abel Larsen. But seen through the lens of suspicion, the whole scene didn't look right. Interesting how Celia had flipped right around in the fall. She would have had to do cartwheels. Unlike Hollywood portrayals, people who fall down stairs generally don't cartwheel. If Celia had fallen down the stairs, she'd more likely have slid over the sharp-edged treads and abraded skin on other parts of her body. Why just one injury to the back of the head? Would an autopsy have shown crushing of the occipital bone consistent with a series of heavy blows from a blunt object rather than a single impact on a sharp stair tread?

She recalled saying to Doc Ray that Celia had taken a very bad fall and was dead. Doc Ray, taking Samantha's word for the fall, had checked for vital signs and asked Abel for a blanket to cover the body. Abel had become hysterical and Samantha had gone to get the blanket. Volunteer firemen had taken Celia off to Ridge Rest Funeral Home while Doc Ray sedated Abel.

And Samantha had spent the rest of the day with the man. Babysitting rather than being a police officer. Babysitting a man who had been on the front lines in Korea and had never been known to lose his nearly legendary composure. At the time she had attributed Abel's uncharacteristic hysteria to grief, but now it looked like a sinister and successful attempt to create a diversion.

Samantha took a deep breath and turned to the next picture. Celia's head rested on the bottom step, sightless eyes gazing into the lens. Smears of blood on the steps above her and a big puddle of it under her head.

It wasn't the way she wanted to remember Celia Larsen, who had been like an aunt to her after her mother's death. After nearly two years, she had still not gotten used to not being able to pick up the phone and give Celia a call.

The next shot had been taken from above on the steps. As well as showing no other injuries, the pictures showed no dirt or rips on Celia's tank top blouse or clean white jeans.

How could Samantha have missed the cleanliness of the jeans? Celia had supposedly just fallen all the

way down a flight of stairs and the jeans, other than being splattered with blood, had been immaculate.

All the way down?

With growing despair, Samantha leafed through the gory shots, looking for one in particular.

There it was, third from the bottom. Taken about midway up the stairs, showing the loose top tread, the one that had made her conclude the fall had been accidental. The next tread down sported a large smear of blood.

Now it all seemed too obvious. If Celia had turned her ankle on the loose tread, she would have had to do an impossible jackknife to hit her head on the second tread. She would instead have been launched outwards and probably landed at least halfway down.

And the stairs, like everything that belonged to Abel Larsen, had been in a state of excellent repair. Why would just the top tread be loose?

There had been no autopsy, since Doc Ray had certified death by misadventure and Abel had not requested an autopsy, but there had been nothing to suggest Celia might have had a stroke, or a fainting spell, or anything else. The woman had been in remarkably good condition, running a daily eight miles between her home and Six Mile Chevron. Four times a week, like clockwork, she had worked out at Body Wonderful in Tipple.

Leafing through the rest of the glossies, Samantha came to a shot of the gazebo that had been such a favored place for Celia. There had, Samantha recalled, been fresh lemonade on the Gazebo table and a Danielle Steele book open and turned over. The

supposition had been that Celia had been going in to the house for something at the time of the accident.

Then Samantha noticed something else that had eluded her on that awful day. Flagstones from the gazebo to the back stairs appeared damp, as though Celia had washed the walk. But the sidewalk under her body was dry. If Celia had hosed down the flagstones, she hadn't continued and done the walkway. An oblique shot of the body showed the hose in the background, rolled up and hung on its bracket at the side of the house. A small puddle directly under the nozzle indicated it had recently been in use.

But if someone went to the trouble of washing the flagstones, why not do the walkway, too?

Feeling sick, Samantha called Judge Edgar Svenson for a warrant to conduct a search of the grounds around the Larsen house. But Svenson held that mere suspicion there had been more to the death of Celia Larsen than met the eye wouldn't do it. The death had been ruled a mishap by Ray Medley and, unless Samantha had some compelling new evidence, that was the way it would have to be.

Samantha, disappointed, hung up.

God, it had been so bogus. How could she ever have failed to notice these things?

The bottom line seemed to be that you don't see what you're not looking for. Abel and Celia had always been such a happy couple. She had never heard of any marital discord and couldn't recall either so much as raising his or her voice to the other. Come to think of it, that was strange, wasn't it? Every marriage hits the rocks once in a while. Even she and Danny, who'd

probably been about as happy as anyone, had had a fight or two. But not the Larsens.

Perhaps the answer was even deeper than that. Perhaps she hadn't wanted to notice. It was just inconceivable that Abel Larsen could have killed Celia. It was inconceivable that anyone could *want* to kill Celia.

She had to find out for sure. Even if it meant that any evidence she gathered would not be admissible in court.

Taking the ident kit and telling nobody where she was going, Samantha drove out to the Larsen's along Jack Leg Road, which was little more than a narrow, rutted country lane running through brush land and eventually meandering past the back of several properties. It was safe enough, since she knew Abel would be at his store and Odin was out for an afternoon and dinner in Seattle with Ellen.

When she was about a hundred feet from the Larsen garage, she switched off her engine and coasted the rest of the way. Walking silently to the side of the garage, she peeked through the window. As she had suspected, it was empty. All the homes that backed on to Jack Leg Road had garages, but few were ever used for cars. Most residents parked in front of their homes and used Snoqualmie Way.

Save for a twenty-five-watt bulb burning at the top of the back steps, an indication that neither Abel nor Odin expected to be back before nightfall, the Larsen home was completely dark. After a quick check to make sure neither of the Larsen vehicles were parked around the front, Samantha, feeling like a burglar, lugged her ident kit to the gazebo. There she pulled on surgical gloves

and carefully arranged chairs the way they had been the day of Celia's accident. She sprayed Luminol under the chair where Celia would have been sitting, then on the ceiling behind and above, on the latticework and along the steps under the overhang. It was unlikely, due to foot traffic, that there would be enough left to show on the surface of floorboards, but blood works its way into cracks.

At last she took a deep breath and got out the ultra violet light. It was the moment of truth. This would determine whether Dolly Jenkins had been her first murder case, or her second. It might also shed some light on how good a police officer Samantha Bentley really was.

"Please, please ... no blood," she muttered, heart racing and hand trembling as she aimed the light at the floor around where Celia had been sitting and snapped it on.

A second later she gasped, "Oh, *no*", as she saw lines of fluorescence where blood had collected in cracks.

She turned the light on the ceiling and saw a clear and unmistakable sponge pattern, indicating someone had scrubbed away blood sprayed from the murder weapon. Luminescence on latticework at head level indicated the first blow had landed while Celia sat with her head in an upright position. There were at least three smeared patterns on the ceiling indicating three or more blows while Celia had been slumped forward with her face on the table.

"Oh. God, *no*," Samantha whispered, a lump of solid ice in her stomach as she gazed at the blue-green fluorescence. Luminol is considered a presumptive test

for blood, but it's better than presumptive when it shows such a clear pattern. No, there was no other explanation. Celia Larsen's death had not been an accident. Samantha had let one get away from her. Friendship for Abel Larsen had blinded her and she had completely overlooked the obvious.

And it had all been so calculated. So cold and methodical. One blow while Celia sat looking the other way. She would slump onto the table, instantly unconscious. But her head would turn sideways, wouldn't it? It wouldn't just obligingly balance on its nose while the killer struck three more blows. Abel had probably grabbed Celia's hair with his left hand and held her head in position while he struck again and again. Like killing a trout.

Samantha sat heavily on the top steps of the gazebo. She had never in her life, not even when she received news of Danny's death, felt so totally alone. Tears were very close to the surface, and she put her head between her knees.

She could forget about it.

At that very moment, she was the only person in the world, other than Abel himself, who knew what happened to Celia. There was no search warrant to explain, she'd made no investigation report and had not told anyone she was going to the Larsen's to look for traces of blood. An arrest would not bring Celia back. It would just deprive Odin of his father, Ellen of her father-in-law, and herself of her oldest and dearest friend. Abel was not some serial killer. Obviously there had been some terrible provocation involved. Something that had made the man just lose it and do something completely out of character.

Or was it?

What about the circumstantial evidence that had gotten her wondering about Celia in the first place? Abel obviously had the ability to kill. He also had the opportunity and a means of moving Dolly's body. He would have a motive for framing Matt Helprin. The only thing lacking was a motive for killing Dolly in the first place.

Finding the truth and making an arrest was her duty, but, without Abel, she might not be a police officer much longer. And neither would Harlan Steeples, who certainly didn't deserve to lose his livelihood.

And yet the image that filled her mind was not that of Abel Larsen, with his kind eyes and helping hands. Or even the hated Matt Helprin with his sneering smirk and foul mouth. It was a baseball-sized rock striking the back of a cadaverous man on a bicycle. A man who wore a hooded jersey, summer or winter, and stoically endured the abuse of a hating village. She could still hear the awful thump and see the puff of dust as the rock struck home and, worse, could feel the surge of adrenalin and flush of morally justified rage as an injured, agonized man dragged himself out of the ditch and wobbled away on his old bike.

She could hear her own youthful voice laughingly saying, "Girls don't throw like *that*, Ray."

"Luck, Bentley, beginner's luck."

"Hey, I was on the money, big shot. You missed."

And vicious, disdainful laughter as The Mailman, bent almost double with a freshly cracked sixth thoracic vertebra, disappeared in the distance. It was the last time she, or anyone else save whoever it had been that had shot his bicycle tire with a pellet gun as he made

his lonely way up Lookout Point Road, had ever seen Mel Manson.

She had laughed at Steeples and others who believed in the ghost of Mailman Mel, but, in a way, there was a ghost and it was very much in the Larsen's back yard with her. It had haunted her, more than anyone else in Tipple, for twenty-three years. Images from that horrible day, when she'd knocked a man off his bicycle and broken his back purely from blood lust, were seared forever into her mind.

Later that night, when Harry Miller and his posse had gone to find The Mailman, she had stood aside and let them go off to administer frontier justice. By her inaction, she had been party to a lynch mob. She had to be honest with herself. If the men had allowed her, she'd have willingly put the rope around Manson's neck and helped haul him up.

Did it matter, as she had stood aside and watched her father walk out the door, a coil of rope over his shoulder, that the body of Mailman Mel was probably already cooling in the lonely meadow above Lookout Point? Mel Manson's blood was on her hands as surely as though she'd pulled the trigger herself.

Perhaps that was what had always nettled her about Odin's White Knight act. He'd always stood up for the underdog, something she had failed to do. Looking across the Larsen's back yard, shimmering in the blazing heat of the afternoon, Samantha could almost see The Mailman standing where Celia's body had lain.

But she still wasn't being truly honest with herself. As she sat in the shade of the gazebo, listening to the occasional crackling of grasshoppers in flight and the soft sighing of a breeze in treetops, she at last faced

the fact that she hadn't thrown that rock and later stood aside because she thought Mel Manson was a killer. She'd hadn't run with the village pack because she'd been motivated by high ideals of justice.

She'd done it because it had been fun.

She and her friends had an ideal victim. Mel Manson had been someone safe to hate and persecute because he had been eccentric and alone.

But what about Dolly Jenkins?

What about the circumstantial finger that was now pointing at Abel Larsen?

Maybe he *had* killed again.

And now Samantha Bentley was actually thinking of ignoring evidence and sending another innocent man to his fate. Even if the new victim was the hateful Matt Helprin, the fact remained that Helprin had probably not killed Dolly Jenkins.

Sending Helprin away would put her in the good books of just about everyone in the village, but it wasn't what she stood for.

Not any more.

Once she had joined the mob and persecuted an innocent man. She could never do it again, no matter the cost. She walked slowly back to her cruiser and unclipped the radio mike. This was going to be utterly awful. For a moment she toyed with the idea of putting it off. But she knew if she put it off now, she'd put it off the next day, too. And the day after and the one after *that*. For the first time since she'd become a police officer, she genuinely wished she *had* settled back to a life of ease on Dan Bentley's money.

"Samantha here," she said, thumbing the mike button.

“Go ahead, Sammi,” came Burton Jenkins’ voice. He sounded tired and bored. Obviously another scintillating shift at Tipple police headquarters.

“Burton, give Harlan a call, okay? He’s at home. Ask him to meet me at the station. Tell him I have time, right now, to inventory those supplies.”

‘Supplies’ was the latest clever Tipple PD code for ‘emergency’, designed to throw off valley residents monitoring scanners.

“Ah, roger that,” Jenkins said, voice becoming animated.

As she drove past Larsen Hardware, Samantha caught sight of Abel standing near the window, stocking shelves. No, it just wasn’t possible that gentle old Abel Larsen was a killer. There would be an explanation for all this. Abel would naturally forgive her for skulking around his home and everything would go on as before. Maybe it would be better if she talked to Abel without Harlan Steeples. It was, after all, just good old Abel. He would never try to harm Samantha, who had always been like a daughter to him.

Or, at least, he *probably* wouldn’t try to harm her.

But how well could she say she knew the man now? Up till the moment she’d shone the black light, Samantha would have sworn murder was completely beyond Abel Larsen.

Maybe the murderer had been a prowler. Maybe Celia had unexpectedly gone into the house and surprised a burglar who had ... done what? Chased her out to the gazebo, placed her in a sitting position, bludgeoned her to death, then dragged the body back to the steps, arranged it so it looked like the results of a bad fall and loosened the top step?

Oh, yeah, lots of burglars did *that*, all right.

Her vision blurred with tears as she remembered leaning on Abel's shoulder at Danny's funeral service and the strength in his arms as he'd held her tightly and let her cry. He had always been there for her, her father's best friend and the closest thing to an uncle she'd ever had. On that terrible, rainy day, he'd been more like a father to her than her own father would have been. Then his quiet work behind the scenes, organizing the wake, arranging food and drink, serving as host and shepherding friends and neighbors out after a reasonable amount of time, making sure she was free to grieve. In the following days he'd been like a rock for her, always there, always stepping in to take care of things before they became a problem. She'd never known how she could have gotten through it all without him.

As she wheeled into the police lot, Samantha realized she was not taking Harlan Steeples along for safety reasons as much as moral support. Without the younger man's calming presence, she wasn't sure she'd be able to even bring the topic up, much less put handcuffs on Abel Larsen. It wasn't just Abel. She was going to be putting cuffs on her *life*.

Followed by a Harlan Steeples rendered virtually speechless by being told he was about to question Abel in the murder of Celia Larsen, Samantha found Larsen alone, sorting bolts in a large bin. The air in the old store, heavy with the old, familiar olfactory orchestra of solvents and oil, was stifling despite the lazy motion of a huge ceiling fan fifteen feet above and footsteps were forlorn on worn wood flooring.

Thank God the boys were not sitting in back drinking Abel's coffee and smoking up a storm.

"Hi, Sammi," Abel said, coughing wetly, "Harlan. You guys need any hardware? Nobody else did today. Just came in and messed up all these goddam bolts. Keep asking people to keep them in the right bins, but ..."

Abel was holding at least a half dozen six-inch bolts in his left hand while he pawed through the bin with his right. Huge hands that had once smacked a couple of boys who had been tormenting her, then soothed her and gently wiped the tears away. And handed over a quarter at the Dairy Queen for a large soft ice cream to make her feel better. Her eyes suddenly smarted and a tear trickled down her cheek. She wiped it and tried to stop her lower lip from quivering.

"What's the matter, Sammi?" Abel asked, putting bolts back in the wrong bin and taking her gently by the shoulders.

"Abel, I ..."

Steeple, embarrassed, began examining a bin of hexagonal nuts. Samantha noticed, though, that he was within earshot and watching Larsen from the corner of his eye. His right hand rested on the grips of his 9 mm.

"Abel, I want to talk to you. It's ... it's important. Can we close up for a little while?"

"Alright," Abel said, "we can do that."

"It's okay," Steeple said, moving to the door, "I can do it."

He twisted the key in the old lock and flipped the 'OPEN' sign around.

"Not as though I'll be losing a lot of business," Abel sighed, "So, what's this all about?"

"I ... Abel, I don't know ..."

"Just spit it out, honey," Abel said gently, "It'll curdle if you keep it in like that."

"I just don't know how to say this," Samantha said, looking at myriad stains on the worn old pine floor. God, she'd spent so much of her life running in and out of this store. She had a tremendous urge to drive back to the station and type her letter of resignation.

"Well, then, better you use English. I understand a little Swedish, but English would be best."

"Abel, I'm sorry, but this isn't a ... a social call. You ... you have the right to remain silent. Any ... anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law ..."

Abel's hands trembled on her shoulders and he took them away. She looked up through tears to see him regarding her sadly.

"So it's like that, is it?" Abel said softly as Samantha finished reciting the Miranda warning, words tumbling in her haste to finish before she started crying.

"I'm sorry, Abel. I really am," Samantha said, composing herself, "but I'm going to have to ask you some questions. You have a right to a lawyer, like I said. Do you want one?"

"I guess I'll have to hear the questions first," Abel said. "You ask your questions, honey, and I'll decide whether I need a lawyer."

"It wouldn't be a problem to arrange. We can go over to the station and call Clarkson, or ... or somebody."

Even as she spoke Barry Clarkson's name, Samantha remembered that he was Matt Helprin's lawyer, and there very well could be a conflict of interest if he were to represent Abel Larsen.

"It's okay, honey," Abel said in the same soft voice, "you go ahead and ask your questions. You do what's necessary."

His eyes followed Samantha as she took out her pocket tape recorder and snapped it on, saying that this was an interview with Abel Larsen, in Larsen Hardware, Monday, August 3, 1998 at 15:30 hours.

"Abel, I'm here to talk to you about the death of your wife, Celia Larsen," Samantha said, "I've read you your Miranda rights and you have indicated you understood your rights as I read them. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's true," Abel said. "I understand my rights."

"You are waiving your right to a lawyer at this point in time, is that true?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Has any coercion been applied by any member of the Tipple police department or any other police department or other person or persons in respect of this?"

"You're being very careful, Sammi, or you're stalling," Abel said. "No, nobody has coerced me."

Larsen was right. She was stalling. Another few seconds and she'd have been asking him about the weather. She took a deep breath and faced Abel squarely, looking directly into untroubled eyes.

She was the daughter of Big Harry Miller and she wouldn't flinch, no matter how terrible this was going to be.

“What really happened to Celia?” Samantha asked.

Steeple abandoned his hardware perusal and moved behind Samantha, hand still resting on his automatic. Larsen suddenly launched into a fit of coughing. Helpless, Samantha waited for it to run its course. After what seemed like hours of deep, wracking hacks and attempts to clear phlegm, he managed to gain control and reached for a pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket.

“Too old to quit now,” he said, seeing the look on Samantha’s face as he tamped the hand-rolled cigarette on his thumb nail and put it between his lips. Flicking a Bic, he watched the two officers as flame cast a warm, yellow glow on his craggy, heavily lined face.

“Celia was murdered,” he said at last, taking a deep drag. “Clubbed to death. But I guess you two already know that, or you wouldn’t be here asking these questions.”

“Who killed her, Abel?”

“I did, Sammi. I’m sorry, but I did.”

Samantha grabbed a shelf to steady herself. The simple answer put an end to the curious state of denial in which she’d been since she looked at that obscene fluorescence on a gazebo ceiling.

“Oh, God,” she choked.

“It’s okay,” Abel said with calm regret. “Just do your job, honey.”

“Oh, Christ, Abel, *why?*”

Abel sighed deeply and walked slowly towards the window. Steeples, drawing his automatic, followed.

“Don’t worry, Harlan,” Abel said without looking around, “You won’t need that thing. I’m not trying to get

away or do anything stupid. I just need a moment to think.”

“It’s okay, Harlan,” Samantha said, putting a hand on Steeples’ arm, “Put it away. It’s okay. Abel, you really should get a lawyer.”

“Don’t need one,” Abel said, staring out at the darkening street, “Sammi, it’s simple. I wasn’t getting along with Ceil.”

“Abel, that’s no reason to kill her. For God’s sake.”

“No, it isn’t,” Abel agreed, “goddam mall has killed this place.”

“What?”

“Sorry, just a stray thought.”

“Abel, why did you kill Celia?”

“Does it matter? Honey, I killed her. I’m admitting it. You have your man, your case is closed. Is it really important why?”

“It is to *me*, Abel.”

“I see.”

“God, you’ve been like my own father. How could you do something like this? How *could* you? Why?”

Abel’s breath came out in a sharp ‘hunh’ as he struggled to suppress a fit of coughing. Eyes watered and he wiped them with the back of his hand.

“I was having an affair. Sort of,” he said when the fit passed.

“Who?” Samantha asked, stunned. How could Abel Larsen have been having an affair in a tiny place like Tipple without having it make the rounds as common gossip?

“It doesn’t matter,” Abel sighed. “She had nothing to do with what happened. Not directly, anyway. The fact is, Ceil found out and was going to divorce me. She’d

have taken half of everything. Forced me to pay her half the value of the house and the store. I couldn't operate this place under those conditions, and I told her so. She said she didn't care, and that she would ruin me and disgrace me. So I ... I ..."

Abel doubled over in another fit of coughing. When he straightened up, his eyes were streaming and he mopped at them with a large, soiled handkerchief dug from the pocket of his overalls.

"I snuck up on her while she was reading," he said, taking another deep drag, "in the gazebo, you know. Hit her over the head with a, ah, wrench. One of those big pipe wrenches."

"Where's the wrench, Abel? What did you do with it?"

"I don't know, Sammi. I just wasn't thinking too clearly after that. I guess I tossed it somewhere, but I don't remember where. Anyhow, when she was dead I put her body at the foot of the steps. Then I smeared some blood and hair on the steps and loosened off the top tread so it looked like she fell from there. I'm sorry I fooled you, Sammi."

"Sounds like you were thinking pretty rationally, Abel. I find it hard to believe you can't remember where you put the wrench."

"I guess it was shock, what can I say? I guess I went into shock. After I arranged the body I put the wrench out behind the garage, in some bushes. I guess I went back later on, after you left that day, but it was gone. I guess somebody found it."

"But you don't know."

"No, I don't," Abel said, lighting another cigarette from the one he was finishing and stamping out the butt

on the floor. He retrieved the squashed stub, slipping it into his shirt pocket.

"How many times did you hit Celia?"

"I ... I don't remember."

"More than once?"

"I think so."

"Was she sitting up when you hit her?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Not lying over the table?"

"No, she wasn't lying over the table. I don't think she was lying on the table. I don't really remember."

"Did she fall over on the table after you hit her?"

"I don't remember."

"You don't remember how many times you hit her and you don't remember whether she fell over on the table after you hit her?"

"No, Sammi, I really don't. It was ... a very ... emotionally-charged moment."

"All right," Samantha said, ignoring a snort from Steeples, "we'll pass over that for a moment. We have another question."

"Fire away," Abel said with a wistful smile.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing, honey," Abel said. "I guess I just knew, from the time I killed Celia, that this day would come. You always were so bright, right from when you were a little girl, and so determined. You were just the most determined little girl I ever saw. I guess I knew you'd figure it out sooner or later. I suppose I'm just a little bit proud of you. Was that your question? What was funny?"

"No. No, it wasn't," Samantha said.

"Then what was it? Go on, spit it out."

Samantha took a deep, shaking breath. Her stomach was fluttering and her knees trembled. Abel's eyes widened as became aware of her tension.

"We ... we have ... what we think is evidence that Dolly Jenkins' body was in your fish cooler for a period of time. At your Hatwich Lake cabin."

"I see," Abel said thoughtfully. "Go on."

"Probably a day or two. It was cleaned out, but we found dried fern leaves and pine needles underneath. There was also a tiny amount of blood between the hinges and the lid, Abel. We're waiting for a DNA match to be sure."

Abel, smoking pensively, stared over Samantha's head. Steeples started to speak, then subsided at a gesture from Samantha.

"You ... don't have to wait for that, Sammi," Abel sighed at last, "you're right, Dolly's body was in the old cooler."

"So you knew it was there."

"Of course I knew it was there."

"Why *of course*? Did you kill Dolly, Abel?"

"Yes."

"*God!*" Steeples breathed.

Samantha's knees buckled. This time it was Steeples' arm, suddenly around her shoulders, that kept her on her feet. Though circumstantial evidence had been pointing to Abel as Dolly's killer, she had not really believed it. Of all people, how could it be Abel Larsen? A double murderer? She realized that, until this moment, such was the depth of her denial that she had really believed there would be some rational explanation for Celia and Dolly. Something that would exonerate Abel and make everything all right.

"Abel, you *couldn't*!" she cried.

"I'm sorry, Sammi, but I could. Did."

Samantha tried to resume questioning, but the words wouldn't come.

"You okay, Sammi?" Steeples asked.

"Yes, I ... I just need a few minutes ..."

Steeple gently took the recorder from Samantha.

"Okay, Abel," he said firmly, "we'd better have the rest of it," he said, putting the recorder on a shelf near Larsen.

He had his notebook in one hand and pen poised to take down details. Though her mind was reeling, Samantha forced herself to pay attention.

"I suppose you've guessed that Dolly was the woman I was having an affair with," Larsen said, eyes roaming over shelves and counters as though seeing them for the last time. "Since she was, ah, twelve. Not all the time. Just sometimes. I ... It wasn't an affair, exactly ... I gave her a few dollars each time. That night she met me at the cabin, like, ah, always."

"Why not your house, Abel?"

"I didn't want Odin to ever find out about it. I was ashamed, of course."

"No *shit*. You should have been ashamed, you son of ..."

"*Harlan*," Samantha said sharply.

Abel's face was calm and composed. The younger man looked away, unwilling to meet Larsen's gaze.

"Okay," Steeples said at last, "so Dolly Jenkins came over to your cabin. Which night was that?"

"July fourth," Abel said. "I was pretty drunk, but I remember that. She, ah, called me. Said she wanted an, ah, a really good Fourth of July. Real fireworks, she

said. And it wouldn't cost me much. That's what she said."

"She called you on July fourth."

"Yes, I think so. I was pretty drunk. I think she called me in the late afternoon or evening."

"She called you and said she wanted to sell you sex and you arranged to meet her at your cabin, is that it?"

"Yes. She said it would be really cheap."

"And you met here there?"

"Yes."

"Did you have sex with her?"

"I, ah, don't remember," Abel said. "I might have. But I'd had far too much to drink and I just can't remember. I don't think so, though."

"Okay, you might or might not have had sex. Then what?"

"Well, Dolly told me she wanted to get out of Tipple. She wanted money. A lot of money. I told her I couldn't give her anything much. Business, as you can see, is not too good."

"Did she threaten you?"

"Yes, exactly. She said she'd go to the cops if I didn't pay her, ah, ten thousand dollars. As a start in her new life, she said. She was afraid of Matt Helprin and wanted out. She said if I didn't get her a new start, she would go straight to you guys and turn me in. I'd be disgraced. She had to die, you see?"

"Why the fern patch, Abel?" Steeples asked.

"Good a place as any. I didn't want to do it in the cabin. Didn't want a lot of blood around."

"Okay, so how did you get Dolly into the fern patch?"

Abel broke down coughing, bending over and putting his hands on his knees, his body wracked by

the fit. Steeples gazed theatrically at the ceiling, body language saying he wouldn't turn a hair to help if Abel were expiring on the floor in front of him. For once in her life, Samantha had no desire to put her arms around the man, either. After what seemed like hours, Abel got control and, clearing his throat of phlegm, wiped streaming eyes and dug another hand-rolled cigarette from his breast pocket. He lit it and inhaled deeply, struggling to suppress yet another bout of coughing.

"I lied," he said at last, voice tight with effort. "I told her I ... had ... money buried in a tin box over by the bog. Told her I'd ... put it aside for a rainy day. I ... got her to walk in front of me and I picked up a club, you know? Like I use to kill fish? I ... I walked behind her until she got to the, ah, fern patch? Then I, ah, clubbed her over the head. And I put the body in the fish cooler. I wasn't thinking clearly."

"When did you move it to the mine?" Steeples asked. He sounded as though he were questioning Matt Helprin.

"I think it was the next morning. Early."

"Did anyone see you?"

"No, I don't think so. It was really early. First light."

"Why not just put the body in the woods somewhere, or throw it in the lake? Why the mine, Abel?"

"She was so afraid of Matt Helprin," Abel said. "All the kids were. I just thought it would be a chance to have some good come from such a terrible thing. I had to kill her, you see. How could Odin run this store after people found out about me and Dolly? Then I thought I could rid this town of that nasty little psychopath by planting the body where it would point to him."

"You painted the graffiti?"

"Yes, I did. I realized later it was a bit excessive, but I figured nobody would really think much about that."

"And you painted the rock at the Davisson's," Steeples said, "when you put muriatic acid in their Koi pond."

"Yes, I did that, too," Abel said, "I thought it would make Helprin look even more dangerous and psychotic. He *is* a dangerous little psychopath, you know."

"How exactly did you kill Dolly," Samantha asked, recovering her power of speech. "Can you demonstrate for us?"

"Demonstrate?"

"Yes. I'll be Dolly and you show us exactly how you did it. Was she standing or kneeling when you hit her?"

"You know what? I think I *do* need a lawyer after all," Abel said.

"Why now?"

"Honey, the stuff we're getting into now could make a big difference in sentencing. I think I need a lawyer."

"The hell it could," Steeples snorted.

"I think it could," Abel replied calmly, "and that means I'm asking for a lawyer. I have the right to one, and I want one. Period."

Samantha took cuffs from her belt. They made a heavy, rattling metallic sound and Abel grimaced.

"You don't need those, Sammi," he said. "I'm not going to be, what do you guys call it, difficult? I'll go with you peaceably. Won't make any fuss."

"It's standard procedure, Abel," Samantha said. "I'm sorry, but you're under arrest and we have regulations."

"Even if you're Chief?"

"Even if. But I'll put them on from the front if you like. Be more comfortable that way."

Abel sighed and extended his hands. As she tightened the cuffs, Samantha noticed heavy nicotine staining.

"I need to get tobacco," he said, following her gaze. "I have a package and some papers in the drawer over by the register. Mind if I get them?"

"I'll do it," Steeples said.

"It's okay, I can get it."

"No," Samantha said, "let Harlan."

"Afraid I have a gun in the drawer?"

"It's procedure."

"Well," Abel said, "in fact, I *do* have a gun in the drawer. But Sammi, I was *not* going to touch it. I'd never harm you, or Harlan either."

"I know."

But the truth was that she *didn't* know. God, how *could* she? She hadn't known that comfortable old Abel Larsen was a two-time killer. The enormity of it left her dazed. This wasn't some drifter or psychopathic village hoodlum she was hauling in. It was Abel Larsen. A village councillor. The father of her future son-in-law and one-time scoutmaster.

The whole scene was so unreal, she felt completely disconnected.

With Abel securely cuffed, tobacco and papers in his shirt pocket, Samantha asked Steeples to bring the cruiser around to the back.

"There's no need to make a production out of this," she said.

In the shadows of the alley, they hustled Abel Larsen to the cruiser. They'd have gotten away with it,

save for the fact that the back door of the pool hall also opened on the alley. Chummy McLarnen had recently been escorted through it at a high rate of speed for being drunk and more than usually obnoxious. He was lying in the back seat of his Toyota Camry, trying to stop the world from spinning, when he heard the back door of Larsen Hardware crash open. He managed to lever himself up enough to see down the alley just as the cruiser door opened. Steeples was helping Abel Larsen into the car and, glinting in a shaft of sunlight, McLarnen made out handcuffs.

As the cruiser pulled out, McLarnen set off to find Odin Larsen. This was really choice. Odin's old man in handcuffs.

At police headquarters, swearing Mabel Murphy to secrecy and thanking lucky stars that nobody was in the office to complain about messy neighbors or a traffic ticket, Samantha and Steeples took Larsen into Samantha's office to book him. Steeples, getting an arrest form and fingerprinting gear, joined them, kicking the door shut behind him.

"God, Abel, I'm sorry," Samantha said as Steeples placed a fingerprint card on the desk and prepared to take prints.

"Never had this done before," Larsen said, coughing wetly and looking at the ink pad with a mixture of interest and revulsion.

"Nothing to it, Abel," Harlan said coldly, "just give me your right thumb and we'll get started."

"I just don't believe this," Samantha said. "Abel, how *could* you kill Celia?"

"I don't know, Sammi, I really don't," Abel said. "I guess a fellow just gets trapped. Larsen Hardware isn't

up to much these days, I know, but it's all I have. She was going to ruin it. Force me to sell it out for a song. I'd have been disgraced. I couldn't face it."

That didn't seem like the Celia Larsen that Samantha had known all her life.

"There's always more to people than you know, Sammi," Larsen said, when she voiced her doubts, "I guess you never really know someone till you're at odds with her."

"What time, exactly, did you move the body the next morning?" Samantha asked.

"I'm sorry, honey," Abel said sadly, "I'm going to have to have a lawyer for questions like that. I suppose they'll all be asked soon enough in court."

Buzzing Mabel, Samantha asked for a call to Clarkson to find out whether there was another public defender available. Moments later she was told Clarkson was gone for the day. A call to his home raised only the babysitter who claimed the Clarksons would be out for the rest of the afternoon and evening.

With Larsen booked and locked in a holding cell, they retired to Samantha's office to sort out their case.

"What about Helprin?" Steeples asked, settling on Samantha's couch.

"We don't have much there, do we?" Samantha said, "The only case we're left with is rape or sexual assault. Dolly is dead and the other witnesses are underage. The younger one claims there was a knife, but he was looking through a knothole. The one who was in the room won't confirm the knife."

"For that matter, Jenkins didn't even say that his sister was raped, just that Helprin was afraid she would say she'd been raped," Steeples pointed out.

"No, he didn't. We don't have any vaginal tearing and we don't have corroboration on the knife, or even a good witness for it, so Clarkson might be able to get a jury to buy consensual sex. I'm afraid our Dolly's character wouldn't exactly come off as a Debbie Reynolds, either."

"It wouldn't, would it?"

"Okay, so, what have we got? Abel will get a bail hearing tomorrow and we ought to get the case in front of a grand jury within a couple of days. Given his confession, I don't see any problems with getting an indictment. I'll talk to the DA in the morning about changing the charges against Helprin."

"Or dropping them," Steeples said.

"Yes, more likely dropping them. It's too bad, he really *is* a little bastard."

"The town won't be better for having him back, that's for sure. Abel was right about that, at least. He'd have been doing everyone a favor. But we'll get the little turd on something else. If we're still around."

"The council?"

"Yeah. If I read things right, we've got the lynchpin of our support locked up. That will leave a seat vacant."

"Well, at least they can't do anything to us until they fill the seat, can they?" Samantha asked.

"I don't know. But if they can't, I'll bet Murchison will try the moment the election is over. Hashimoto really, really cares about Nip Street. You've seen that enough times. Only thing that's saved us so far is he's loyal to Abel. If we get someone in there who's even neutral, I'd bet Murchison will take advantage of our bungling the case and offer Hashimoto a concession on Nip if he changes his vote. I think he was going to do it before,

then we arrested Helprin and took the wind out of his sails.”

“Likely enough. Oh, God, I’m sick of talking about this. I just can’t believe it, Harlan. I just can’t.”

Samantha put her head in her hands and rubbed her eyes. Things were happening far too fast. In the space of a couple of hours she had gone from having a burdensome little psychopath safely locked up to having her second father sitting behind bars. Waiting to answer a pair of murder charges.

“You okay, Sammi?” Steeples asked.

“Yeah,” she said, taking a deep breath, “I’ll be all right. It’s just all ... a bit sudden, that’s all.”

“You didn’t tell me what got you onto this.”

“Just too many little things that didn’t point to Matt Helprin, I guess,” Samantha said. “Too many things that pointed ... well ... at Abel. The only thing I didn’t have was motive. Then I noticed the similarities between Dolly and Celia’s so-called accident.”

“I was on leave,” Steeples said defensively.

“I know. If you’d been there it might have been a different story. That was entirely my doing, Harlan. I’m just so ... so close to Abel ... I couldn’t ever imagine that he’d do anything remotely like this. It’s just a *nightmare*.”

“I wish I’d been here,” Steeples said.

“I do, too. You wouldn’t have been so blinded by friendship. You might have noticed all the things that I just noticed now. Christ, I’ve been such an idiot. So goddam *blind*.”

“Better late than never,” Steeples said.

“Listen, don’t tell anyone about this, will you, until I get a chance to tell Odin?”

"No, I won't. It doesn't really matter, I guess."

Steeple wandered out. Though horribly pessimistic, he was probably right. Up to now, Murchison had probably been biding his time, letting the investigation drag on while he stonewalled Hashimoto on Nip Street. Really got the man frustrated. Then, when the time was right, he could make an offer to change his vote on the issue and Hashimoto would leave the Larsen camp. Murchison would have his revenge for the mineshaft incident.

Now the time could be right. Hashimoto would not want to be allied with an accused murderer, even if it were Abel Larsen, and would be wide open to an offer. Couple that with allegations of incompetence and that would do it. Checking the time, Samantha called Hattie to see if she knew what time Odin and Ellen would get back from Seattle.

To her surprise and consternation, Ellen was home.

"We canceled the outing, Mom," she explained. "Odin got a call from Otis Hays. Some plumbing problem. He had to get some stuff from the store and go over there. We're going out for dinner when he gets finished."

Dear God.

Otis Hays lived just fifty yards or so east of the Larsen home. All the time she'd been prowling around his back yard, Odin had been right next door, helping a friend with a plumbing problem. He could have come to the window for some reason, and spotted her poking around the gazebo.

He might even have watched her while she worked.

Samantha felt sick for a moment, then pulled herself together. It was a pretty safe bet that Odin hadn't seen

her. If he had, he'd have come over to see what she was up to. And how utterly awful *that* would have been. What am I doing? Oh, nothing much. Just discovering that your father killed your mother, that's all. How's *your* day going?

"Not the Red Lantern," Samantha said woodenly, "I guess you're pretty tired of that place."

"We're going to the Ho Ho Inn," Ellen said, naming a posh Chinese eatery about twenty minutes away on the highway to Seattle. "Mom, is anything wrong?"

"Oh, no, nothing, honey. I'm just tired, that's all."

"You should come home and get some rest."

"You're right. I'm going to do that very thing. I just have a few things to take care of first."

Her next call was to the Larsen home. Perhaps Odin had finished with Otis Hays' plumbing and was changing to go out. The phone rang three times before Odin's recorded voice came on the line.

"Hi there, sports fan," he said, "you've reached the other home of Larsen Hardware, screws for every occasion. If you want to get screwed, just leave a message at the tone."

Samantha hung up. She wasn't about to leave *that* message on a tape. Nor would she call the Hays place and give Odin the bad news when other people were around.

Well, that was that.

Matthew Helprin, the awful little scourge of Tipple, would be free to return to his life of petty crime while an old, dear family friend and pillar of the community could be executed for two murders. And not only would she lose her own treasured job, she'd have managed to get

Harlan Steeples fired for his loyalty. God, how awful could things get?

And yet, there were aspects of Larsen's confession that were puzzling.

How could he not remember whether he had sex with a girl? If he had been that drunk, how could he have remembered the lie he told Dolly to get her in to the fern patch? How could he remember killing Dolly at all?

And how did Abel Larsen buy sex from Dolly Jenkins for four years in a tiny place like Tipple and never have anyone find out about it? It should have been the gossip of the century. Quite likely led to mayhem when Juke Jenkins found Abel Larsen muscling in on his territory.

She slid a grade ten high school picture of Dolly out of the file. The girl had been very pretty, in a pouty and slightly slutty way. From all accounts, she'd had a lot of young male admirers in Tipple High. Why would a girl like that take up with Abel Larsen, an unassuming man in his mid sixties when the affair allegedly began and now pushing seventy? Abel wasn't lying when he said he could only afford a few dollars. Larsen Hardware barely brought in enough to keep Abel and Odin in beans. Samantha didn't know for certain, but she thought Abel's obsession with fishing had as much to do with food as anything else. If she wanted to sell herself, Dolly could easily have done a lot better.

What else would have gotten her into Abel Larsen's bed? It certainly wouldn't be the thrill of screwing a councilman for the village of Tipple, Washington, present population less than ten thousand on a hot day. Gratitude for Abel's connecting her with the Thea

Carter Society? There was no evidence Dolly had really appreciated *that* at all.

Maybe Abel had something on Dolly. Something he wasn't willing to tell anyone else, even now. Maybe the payoff was *from* Dolly, not *to* her. And the coin was sex.

And there was something else nagging at her.

She played back her tape. Larsen's voice filled the room, saying he bludgeoned Dolly and put her in the cooler. The next morning, at first light, he took the body out and drove it up to the mineshaft.

Then Samantha saw it. The next morning would have been the morning of July 5. What was it the entomologist had said? The time of ovipositing was anywhere between 11 pm July 5 and 10 am July 6. Since *Lucilia* doesn't fly during the night, the time of ovipositing would be between about 6 am and 10 am July 6. Realistically, since *Lucilia* is a sun lover, it would be more like 8 to 10 am. So Larsen could not have moved the body at dawn and he was out by a full day. He had to have moved it in sunlight on July 6, which would have been a full day and a couple of hours later than he claimed.

Well, Abel could be confused on the dates. If he had been really, really drunk, he could have blacked out and misplaced a day. But if he remembered taking the body of Dolly Jenkins to the mineshaft, he should remember whether he did it in full sunlight or at dawn. If he did it before the sun was up, there would have been no *Lucilia* to deposit eggs on the body.

Perhaps he had been in shock. Probably moved the body just about sun-up and didn't remember that there was morning sunlight. Just remembered going somewhere around dawn and getting the body.

It would be nice if she could just go back to the cells and get Abel to clarify things, but this case had to be by the book. He'd asked for a lawyer and that was that. Until Clarkson called in and she could find Abel another lawyer, there'd be no further questioning.

What was she doing anyway, trying to conjure some phantom Mailman Mel to take the fall? No, Abel's confession made perfect sense and loose ends were just that: Loose ends.

Samantha rubbed her eyes and stretched. It had been a long and shocking day, and things weren't going to be pleasant around Tipple for a while. She could well imagine the reaction of the villagers when they found out that she had charged the ever-popular Abel Larsen with two murders and would likely be setting loose amongst them the plague that was Matt Helprin. Probably the only ones who would be pleased, other than Matt himself, were Helena Helprin and Daniel Murchison.

Sighing heavily, she slid open her bottom desk drawer to deposit tape recorder and notebook. Her eye was caught by a thick white envelope with bold orange markings that lay on top of a bunch of papers. It was from a photo lab and still sealed.

She remembered picking the envelope up sometime in June, before Dolly Jenkins had gone missing. She hadn't had time to open it for a few days, then the whole Dolly Jenkins mess had begun. Why bother taking these damn things if she wasn't even going to look at them?

Well, no time like the present. She dreaded going home and telling Ellen that her future father-in-law was in the holding cells and might one day be executed for

the murders of two women, one of whom had been like a second mother to Ellen. The photos were an excellent excuse to stay in the office. At least for a few more minutes.

There was a discreet cough and she looked up to find Burton Jenkins, who had just come on shift, leaning in her doorway.

"Want a coffee, Chief?"

"No, thanks. It's okay."

"You sure? Mabel made some good stuff."

"No, I'll pass, thanks. Burton?"

"Yeah?"

"You know who's in the cells?"

"Yeah, Mabel told me. I can't believe it."

"Believe it. Just don't talk about it to anyone outside the department."

"Sammi, you know me better than that."

"Yes, I do," she sighed, "I'm sorry. I guess I'm just overtired. Overtired and over-stressed and I hardly know what I'm doing any more."

"Just can't believe it's Abel. Listen, Chief, everyone here is a hundred per cent behind you and Harlan."

"Thanks, Burt. Means a lot to me," Samantha said.

Jenkins went back to the front desk and, a moment later, she heard the faint squeak from the old office chair as he sat. In the silence of her own office, she spread out the glossy shots. There were several of Ellen and Odin taken, she recalled, when the couple had been going hiking up to Elaho Lake. They were standing on a gravel road that ran for a short distance along the Elaho River, wearing jeans and matching denim shirts and carrying small backpacks.

That had been an Odin Larsen special. Ellen had carelessly mentioned that she had enjoyed a hike to Elaho a few years before and then nothing would serve but they had to do it. Even with Odin's bad knee. Samantha recalled Ellen's saying later that Odin had probably been in pain much of the way, but had never let on. It was so much like Odin to make a sacrifice like that. He'd probably been okay on the road that ran along flat land, but once he had gotten to the end of it the Elaho trail was a brutal slog even for someone with two good knees.

Suddenly Samantha frowned. Pawing through her cluttered top drawer, she found a small magnifying glass and took a close look at one of the pictures, a shot that showed the couple full-figure. So much for the great Doc Martens clue. Ellen was wearing her old Doc Martens and Odin was sporting an obviously new pair. God, half the valley owned the damn things. Abel Larsen had missed a good bet. Instead of keeping a hardware store, he should have gone into Doc Martens.

She smiled. Ellen looked so fresh and healthy.

Well, Danny, you did a good job creating your daughter. What a pity you didn't live to see her grow up. Or even to hold her in your arms.

And there was Odin, standing so tall and handsome with his chiseled, Nordic good looks, facing the camera with a square set to his jaw and his very slight, ironic smile. Samantha had never really noticed it, but the smile seemed familiar. Like she had seen it before on someone else.

Oh, hell, she was probably just too shocked and strung out to think straight.

Time to knock it off for the day. Maybe hunt up Helena and slip her the good news. Helena could be relied upon to keep quiet, at least for a night, and it would probably be such a tremendous relief to know her boy was no longer facing life in prison or worse. Closing her drawer, Samantha reached out to switch off her desk light while glancing, as she always did, at the silver-framed picture of Danny, taken at the base camp in Nepal three days before his death on Mount Everest.

Goodnight, my love.

Samantha snapped off the desk lamp, plunging the office into late afternoon gloom.

Then she snapped it back on again.

What was *that*?

She studied the picture intently, as though she had never seen it before which, in a sense, she hadn't. In the picture, Danny stood straight and tall, facing the camera squarely with a slightly lopsided, ironic, self-depreciating smile. Just like Odin's. How strange that she had never noticed it before. There it was, that same expression. Digging out the Elaho picture, Samantha carefully compared it to the photo of her husband. They didn't look that much alike, but the smile gave them a similarity that was just plain eerie.

That would explain why she'd always liked the boy so much.

She got up to leave, but this time didn't even get as far as reaching for the light switch. Instead, she sat back down and took her tape recorder out of her top desk drawer. Then she opened the second one and dug out the tape of her interview with Marvin Hampton.

In seconds the boy's voice and her own filled the office.

"Who were they from?"

"Couldn't see."

"You couldn't see the return addresses?"

"Yeah, I *said*. It was too fuckin' small and, besides, Dolly grabbed them up right away and took off with them."

Samantha snapped off the tape. Marvin had not seen whom the letters were from. And she had not pursued the topic because she had realized at once these were the missing letters from the Seattle School of Power Broadcasting.

But what if they weren't?

She carefully put the pictures of Ellen and Odin back into her desk drawer and left her office, walking as though in a trance. Burton Jenkins watched in puzzlement as she wandered past, then dismissed it as a symptom of weariness and stress and went back to his crossword puzzle.

A few minutes later Samantha found herself standing on the Hampton porch, facing Howard Hampton.

"Sammi?" he said, surprised. "Goddam, it's nearly dinner. This is a hell of an hour to be buying insurance."

"I'd like to talk to Marvin, Howie," Samantha said.

"Why? Is there trouble?"

"No, not at all. I just have to check something Marvin says he saw."

"That stuff about Dolly Jenkins? He told me all about that. I can tell you anything you need to know."

"I don't think so, Howie," Samantha said. "I think I need Marvin for this one."

"Okay, he's in the computer room," Hampton said after a pause. "You can talk to him there. Come on in. I'll have to be there when you talk to him, of course."

The computer room was in the basement, and neat as the proverbial pin. Marvin, who had been engrossed in a game of Doom, looked worried at the sight of Samantha.

"Hi Marvin," she said, projecting a cheerfulness she didn't feel and trying to put the boy at ease, "how are things?"

"Okay, I guess."

Samantha sat on a chair next to the boy, elbows on knees so her eyes were level with his. It was a technique designed to make her seem less intimidating and it seemed to work. Marvin released the joystick and leaned back, crossing skinny arms.

"Marvin, remember those letters you saw?"

"Um, yeah ..."

Marvin cast a worried glance at his father. This conversation was not going down a very comfortable avenue.

"Dad said I could go up there if I didn't go in the mine," he said defensively.

"It's not a dangerous place if the kids don't go in the shaft itself," Howard said.

"I know," Samantha sighed, "I'm not interested in the mine. Marvin, you said Dolly Jenkins dropped two letters the day you saw her, right?"

"Yeah."

"Can you describe them?"

Samantha, heart hammering, held her breath. Please God, let these be business envelopes with typed addresses.

"Yeah, they were blue and kinda small."

Oh, God. Under Dolly's body. What color had that envelope fragment been? She saw it in her mind's eye, nestling in its plastic evidence bag, so small she could barely identify it. Badly faded and smirched with coal dust, but it *could* have been blue.

"Blue and small?"

"Yeah, I *said*. And they had funny stamps."

"Funny stamps from where?"

"I don't know. Just funny stamps. One of them had a kind of spear or something on it."

"A spear?" Samantha said, "like from Africa?"

"Yeah, I guess. I don't know," Marvin said.

"Son," Howard said, "would you know if you saw them again?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"We could search the Net," Howard said, "but it would be a pretty big search."

"Maybe I can narrow it down," Samantha said, stomach sinking, "we could try Nepal."

"Slide over, son," Howard said, pulling another chair up. In a second another window was open on the screen. "This is a really good search engine," Howard said, "let's try Nepal and stamps."

In a few seconds the screen filled with URLs. "There's something called Nepal Stamp Page," Howard said. "Sounds like a good place to try." He clicked on the URL and another window sprang open. "Just the very thing," he said as he warmed to his task. "What year?"

"1975," Samantha said.

Click. The screen filled with colorful stamps on a black background.

"See it, son?" Howard asked.

"Yeah, it's that one," Marvin said, pointing to the top right.

"Oh, I see," Howard said, "that isn't a spear, it's some sort of scepter. See? It has a throne and all. A coronation stamp." Using the scroll bar, he revealed additional rows.

"They had one with that tiger, too," Marvin said, "and that one up there with those two people on it. I can't remember the others."

"Wow," Howard said proudly, "hey, don't worry about it. You got three of them. That's a pretty good batting average, son. Say, Sammi, wasn't Danny in Nepal when ..."

"Listen," Samantha said, the room reeling around her, "you've both been a terrific help. I'll see myself out."

"Sammi, are you alright?" Howard said, peering at her, "you look like you've seen a ghost."

"I'm okay. Don't worry about me," Samantha said, "I've got to run. Excuse me."

She didn't run far. About a block away, she pulled the car over and leaned out the door, gasping and struggling to keep her stomach down. She had a sense of unreality, as though she were divorced from the world around her, and realized she was suffering shock.

God, how stupid could she be?

She'd forgotten all about the might-be-blue envelope fragment under Dolly's body and jumped to a colossal conclusion about the letters. Instead of being from the broadcasting school, they'd been from Danny. Who else would write to her from Nepal? And there had

been one to Celia as well. There had been something awful in those letters, because Danny's next letter had spoken of rebuilding their lives and going on.

Samantha lost her battle.

"Good God!"

Wilbur and Harriet Henley were a few feet away, faces showing shock, consternation and fascination. It wasn't every day they got to see the Tipple police chief toss her cookies out the door of a squad car. Their dog, Squid, a yappy little Pomeranian that Samantha had never liked, trotted over to sniff the puddle.

"Squiddie, get away from that mess," Harriet said sharply, hauling on the leash. Squiddie was dragged backwards, toenails scratching pavement. "Honestly," Harriet added, "*bad* Squiddie. Sorry, Samantha."

"Sammi, are you all right?" Wilbur asked belatedly.

"I'm ... fine ... must be something ... I ate," Samantha managed. "It's okay ... why ... don't you folks just go on ... with your walk."

Casting curious glances over their shoulders, the pair moved on, dragging bad Squiddie. She had to pull herself together. She was the police chief, for God's sake. Samantha fumbled out some Kleenex, wiped mouth and chin and took a look in the rearview. Her face was pale and eyes, nestled in deep hollows, were haunted.

The letters taken by Dolly had been letters to her and Celia and must have contained something really juicy to attract Dolly. Some real gossip for the village mill. She realized, as she drove off, that it was going to be a very long night.

Oh, Danny.

Samantha, after a drive of a mile that seemed like a thousand, arrived home to find her daughter on the living room couch with a scrapbook on her lap. She recognized it as the one Ellen had begun in Junior High, when she had begun dating the scrawny young boy who had been her companion right from childhood. The phenom who had then been on the brink of shattering every quarterback football record in the conference.

"Hi, honey," she said, fighting to control her voice as she went to the sideboard, "any messages?"

"Just Bill. Dr Blake. He said he had to run a couple of errands, so he might be a bit late."

God, she'd forgotten all about dinner with Blake. She'd have to call it off. She was far too shocked and distressed to engage in social civilities, even with Blake, who was remarkably easy to talk to.

"I'll have to get hold of him and take a rain check," she said.

"He was already on his way out and wasn't taking his cell phone," Ellen said. "You wouldn't have much luck."

Samantha sighed. Well, maybe it wouldn't hurt to have Blake on hand. He could play private psychiatrist to the Bentley family. They were probably going to need one. In the morning she'd have to see the district attorney about Abel, a task she dreaded, but in the meantime, there wasn't a lot she could do. It was just so bizarre.

She carefully poured two fingers of scotch, her limit on the rare occasions she drank at all, then, noticing how her hand was trembling, recklessly added another

two fingers. Then she crossed the room to sit next to her daughter.

"That's pretty heavy, Mom," Ellen said, looking at the glass, "tough day?"

"A lot more than just tough," Samantha sighed, "I'd ask you to sit down, but you're already sitting."

"Uh oh."

"Honey, there's been a ... a development."

"Oh, God, are you *fired*?"

"No, no, not yet."

"Dolly?"

"Yeah."

"Big one or little one?"

"Big."

"Uh oh. Okay, let's have it."

"Honey, I've got Abel in jail. He's confessed to killing Dolly. And Celia."

"*What?*" Ellen's eyes opened wide with shock and her mouth fell open. If it had not been such horrible news, her reaction would have been comic. "Mom, this has to be a *joke*."

"It's true. I can't believe it, but Abel killed Celia. He said he killed her because she found out he was buying sex from Dolly Jenkins."

"*Dolly? Buying sex from Dolly?* My God, I don't *believe* it."

"It's a bit of a stretch, I must say, but it's what Abel claims."

The two sat and stared at each other, eyes mirroring each other's incredulity.

"I can't believe he could have been having it on with Dolly," Ellen said. "It's just crazy. Why would he kill her?"

"He told us he killed Dolly because she was going to blackmail him. She was afraid of Matt Helprin and wanted money to get out of the valley. I don't know, honey. I doubted it at first, but that was just wishful thinking. Crazy as it seems, what Abel says is what fits. On the fourth, Dolly did her strip tease and Matt sexually assaulted her. Later he threatened her with a piece of pipe. She got scared and went to Abel and demanded ten thousand dollars. When he told her he didn't have it, she threatened to expose him. He killed her."

"Oh, God ..."

"Well, he was very drunk. You know how bad he gets on the Fourth. Couldn't even remember when he moved Dolly's body."

"What about Celia?"

"Celia had found out about Abel and Dolly," Samantha sighed. "She was going to divorce him and take half the store. I don't think Abel could stand the disgrace."

"My God, Mom. My God ... Oh, poor Odin."

"That's not all of it," Samantha said, taking a large swallow and shuddering as woody-tasting fluid ignited her stomach. "Maybe it's not even the worst of it."

"Oh, my God. What more could there be?"

Samantha took Ellen's hands, noticing her daughter's fingers seemed stiff and icy.

"Honey," she said, squeezing tightly, "I don't know how to tell you this, so I'm just going to spill it. There's a very, very good chance that you and Odin are half-siblings."

"What?"

"No, wait, I'll explain. I think your father was having an affair with Celia Larsen when he ... got killed. If that's true, you could easily be a half-sister to Odin."

"I've been sleeping with my *brother*? That is so gross! Why in God's name would you think that?"

"There's an incredible similarity in their smiles," Samantha said. "I don't know why I never saw it before. It's just so obvious."

"Mom, this is all in your mind. Odin doesn't look like Daddy," Ellen said shakily. "You're just imagining things."

"They have the same smile, honey. I always liked Odin's smile and tonight I compared pictures and realized it's the same smile."

"That sounds a bit thin."

"I couldn't believe it either. Well, there's something else. Remember, when he went missing, The Mailman was carrying letters to Celia and me? The letters Marvin saw Dolly drop?"

"The ones from that school."

"Honey, I was wrong."

"Mom, what are you *talking* about?"

"Before I came home I went over to the Hamptons. I did what I should have done the night we talked to Marvin. I asked him to describe the letters he saw Dolly drop. They were airmail envelopes, and they had Nepalese stamps. Marvin recognized them from a web site."

"Omigod," Ellen said in a small voice. "Well, why do you think they were about ... about an affair?"

"Because of a letter I have in the attic trunk," Samantha explained. "Your father's last letter referred to one I don't think I ever got. He said we'd rebuild our

lives and he was terribly sorry for what he'd done. I think it's pretty clear what he did."

"God, my *brother*. Oh, hell, that's just disgusting," Ellen said, "but why would Dolly care about something like that? Like Daddy ... Daddy having an affair with Celia Larsen?"

"I think it was Matt Helprin. I think she was afraid of Matt and needed money to get away from here. She planned to blackmail Abel because he'd been paying her for sex. I think she was planning to bring the letters to me and try to blackmail me, too. Threaten to destroy your marriage before it even happened. But she went to Abel first and he killed her."

"But Abel couldn't do anything like that. Kill a person."

"He was in Korea," Samantha said.

"As a medical corpsman, Mom. He was saving people, not killing them."

"Maybe he did other things over there." Samantha sighed. "But I'm afraid it fits all too well, honey. I'm convinced you and Odin are brother and sister. Half-brother and half-sister, anyway."

"God, that's just so goddam gross. We couldn't get married ... I think I need that more than you." She took a large swallow of scotch, gasping and choking as the liquor burned its way down her throat.

"Oh, darling, I'm so sorry," Samantha said, tears in her eyes as she braced herself for an explosion of grief. To her surprise, Ellen sighed with what sounded more like relief and relaxed, leaning back and crossing her arms.

"I'm not," she said. "Not really."

"What?"

This seemed like a night for stunning surprises. First Abel, then Danny, now Ellen. Lord, was *nothing* what it seemed?

"Well, I'm sorry for Odin, of course. I guess he'll be as grossed out as I am. But I'm not sorry about not being able to marry him. I've been having very serious second thoughts about marrying Odin. In fact, I'd decided to call it off anyway."

"Honey, why? I thought you loved Odin."

"Well, it's kind of hard to explain, but our marriage was just something that everyone sort of expected to happen, you know? We started dating in junior high. Odin was going to become a big football hero and I was the young heiress Ellen Bentley. It was a storybook romance. Right out of Harlequin. Everybody, and I mean *everybody*, even you, Mom, expected it."

"You never told me."

"There was just so much pressure all the time," Ellen said, "right from our freshman year. Then Odin really did become a huge football hero and I got to be student union president and it was kind of like ... fulfilling a prophecy. Nobody ever thought either of us would go out with anyone else."

"I had no idea," Samantha said, "were there other boys who might have asked you out?"

"Oh, yes, about a dozen over the four years," Ellen said. "I would have gone with them, too, probably, but none of them ever asked me. Not even the seniors, when I was in my junior year. Who would ask out Odin Larsen's girl?"

"Couldn't you have approached them?"

"I suppose. But, like I say, everyone expected me to graduate from high school and marry Odin. It was just

such a set piece, I guess I came to expect it, too. I talked to Dr Blake about it a few days ago. He said that when everyone around you expects you to do something, there's a powerful pressure to convince yourself it's right for you. He said most folks do exactly that. Even if they know at first it's the wrong thing to do, they manage to make themselves think it's right. At least for a while."

"Honey, I never guessed. You should have told me. I would have ended it."

"Mom, I have to fight my own battles. I should have ended it, not you."

"Well, at least you have an excuse now."

"I was going to end it tonight, anyway. I had sort of figured my way around the love part of things. And after I talked to Bill, ah, Dr Blake, I could see there was a kind of guilt there."

"Guilt?"

"I guess I was concerned about how this would look to everyone around here. It would look as though I was abandoning Odin now that he's not a big football hero. Now that he's just a co-owner of a failing hardware store in a dinky little mining town that doesn't even mine any more."

"I see."

"I would know it wasn't true, and that I would have broken it off even if he were an NFL superstar the way he was supposed to be, but the rest of the world wouldn't. I guess I didn't want people to think I was just a shallow little glory hound, only interested in Odin because he was a huge celeb."

"I don't think people would think that," Samantha said, though her voice lacked conviction. God, that was *exactly* what most of them would think.

"Yes, you do, Mom," Ellen said, "and yes they will. But I've got to grow up and not sacrifice my life on the altar of their opinions."

"Did Bill say that?"

"Not in so many words."

"But words to that effect."

"Yes, sort of. He sort of helped me see that's what I was thinking. That's why I've been looking at this album. You know why I kept this stupid thing?"

"Well, I thought ...

"I kept it because I was *supposed* to do things like that. Everybody expected me to save his clippings. The girls used to come over, remember, and they'd make me get out this album and they'd sigh and swoon and get all runny. I'd sort of feel like a fairytale princess with her court. And I'd try to love Odin because I was supposed to."

"You'd try ..."

"I used to look at these pictures and try to *will* myself to love him. But I've never loved him, Mom. Not really."

"Oh, honey, is that why you put off the wedding those times?"

"I guess so. I didn't really think of it like that. I mean, I really *did* have my studies and all, but I guess the real reason was that, deep down, I just didn't want to marry Odin. I've been sitting here trying to figure out where it all got started. Where everybody started thinking of us as an item."

"Now I'm starting to feel guilty. I guess I always thought of you two that way. I sometimes thought you

should look around, but then I thought you'd never find a better young man than Odin."

"He was always just perfect, wasn't he, Mom?"

"Still is, I thought," Samantha said.

"Yes, still is, I guess. He's perfect, but even if he weren't my brother, the chemistry is just not there. Not for me, anyway. I know he loves me, but I don't love him. Remember Tony Healy?"

"Sort of."

"Grade nine. He was a funny little guy with narrow shoulders and thick glasses and homely as hell, but I liked him a lot more than I liked Odin. Naturally he never dared ask me out."

"And you ..."

"Would have gone out with him. Sure. I didn't care what he looked like, or that he could hardly pick up a football. He had this great sense of humor. He always made me laugh and I really liked him. I liked being around him because he always gave me such a lift. I never liked being around with Odin that way. It was more like the king and queen attending official functions. Like once we were there it was an official event."

"You could have asked him."

"Mom, he wouldn't have dared accept. It would have put him in a horrible position. I liked him too much to do that to him."

"Odin wouldn't have hurt him."

"No, I don't think he would have, but the rest of the school would have scorned him right out. The ugly troll doesn't get the princess, Mom. You don't mess with a fairytale."

"God, honey, that's ..." Words temporarily failed Samantha. "... horrible," she said after a pause, "Are you going to tell Odin tonight?"

"Yes, he called after I talked to you. We're going to a movie and stop off somewhere for a late meal. I'll do it then."

"Will you be okay?"

"With Odin? Oh, sure. It won't be a lot of fun, but it's something I had to do anyway, and I just couldn't put it off any more."

"No, I don't suppose you could," Samantha said. "I guess he's just going to have to get on with his life. It's going to be an awful blow to find out about himself and his father on the same night. I'm not looking forward to telling him about Abel any more than you're looking forward to ... to telling him you're his ... his sister."

Ellen took another gulp of scotch. She wasn't a drinker, either, and there were tears in her eyes as she shuddered and suppressed a fit of coughing. The alcohol was already taking effect.

"Mom, I want to tell him about Abel, too. If he doesn't already know. It would be better coming from me. You know, what with our relationship and all. It would be better for me, too."

"Maybe I should ..."

"Mom, no, please. Let me do it. It doesn't matter whether I do it, does it?"

"I guess not," Samantha said, reluctantly.

"I'll be okay. I'd like to tell him we're breaking it off, first. Maybe I'm selfish, but I want him to have his mind clear when I tell him ... well, about our being brother and sister, maybe, and that I was going to walk out

anyway. Then I can tell him about Abel. It's going to be a lot for poor Odin to absorb all at once."

"Poor Odin is right. No football career, and now no fiancée or father."

"It isn't like we're abandoning him, Mom. We'll still be here for him, won't we? He's family. I'm just not going to marry him, that's all."

"Well, I guess he's pretty resilient," Samantha said, "he did overcome his injury and all."

"Yeah, he'll come through it," Ellen said, leaning forward and turning back to the beginning of the scrapbook. The sole clipping on the first page was a small article from *The Tipple Miner* about a freshman with, it seemed, a genuine chance to make the Tipple Coal Miners' first string. If young Odin Larsen actually made it as No. 2 quarterback, the article noted, it would be totally unprecedented in the entire conference. The story went on to quote coach Ray Edwards, a former fringe NFL player and star in the Canadian Football League, who said he had never in his entire career seen anything like the potential in this young man.

"You see?" Ellen said. "There he was. The whole school was talking about him. Nobody could believe it. He was just a skinny, wet-behind-the-ears kid fresh out of grade school, just like all the rest of us. Then he decided one day that he was going to play football and it seemed the next day the entire valley was talking about it. And there I was, the heiress, the Princess of Tipple. Danny Bentley's daughter. What could have been more natural?"

She turned the page. There was a large picture of a very young Odin in full uniform, helmet tucked under one arm, facing the camera with that familiar smile. The

smile that said he had been born to the purple and had never had a doubt.

God, it was Danny reincarnated.

Why had she never noticed that?

Because she hadn't wanted to see it?

The headline announced that not only had the phenomenal Odin Larsen made first string, but he would start at quarterback against the Bellevue Bombers in the season opener. Ray Edwards was quoted as claiming this was not the risk it seemed to be. This young man, he predicted, would rip the Bombers' secondary to shreds. On the adjacent page was another picture of Odin under the headline 'MINERS DIG A HOLE FOR BOMBERS - WIN OPENER 49-14'. A deck head informed the world that the sensational young Odin Larsen had passed for six touchdowns and scrambled for a seventh in an unprecedented destruction of the powerful Bombers.

"That was just incredible," Ellen said, "nobody could talk about anything else, remember? God, even seniors were coming around to Odin's locker. All of us dweebs were in awe. But he handled it so well. You know, he didn't lord it over anyone. He was just so ... so self-effacing. Like he's always been. I remember once, right after that game, there was a big lineup of kids waiting to check out biology textbooks. Odin showed up and stood at the back of the line. One of the guys up front offered to trade places and Odin asked him why. Said 'that's your place. You came early. This is my place. This is my penalty for coming late' and then he just stood there, reading, and waited his turn. That's just the way he always was. He had all this position in high

school, but he never took advantage. Someone I should have loved but just didn't."

Ellen flipped through a few more pages. By his sophomore year, Odin was being touted as the greatest quarterback ever in the conference. There were some stories that called him the greatest, period. One article, accompanied by a picture of Abel Larsen raising a fire axe over a telephone, said the Larsen household would need a separate phone line just to handle calls from college scouts.

"That was the year you became student council president," Samantha recalled. "Your father would have been so proud. I certainly was."

"It was all there, you see?" Ellen said. "Everyone thought we'd be homecoming King and Queen, which, naturally, we were. And we'd marry in some sort of storybook wedding and Odin would go on to a brilliant career in the NFL and we'd come back to Tipple and live happily ever after. It was all so perfect."

"Except for Odin's knee," Samantha said.

"Yeah. Except for Odin's knee. And the fact that I don't love him. Now, I guess, the fact that he's my ... my brother."

Odin's knee had been destroyed in the eighth game of his first season on the University of Washington Huskies, ending his chances of stardom in the NFL. Samantha remembered the terrible days of surgery and rehab paid for in part by the university insurance, in part by Abel with money that was to have gone to modernizing Larsen Hardware and in part by a generous, interest-free 'loan' from the 'Bentley Foundation'. Days of optimism as the finest surgeons in the state said there was at least a slim chance the

young star would play again, followed by days of despair as it became apparent that, try as he might, Odin would never even walk properly, much less play ball. Days of darkness as legions of scouts and sports writers drifted away and a sad, bitter young man faced the end of his dreams.

"It was kind of fun, though, in a juvenile way," Ellen said.

"What?"

"Well, you know. All the other girls were so jealous. It was just ... well ... fun. They all wanted Odin and I had him. They were ladies of the court, but I was the princess. Here, look," Ellen said, leafing through the album to the front. On the fourth page was a shot of Odin being carried off the field on the shoulders of his linemen. One hand was raised in victory and the other reached out to a forest of students. He looked shockingly small and vulnerable.

"His first big win," Ellen said, "first game, first freshman ever to start at quarterback. Annihilating the last year's conference champs. They had most of their championship players in their lineup, too. It was pretty wonderful for him. All my friends were swooning for days afterwards."

"I remember," Samantha said. "Celia was so proud and I thought Abel would burst. It was quite a day."

"See all those girls?" Ellen pointed to the throng around Odin. "Tell me they weren't jealous."

"I guess they were."

"God, everybody looks so *young*," Ellen said, peering closely at the picture.

"Oh, sure, a lot of years have gone by," Samantha said dryly, "I can see how everybody would look a *lot* older."

"Hey, look, there's Dolly Jenkins," Ellen said.

Samantha looked at the bottom right of the picture, where her daughter was pointing. There, unmistakably, was a skinny, prepubescent Dolly Jenkins gazing enraptured at Odin.

"Was poor Dolly one of the jealous ones?"

"I don't think so. I always thought she had a thing for Chummy McLarnen. He was hanging around her for a while when we were in grade twelve. I kind of thought they were an item."

Ellen turned the page to a shot of Odin standing on the sidelines during a practice. Several students stood nearby, but Dolly Jenkins was not among them. The next picture was another victory celebration.

"Cam really liked those shots, didn't he?" Samantha said, checking the credit line. Cam Steeples, Harlan's younger brother and *Tipple Miner* photographer, had relied heavily on several standard shots. The victory parade off the field had been a favorite.

"He got lots of practice," Ellen said. "Odin didn't lose many, did he?"

"Oh, here's Dolly in this one, too," Samantha said.

"Omigod, so she is. God, how many?"

Together they went through the album from cover to cover, carefully inspecting all pictures that included non-players. There were thirty-seven, and Dolly was prominent in twenty-five. Always gazing at Odin and wearing the same enraptured expression. By Odin's senior year, she had been twelve and already clearly following the footsteps of Marvelous Molly Melons.

"Well, so much for the Chummy McLarnen theory," Samantha said as they reached the last page, "looks more like she was hanging around Chummy because he's a big friend of Odin's. Guess it got her close to Odin."

"God," Ellen said, "I never guessed. Poor Dolly. Remember that day in the bleachers, the day you picked me up? A day or so before Dolly went missing? Remember that dark look?"

"I guess we have an explanation," Samantha said, "and I thought she was mad at me for some reason. Hated cops or something."

"No, when she was in group, she ..."

The front door chimes heralded the arrival of Odin Larsen, cutting off whatever Ellen had been about to say concerning Dolly's time in Thea Carter group meetings. A moment later Hattie escorted him into the living room.

"Good evening, ladies," he said with his lopsided, now all-too-familiar grin. "My love, the big yellow chariot awaits. Cleaned up, gassed, ready to roll."

"I'll get my purse," Ellen said, getting up. "Mom, remember your promise."

She walked out of the room, followed by the gaze of a puzzled Odin Larsen. Samantha was tempted to tell him that his father had been arrested. It just suddenly didn't seem like a good idea for him to get the terrible news from Ellen. Not on top of the terrible news that his marriage was off and that he had been sleeping with his sister. And yet, she had given her word. Odin turned back and his eye fell on the open scrapbook. His face softened, wiping irony from his smile.

"A blast from the past?" he said quietly, easing his weight onto the couch and picking up the book.

"Ellen had it out," Samantha explained. "I think she was doing a little, ah, room cleaning, and came across it."

"Good days," Odin smiled, quickly leafing through the clippings, "all too quickly over."

He paused at about the middle of the book and glanced quickly at Samantha before returning to his perusal. Samantha, who had turned away, caught the look from the corner of her eye. Perhaps it was her imagination, but it seemed to her that there was, just for a moment, a feral quality in Odin's eyes.

God, she was getting paranoid. If Odin knew about his father, he would already have said something. In fact, he'd probably be down at the jail, not here. Still, she hoped he wouldn't consider it unfair to get the news from Ellen rather than from her. And she hoped that, once things had been sorted out, the pair would head for the jail to visit Abel.

"Okay, let's roll," Ellen said, sticking her head into the room. Odin dropped the scrapbook on the couch, flipping it closed. Using only his good leg and leveraging himself with powerful arms, he rose to his feet in an effortless motion, looking for a second like the lithe young quarterback who had once brought thousands to their feet in shrieking ecstasy. Then he was just Odin again, limping across the living room and down the hall. A moment later the front door opened and closed and the die was cast. Odin would get the bad news from Ellen. A triple dose of bad news, at that.

Still nursing her drink, Samantha sat on the couch and picked up the TV remote. She clicked on the set

and caught the weather forecaster telling her the high pressure ridge that had led to record high temperatures for more than a month now was rapidly breaking down, allowing moist, cooler air to flood in from the Pacific. There was a strong probability that the long hot spell would end in heavy thunderstorm activity over a wide area. Forest crews, already on high alert for weeks, were mounting a round the clock vigil. On Snoqualmie Ridge

Samantha restlessly snapped the set off. She just couldn't concentrate enough to absorb the news broadcast and the television was irritating. Noticing that she was sitting on a corner of the scrapbook, she reached down to push it out of her way, then realized that the TV guide had become partially caught between the pages when Odin had flipped the scrapbook closed.

Curious, she opened it to the inadvertently marked page. It was one of the triumph pictures, taken in the senior year. One that featured a very prominent twelve-year-old Dolly Jenkins, face flushed, mouth parted and eyes glazed with adoration. That was the picture Odin had been looking at when he'd glanced at her with that strange expression.

If the look hadn't been just a figment of her tired imagination.

Poor Odin. It was just so terrible about poor Odin. Such a brilliant career ahead. Brilliant career, great marriage to a beautiful, rich, capable, sophisticated young lady that any man would be lucky to have. He'd been leading a charmed life from the pages of a fairy tale. Then he'd blown out his knee and that was it for the football career.

She looked through the pictures again, realizing that Abel was also prominent in most victory shots, also gazing enraptured at Odin. Poor Abel, too. He loved the boy so much. What a lot of grief. Were it not for the fact that Ellen really didn't want Odin and the problems surrounding marriage between half-siblings, Samantha could almost wish Mailman Mel had never been found.

It was just impossible to believe the kindly, gentle Abel could have killed two women. In all the years she had known the man, she had never seen any dark side. If he had any weakness at all, it was overwhelming love of his son. And pride in the boy's football career. Nor had he ever seemed a secretive man. He'd always seemed more the sort who wore his heart very much on his sleeve. She could remember Odin once, as a child, questioning his father about the possibility of a surprise birthday party for himself. Samantha had known there was a party planned and had managed to lie when Odin asked her. Abel, under questioning from a child, had stammered and become red in the face, and finally admitted there was a party, saying he just wasn't any good at lying.

Samantha remembered Celia's laughter when she'd found out. Remembered her saying that the next time, she'd have to keep the secret from Abel, too.

How could a man who couldn't even keep a kid's birthday party secret have managed to keep quiet a four-year sexual liaison with Dolly Jenkins? And why would a girl who had such a crush on high school football hero Odin Larsen be, to put it crudely, fucking his father for peanuts?

Poor Odin. No football career, and now no Ellen. He'd be just another ex-high school jock who happened

to walk funny. An ex-high school jock with a kiddy-diddler father in jail for murder, never mentioned in his real father's will and his only source of income a failing hardware store. And all because Mailman Mel had finally, truly, haunted Tipple. The Mailman had come from beyond death to put into the lovesick Dolly's hands two incriminating letters that had placed Samantha on the blackmail list. Abel, too, after threats from Helprin. Samantha looked again at the pictures. At the yearning adoration on Dolly's face. These, she was willing to bet, were the only pictures of Dolly Jenkins in which the girl wouldn't look sullen. The poor, desperate, lovesick Dolly.

Samantha's blood suddenly turned to ice, as though skeletal hands of The Mailman were wrapped around her throat.

There was another way of looking at it.

What if Dolly had not gone to blackmail Abel at all? What if money had never had anything to do with it? What if there had never been any sex between Abel Larsen and Dolly Jenkins?

What if she had gone to the fishing shack looking for Odin?

Here, in two letters, she had proof that Odin Larsen and Ellen Bentley were half-siblings. Proof of something that would end marriage plans. And a lovesick girl would get a chance to be on hand and console the bitterly disappointed ex-football hero. And have him fall in love with her. Naturally.

It wasn't about money. It was about an obsessive, unrequited love. She would confront Odin, not his father, with the letters. And what might a man of swift and decisive action like Odin do if he thought his entire

future was threatened by a slatternly little girl with a couple of old letters?

Good God, suppose he had already done it once before. When had Celia had her so-called accident?

It had been the day Odin had proposed and Ellen had accepted. A hot summer day, just like this one. Odin had come by the station, alone because Ellen was off on a Thea Carter Society outing, and called her 'Mom' for the first time. He had seemed almost shy about it but his self-effacing smile had been so endearing she had just melted. Odin had left the station saying he had to get home to pass along the good news.

What time had that been? About eleven am. The horrible call from Abel had come in at about noon. The rest of the day was just a blur to Samantha. Abel had been hovering around, nearly hysterical, desperate in his need to help. A tight-faced, pale Odin Larsen had been there, too, lending what help he could. And walking all over the crime scene. Contaminating the physical evidence beyond redemption. And Samantha had been so immediately certain it had been an accident that she had never thought to call in backup and seal off the scene.

Later Odin's statement would claim he had left the station at about eleven am, then, thinking his mother was taking a nap, had gone looking for Chummy McLarnen to tell him the good news. Failing to locate McLarnen, he had finally given up and gone home, arriving about noon. There he found Abel, who had arrived about ten minutes before him, trying to revive his mother.

Abel's statement claimed that he had left Henry Thurgood to look after the hardware store while he went home for lunch. This, Samantha knew, was not uncommon. He had arrived shortly before noon to find Celia lying at the foot of the back steps. She had obviously stepped on the loose tread at the top. The one he had been meaning to fix. He blamed himself for the tragedy.

At the time, the statements seemed to neatly dovetail with each other. But now they seemed sinister and full of unanswered questions.

For one thing, Celia Larsen had been the closest thing to a human dynamo Samantha had ever seen. She had not been in the habit of taking naps at any time and certainly not in the morning. Samantha could recall being mildly surprised that morning when Odin had said Celia was napping. And in the light of her new suspicions, it seemed awfully convenient that he'd spent nearly an hour doing something that nobody could trace. He hadn't bought anything, visited any stores, been anywhere where someone would remember seeing him. He'd just 'driven around' looking for McLarnen.

Suppose, instead, that Odin had gone straight home to tell Celia he was at last going to marry his high school sweetheart and heiress? Suppose Celia had kept her secret all those years hoping the two would split up for some reason and she'd never have to tell? She might have greeted the wedding announcement with the news that Odin and Ellen were half-siblings and no marriage between them could ever take place? Suppose his response had been to bludgeon her to death to keep her from telling anyone?

He would have had time to fake a murder scene before Abel came home.

But Abel would know there had been no loose stair tread.

No, Abel might not have been involved in the actual murder, but he had helped to cover it up. He had loudly called attention to the loose tread and hovered around the investigation, creating a huge distraction in a successful attempt to ensure that neither Samantha nor Medley noticed anything amiss.

Suddenly, Samantha thought of Odin's car rolling past Dolly Jenkins' bedroom. There was Dolly, changing out of her ripped skirt. She'd been looking for clean panties when she'd seen Odin Larsen barreling past in the dusk, headed for the fishing shack. That would be her chance to catch him alone and confront him with her evidence. She forgot about changing panties and grabbed a pair of jeans. She had run along Lake Road for about a half mile, then down to the Larsen's fishing cabin where she had found Odin. Wearing, of course, his new Doc Martens boots. She told him he couldn't marry Ellen Bentley because they were half siblings. Here were letters that proved it. What would Odin do? Suppose he had already bludgeoned his mother to death. Would he balk at braining and strangling Dolly Jenkins?

Why the fern patch? Perhaps bludgeoning his mother to death in the gazebo had made him an instant expert on blood splattering. He wouldn't want to make a mess in the cabin. He would tell her they'd take a little walk. Maybe tell her he really loved her all along and suggest they lie down in a fragrant bed of ferns and

make love. Or maybe she would walk into the ferns and sit down, telling him to come and sit down beside her.

He'd ascertain that these were the only copies of the two letters that could prove his sibling relationship to Ellen Bentley. Perhaps he would wait till she was sitting in the ferns, then strike her from behind with a blunt object. Then he'd strangle her while she was unconscious. There he'd be with a dead body on his hands. He'd have to get it a good distance away from the cabin. But there would be nobody to see him, so why not just load it into his car and find some spot along Lake Road to dump it? But what if he were really cool? What if he decided right then and there to put the body in the mineshaft in an attempt to frame Helprin? Maybe put the body in an old cooler at his father's fishing cabin? Burn the letters in the cabin stove?

He'd have to move the body fairly soon, of course. It would start to smell in about twenty-four hours. Why not just drive it at night? He picked the mineshaft to cast suspicion on Jenkins and Helprin. He couldn't get up there without the Jeep. He would have had to go to his home and get the Jeep, then go back to the cabin for the body. Suppose he had intended to do that but got delayed? What had Ellen said? That Odin got caught up in a surprise celebration? Something like that. He was at home when the group found him and dragged him off to Seattle. And Odin had gotten so drunk he passed out so Ellen, in disgust, left him on someone's couch and returned with some friends to Tipple. That conversation was late July 5, Samantha recalled, and Ellen said Odin was still not home.

Suppose he had finally sobered up enough to move the body on the morning of July 6. He could have

gotten the Jeep and gone up to the cabin sometime after dawn. But Abel had said he went up to the cabin July 6 about eleven or so. Confirmed by Henry Walker. Wouldn't he have had the Jeep?

Leafing through the phone book, she got Walker's number and dialed, catching the man just before his evening nap. Or so he said, voice surly and abrupt.

"Just a quick question," Samantha said, "won't take a minute."

"What do you want, Sammi? Make it quick. I'm an old man and I need my damn sleep."

"Henry, I want you to think back to the morning of July sixth. Remember you told me you went up to go fishing with Abel?"

"Sure I remember. I'm not damn senile, you know. It was right after I put that acidifier on my Sarah Van Fleets. Turned out to be just the thing to do. You know, they were looking a little peaked, and ..."

"They look really nice, now, Henry," Samantha said, "I was by your place just the other day. Now, you were talking to Abel in town about nine when you went to get some fertilizer and ... and ..."

"Moss killer. I remember what I said. I got some acidifier, too."

"Okay, yes, moss killer."

"It was moss killer. That's what I said."

"Yes, I remember now. So Abel went up first and you drove up later."

"That's what I damn said. Got there about one. Like I damn said."

"Was anyone else there when you got there?" Samantha asked.

"Nope. Just Abel and me. Nobody else."

"Did Abel seem to you to be at all nervous? Ill at ease? Bothered by anything?"

"Nope. He was fine. Just finishing up on the window. We got a couple of beers and went out on the lake. Didn't catch a damn thing, though."

"You got the beers from the fish locker," Samantha said.

"Nope. Goddam thing ain't had no ice in it in years. Abel's got a fridge in the place now. We got the beers out of the damn fridge."

"So you never looked in the cooler?"

"Hell, no. Why'n hell would we do that? Damn thing didn't have no ice in it. I told you. Weren't you damn listening?"

"I was. So nobody drove away just as you got there or anything?"

"Nope."

"And you're sure Abel was relaxed? There was nothing wrong?"

"Nope. Nothing wrong with Abel. Hell, I was more nervous than Abel. For a bit, anyhow."

"Why was that, Henry?"

"Because when I damn got there, that yellow GTO of Odin's was parked in front. I figured maybe Odin was there. Never liked that boy. Big football hero and all, but mark my words, there's something damn wrong with that boy."

"The GTO was there?"

"Yep. Turned out that young Odin had the Jeep, so Abel was driving the damn GTO. Sure as hell gave me a turn, though."

"Henry, you've been a big help. Thanks."

Oh God, it didn't take a rocket scientist to see that Odin had taken the Jeep first thing that morning because he knew he'd have to get the body out of the cooler, before someone found it, and up to the mine. The GTO would never make the run.

The body would have been getting gamy by then; it must have been pretty awful. It would have been sunny down there by the lake. And up in the mine yard, probably. Blowflies of genus *Lucilia* could have landed on the body in either place and oviposited.

Odin had then carried the body into the shaft and dumped it. Pulled jeans and panties down so it would look like a sex attack. He'd probably have known all about Dolly's striptease sessions. That was likely common knowledge amongst the younger set. So he'd know suspicion would center more on Helprin than anyone else. Especially after he painted the SS runes and barbed wire on the cave wall near Dolly's head. And subsequently started a rumor that this was Matt Helprin's 'sign'.

Why was Celia Larsen just bludgeoned and not strangled as well? Simple enough. One scene was supposed to be an accident and the other a sex murder. And that would explain Abel's reluctance to go into details about Dolly's killing. Having happened upon his son cleaning up after Celia's murder and helping in the cover-up, Abel would know all about that one. He would be able to give complete and convincing details. Suppose he guessed that Odin had killed Dolly? It wouldn't take a rocket scientist. He'd be more than anxious to have Helprin take the fall. When the noose began to close on his own son, would he take the fall himself? Would he stand in for his son? God, yes. Why

not? Abel Larsen married very late. He was pushing seventy and clearly in failing health. If he got the death penalty, it would mean a dozen or more years in state facilities and then a quick and painless death. If he lasted that long.

That would explain his reluctance to describe how he had killed Dolly. He had admitted to only that which was public knowledge. He had broken off his confession when Samantha pushed for details.

Because he didn't know the details.

He had known only that Dolly Jenkins had been bludgeoned. Not that she had been strangled as well.

Ellen was on the point of ending her relationship with a dark, obsessed young man who had already killed two women. What if Odin lost it when Ellen tried to break off the relationship?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the front doorbell. In a moment she heard the door open and Hattie say, "Good evening, Dr Blake."

Samantha raced to meet Bill Blake in the hallway. A faint smell of wood smoke accompanied the man, but Samantha failed to notice.

"God, Sammi, you look like you've seen a ghost," Blake said, startled by her sallow face.

"Bill, what do you know about Odin Larsen?" she asked breathlessly.

"I had a talk with Ellen a couple of days ago," Blake said. "I think she was planning to break off with him."

"I don't mean that. I mean is he capable of murder?"

"That's a pretty loaded question," Blake said, "why are you asking me?"

"Bill, it's very important. Do you think he's capable of murder?"

"There's something wrong, isn't there?" Blake said, taking her by the arm. "Maybe we should sit down."

"I can't sit down! There's no fucking time!" Samantha cried. "*Can Odin kill?*"

"I don't know for sure," Blake said. "I think if he felt threatened ... I think Odin Larsen may be a psychopath. I think he projects qualities he thinks people will like. It's a well-constructed simulacrum, and it would fool most people. But that's just a guess, I don't have ..."

Samantha raced to the phone, frantically dialing Steeples' home number. She was aware of Blake standing where she'd left him, hat in hand, expression showing he was rapidly putting two and two together.

"Harlan," she said when Steeples came on the line, "I want you to do something important. I want you to round up the others and search the highway out to the Ho Ho. I want you to find Odin and Ellen."

"Because of the fire?"

"What fire?" Samantha asked, heart sinking with new dread.

"They got a bad one going up Snoqualmie Ridge. It's about three thousand acres right now and spreading fast. No containment. Stanley-Emmerson has everyone they can get up there now. Water bombers are coming in. Forest service is sending men. It's a total disaster."

"Oh, God, Harlan, forget the fire, please. Get the sheriff's people to search between here and Seattle. Get a roadblock up on the main highway past the Ho Ho. Don't use the radio, not even Tac 2. I don't think it's secure. Hurry, Harlan, *please*."

"Do what when we find them?" Steeples asked.

"If you can get Odin away from Ellen without arousing his suspicions, arrest him for the murders of Celia and Dolly," Samantha said, "otherwise, just keep him in sight while we figure out what to do."

"Oh, come *on*, Sammi. It's Abel. We've *got* the guy. What's *this*?"

"This is the *wrong* guy, Harlan. Trust me, *please*! I haven't time to explain, but trust me. I know things are moving pretty fast, but I know what I'm doing. It all makes sense to me, now. Get on it, now, *please*."

Still obviously baffled, but responding to urgency in Samantha's voice, Steeples said he would get the search underway and hung up.

"Okay, Samantha, what's going on?" Blake asked.

"Bill, I'm sorry, but we're going to have to take a rain check, here. I've made a *huge* mistake. Odin is the man who killed both his mother and Dolly Jenkins. I didn't figure it out till just now. I have Abel in jail for it. Ellen was going to break off their relationship tonight and at the same time tell Odin that his father is in jail and I was stupid enough to let her do it. And there's a major forest fire going on about ten miles from here. Does it get any worse?"

"No, it doesn't," said Blake, suddenly grim.

"I'm sorry. I've got to go."

"I'm coming with you."

"Bill, this is police business."

"You might need me. You might have to talk to him."

That was true. She might have to talk Odin Larsen out of harming her only child. They ran out into the blistering evening and drove frantically to the station. With the cruiser's windows down, the acrid smell of wood smoke was heavy on the air.

They found Abel sitting on the gray blanket of his prison bunk, smoking and staring into space. As Samantha and Blake entered the cell he looked up, iron-gray hair hanging over his eyes, then began a fit of coughing, culminating in an incredible amount of phlegm that he spat into the metal toilet. Then he went back to smoking, seemingly oblivious to their presence.

"Abel, where has Odin gone?" Samantha asked, struggling to keep her voice rational.

Larsen looked surprised at the question. "I don't know, Sammi," he said, "Odin doesn't tell me where he goes."

"I have people looking for him," Samantha said. "If they don't find him, he may harm my daughter. Does he have any secret places we don't know about? Places he could take her?"

"I don't know, angel," Larsen said. "If they were secret, I wouldn't know about them either, would I?"

"Don't jerk me around, Abel!" Samantha shouted. "Don't you *dare* jerk me around!"

"I'm not ..." Larsen doubled over in a new fit of coughing, eyes streaming and face purpling. Looking at his arms, Samantha realized that Abel, once a giant of a man, had lost an incredible amount of weight. How strange that she hadn't really noticed how thin his neck had gotten. His head sat on it like a golf ball on a toothpick and the bones of his eye sockets were clearly visible.

The truth came to Samantha even as Abel sat back up, gasping for breath.

"You have cancer, Abel, don't you?" she asked.

Abel glanced at her again, then looked down at trembling hands. "Can't hold them still any more," he said. "Just keep on shaking."

"Don't you?"

"Yeah," Abel sighed, "both lungs. Inoperable."

"What about chemotherapy? Radiation?"

Abel shook his head sadly. "Nope. The doctors figure it would kill me before the cancer does."

"How long have you got?"

"That's pretty blunt," Abel said, "even for you, Sammi."

"How long?"

"Few months. No more."

"How long do you think my Ellen has?" Samantha asked.

"Ellie?" Abel said, clearly puzzled. "How long Ellie has to live? Who knows? Long time, I guess. I don't understand what you want."

"I don't think my daughter has that long, Abel," Samantha said, keeping her voice steady, "she's out with Odin right now. She's going to tell him she won't marry him."

"Why ... why not? Because his dad is a killer?" Abel asked.

"Because she doesn't really love him, Abel. And because they're half brother and sister."

The cigarette slipped from Abel's suddenly nerveless fingers and hit the floor in a shower of sparks. He fumbled the pack from his shirt pocket and lit another. His eyes, locked on Samantha's, showed shock and growing fear.

"I have to have the truth, Abel," Samantha said. "You know Dr Blake. He thinks Odin is a very

dangerous psychopath. You know Odin is very dangerous, don't you?"

"Yes."

The answer was a long sigh which sent Abel into another paroxysm of coughing. Samantha could do nothing but wait it out.

"But ..." he gasped as the racking coughs subsided, "not to you, Sammi. Not to Ellie. No, no, he loves you guys. Don't you see? He loves Ellen. *She belongs to him.* See?"

"That's why you were smiling when I talked to you in your store. You can't lie worth shit, can you? Just can't keep a straight face, can you?"

"No, never could," Abel said, launching into another coughing jag.

"Who really killed Celia, Abel?" Samantha asked when the fit eased.

"You already know who."

"Odin."

"No, I told you. It was me. She was going to ruin me, Sammi."

"You're lying. *Don't you lie to me, Abel Larsen!*"

"No, it was me ... I ..."

Samantha suddenly sprang at Larsen, swinging punches the way Harry Miller had taught his tough, coal-miner's daughter so many years before. Two blows caught Larsen, snapping his head back, before Bill Blake pinioned her.

"That's enough, Sammi, for chrissakes!" he gasped. They nearly overbalanced and fell on Larsen. After a moment, Samantha relaxed in Blake's grasp, controlling her breathing with an almost superhuman effort. Larsen retrieved his cigarette and sat up, blood

trickling from nose and mouth. The side of his face was starting to swell.

"Abel, I'm sorry," Samantha said, "I'm ... sorry ..."

"It's all right, angel," Larsen sighed, wiping at his cheek. He stared at smears of blood matted in hair on the back of his hand and took a long drag on the cigarette.

"Please tell me the truth, Abel, *please*," Samantha pleaded.

The combination of Samantha's pleading and blood on his hand seemed to penetrate Larsen's denial.

"All right," he sighed, "I guess I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. I got home that day and Odin called me around to the back. Said his mom had fallen down the stairs. I ran around there and she was lying ... well ... the way you saw her, Sammi. Like that. But I could see that the walkway to the gazebo had been washed and the gazebo steps were wet."

Abel suddenly doubled over in yet another fit of coughing, holding his cigarette in his mouth and wrapping both emaciated arms around his chest as though to keep ribs from breaking through skin. Samantha noticed a blue haze of wood smoke in the cellblock and realized the forest fire had really taken hold. On the street outside a truck roared past and she heard the squeal of its tires as it took a right turn onto the highway and roared off towards Snoqualmie Ridge.

"That fire must be going pretty good," Blake said.

"Sure as hell is and the wind is this way," Samantha responded grimly, eyes still on Abel, "hope you didn't sign your mortgage yet."

"Afraid I did. We're neighbors."

"Get good fire insurance?"

Abel straightened up, gasping for breath, took another drag and wiped a stream of tears as he resumed his narrative.

"Celia and I really weren't getting along well," he said, "that much of what I told you was true. And I love my son very dearly. So I pretended to believe him. But I'm not a stupid man, Sammi. I could see what really happened. There hadn't been any loose tread. You know I'd have fixed anything like that right away."

Abel said he had told Odin to go in and wash up while he tried to help Celia.

"I said it was so nobody would get the wrong idea, you see," Abel said.

Then, with Odin gone inside, Abel had discovered to his shock and consternation that Celia was clinging to life.

"She didn't have much left. I knew that. I was a medical corpsman, remember. Saw a lot of people die in Korea. She was dying, and there was nothing I could have done for her. But she told me about Odin and Ellen. Told me that Odin came and said he was going to marry Ellie and she told him he couldn't do it because she had an affair with Danny and he was really Danny's son. Two reasons I figured that was true."

"What reasons?"

"I figured it was true because it was a deathbed confession, so to speak. That was one. And the other is that I'm sterile."

"Sterile?" Samantha said, shocked.

"Yep. Always have been. I could never father a child of my own. When Celia told me she was pregnant, well, I knew it wasn't mine, and so did she, but nobody else

would. It was a chance to have a child and I never regretted it.”

“Didn’t you know who the father was?”

“Not for sure. I never asked Ceil,” Abel said, “I just put it clear out of my mind. We sort of made up our differences, Celia and me, and she gave birth to Odin. And what a son he was ... Remember the game against ...”

“*Never mind!* Do you believe me now? Abel, do you believe Danny is Odin’s real father?”

“Yep. I heard around about the two letters. I heard there was a letter to you and one to Ceil. I figured they were from Danny and that they had to do with the affair between those two. I figured Danny must have come clean that he was Odin’s real father and that little tramp was out to cause trouble. When she turned up dead like that, well, I guessed it had to be Odin.”

“Why didn’t you come to me? About Celia? Why did you cover up a *murder*?”

“It wouldn’t have brought her back to life and Odin was just living for the day he’d marry Ellen. It would have destroyed my son’s life,” Abel said. “What would have been the good of that?”

“Dolly Jenkins would still be alive. And my Ellen would be safe, dammit!”

Abel stared at the cigarette, held in gnarled, nicotine-yellowed fingers that looked skeletal in harsh light from the single overhead bulb in the cell. The cigarette trembled as he raised it to his mouth, sucking smoke deep into ravaged lungs.

“I ... I’m sorry about Dolly. Sammi, how could I ever have imagined that Mailman Mel would be found and that he’d be carrying a couple of letters saying those

things? And ... and that Dolly would take them to Odin? That was a stupid thing to do."

"Abel, a naive little girl with a huge crush on Odin wouldn't see any danger. Nobody would. He's so good at projecting a warm, wonderful human being. But *damn* you, *you knew!* You covered for a *murderer*. Twice."

Burton Jenkins stuck his head into the cellblock.

"Harlan just radioed in," he said, "nada. No sign of them at the Ho Ho and he's been out to the limits on the east side. The guys checked all the gas stations and cafes. Nobody seen Odin's car go by, but just about everybody is out at the fire."

"What about the roadblock?" Samantha asked.

"Nope. Sheriff's guys got one up a few minutes after we called them. So far, nothing."

"Jesus, Abel," Samantha said as Jenkins disappeared, "how could you *do* this? Odin's a killer. You've let a *killer* loose."

"He's my son," Abel said simply. "What else could I have done?"

"You had to tell us, Abel. You had to, and you didn't. Now Ellen is off with him and we're in so much trouble. We're in so *God* damned much trouble ..."

"He ... he wouldn't hurt Ellie," Abel faltered.

"Abel, we have no more time. *No more time*, understand? Now where is Odin? *Where did he go?*"

"I ... I don't know. That's the truth. Please believe me, I don't know."

Samantha stared into the guileless eyes of the man and believed him. If there were one thing Larsen couldn't do, it was lie convincingly. He really didn't know.

"Jesus, Abel," she said on the verge of tears, "you bastard. What you've done ..."

"Odin loves Ellen, Sammi. So do I. When ... when he gets what he wants, he'll be okay. You'll see. He'll be a good husband."

"You need a reality check, Abel," Samantha said as she left the cell. "Odin isn't going to be anybody's husband. Odin is going to prison where he belongs. You've killed one girl by keeping your mouth shut and you've probably killed my daughter. And if you have, by God, I will *never* forgive you."

At the main cellblock door she turned to Blake.

"I'm going to release him, Bill," she said. "He's ... he's a very old family friend. He won't go anywhere and the DA can think of obstruction charges later. I wonder if you could just stay with him for a bit and make sure he's okay? Please. You heard him. He's talking about Odin's being a good husband when he gets what he wants. I don't think he's got too good a hold on reality right now."

"No, he doesn't," Blake said. "That much is pretty clear. But, look, I'd better stay with you."

Samantha placed her hand on his arm. "Please don't take this the wrong way," she said, "but I don't want you to. I have to find my daughter."

"I can help."

"Bill, you're a doctor, not a cop. Please stay with Abel."

"I think you might need me more than he will."

"Do it, Bill! For Christ's sake don't argue with me! Just do it!"

"Sammi, you're not thinking clearly," Blake said, placing hands on her shoulders. "You might need me

badly. Odin Larsen is what you would call a classic control freak. Everything for him has to work out the way he plans. Now he's lost someone that he believes *belonged to him* and he's totally unpredictable. Not to mention incredibly dangerous. If we can get close, I might be able to talk to this guy. Just leave Abel here and have him watched closely."

Knowing what she did of Odin, Samantha doubted Bill Blake would have much luck with the man. Still, a psychiatrist would be better than a cop, even one who had taken a hostage negotiation course or two, if they cornered Odin and had to talk him out.

"Okay. Let's go, then," Samantha said, running from the cellblock. The last thing she heard as the door clanged shut behind her was a racking paroxysm of coughing and something else that sounded like sobbing. "Keep a close eye on Abel," she said to Jenkins, then noticed shock in the man's eyes. He was cradling the telephone receiver, cupping his hand over the mouthpiece.

"It's Ellie," he said.

Samantha's stomach turned to ice and blood left her face in a wave. Her knees went loose and she nearly collapsed.

"No, no, it isn't that," Jenkins said, almost desperately, "it isn't *about* Ellie. It's Ellie. She's here. On the phone. Wants to talk to you."

Samantha nearly ripped the phone from the man's hands.

"Ellen? Honey, is that you?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm okay."

"Is Odin with you?"

"Um, yes, yes, I told Hattie about that."

Obviously Odin was within earshot. Samantha realized that she couldn't ask too many yes/no questions without arousing the man's suspicions. She caught Blake's eyes and motioned to another telephone.

"Okay," she said quickly, hearing the click as Blake patched in, "vanilla for yes, chocolate for no. Does he know about his father?"

"I think we should have the vanilla," Ellen said.

"Cream filling for yes, jam for no. Does he know he's your brother?"

"Cream filling is better with vanilla," Ellen said, then, apparently turning to Odin, "Mom wants you over for dinner Saturday, so she's fussing about dessert."

It sounded very thin, and Samantha doubted Odin would buy it. And yet, somehow, he did. Samantha heard him saying something like "that's nice", but his voice was drowned by a roaring and clashing that sounded like a truck gearing down.

"Sherbet for yes, ice cream for no. Did you break off with him?"

"Sherbet. Mom, I got to go. Odin says we're late. Bye."

"Honey, how did you ..."

But the line went dead. Samantha had been about to ask how her daughter managed to get Odin to allow a phone call. He *must* sense the noose tightening. God, where were they? The truck. That was a big clue. It had to be part of the fire fighting effort and that meant it would most likely have been coming out of Jacob's Pass Road, which would put it right at Six Mile Chevron. Odin hadn't taken Ellen to the Ho Ho. He'd been headed the other way, towards Spokane, and

must have gotten cut off by the fire. She quickly punched out the Six Mile number and got Millie Jensen on the line.

"Yep," she said in response to Samantha's breathless question, "they were just here. Just pulled out. Headed back towards town."

Barely thinking any longer, Samantha, followed by Blake, ran out to her cruiser and, emergency lights flashing, barreled out of the parking lot in a shower of dust and gravel. Once on the highway, she slammed pedal to metal, sending the cruiser flashing down asphalt at more than a hundred miles per hour despite poor visibility in the steadily thickening smoke. Blake, white-faced, held on to the dashboard for dear life but said nothing. Figuring relative times, she ought to have seen Odin and Ellen coming the other way about a mile or so on her side of the Lake Road turnoff. But miles fell quickly behind and she saw no trace of the distinctive yellow GTO. Perhaps they'd gone back to Six Mile. Heart hammering almost painfully, Samantha roared around the long, slow right hand curve and Six Mile Chevron came into view, nestled in the shadow of nearly vertical cliffs.

Deserted.

Tires squealing, she fishtailed into the gas bay. A startled Millie Jensen came from the office, wiping hands on an oily rag. "Hi, Sammi," she called, "heading for the fire?"

"Millie, did you see Odin again? Did he come back this way?"

"Nope. Never came back."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. Been right here the whole time. If he came back, I'd have seen him. What's ..."

The rest of Millie's question was lost as Samantha slammed her foot down on the gas and sent the cruiser into a skidding U-turn, roaring back to town.

There was only one way the two could have gone.

She nearly lost it at the Lake Road turnoff. Left side tires barely held the road and if there had been anyone coming in the opposite direction they'd have been toast. She managed a quick radio call to Steeples for backup as she came into sight of the Larsen fishing shack turnoff. He would be on his way, but wouldn't get there for at least fifteen or twenty minutes.

Cutting engine and lights in the tiny, rutted road that led to the Larsen shack, Samantha drifted down to the lake with only a gentle swish of tree branches against the cruiser and the soft crunch of tires on gravel. She came to a stop just inside the tree line and carefully eased her door open.

"Better stay here, Bill," she said, "you might have to make a really quick getaway."

"I should come ..."

"No! You don't have a gun and you're not a cop!" Samantha hissed. Watching her step to avoid making a sound, she slipped to the edge of the clearing, 9 mm in her sweating grasp. There, sitting beside the cabin, was Odin's GTO, engine still pinging.

Crouching and using the GTO for cover as long as she could, Samantha worked her way on to the porch and stood beside the small front window, flattening her back against the wall and straining her ears for the sounds of voices. All she could hear was blood rushing

in her ears. Her automatic was trembling and in constant danger of slipping from her sweating hand.

Duckwalking to keep herself under window level and fighting to keep from coughing in the acrid atmosphere, she moved silently over to the door. It was ajar about an inch, and she stood for a long moment, again straining to hear the slightest rustle. There was nothing from the darkness within. Taking a deep, ragged breath, Samantha spun and kicked the door open, springing inside in a gunfighter's crouch, automatic snout sweeping the tiny room. In the instant, she realized there was nobody in the shack.

She stepped back onto the porch and her eye went to the fish locker. Her heart suddenly turned icy. Oh, God, not that. Walking on knees stiffened with apprehension, she approached the locker.

Please God, please!

Slipping her automatic into her holster, she grasped the locker lid with hands that trembled so badly they seemed palsied. She threw the lid back, halfway expecting to see her daughter's body stuffed into the narrow confines.

The locker was empty. Samantha's knees suddenly buckled and she sat, hard, on weathered planks. Her skin felt cold but her face dripped sweat and her heart raced.

Where were they?

She got up and walked around the corner, finding Blake standing by Odin's car.

"I was going to take a look inside," he said, "but I thought I'd better leave it for you."

"Good thinking," Samantha said, opening the passenger side door and leaning in, smelling at once

her daughter's perfume, a faint, floral scent underlying the odor of the air freshener Odin kept hanging from his mirror. The interior of the car was immaculate, reminding her how anally retentive Odin Larsen could be. Even as a little boy, she remembered, his room had always been in perfect order. A place for everything and everything in its place. What had seemed an admirable character trait now seemed terribly sinister.

Samantha was on the point of closing the door when her glance fell on a small, oval plastic box lying on the floor, almost under the passenger seat. Ellen's compact. Without daring to think that this could be evidence in yet another murder, she opened it. Her heart skipped a beat as she saw the word 'mine' written in lipstick on the mirror.

The mine.

Odin had taken Ellen up to the old mine.

Ellen, clever and resourceful, had found a way to tell her mother where they had gone.

"They've gone to the mine," Samantha said, showing Blake the compact, "Ellen managed to get a message to us."

Blake glanced around Odin's GTO, his expression troubled.

"What's the matter?" Samantha asked, "Come on, they've gone to the mine."

"I don't doubt that," Blake said, "not at all. But I think Odin is as bright as Ellen and he's a psychopathic control freak. Sammi, I don't think Odin would be careless enough to let Ellen use her compact without checking it afterwards, and I don't think he'd allow anything to be left on the floor of his car, you see?"

"No, I don't," Samantha said, "and we're wasting time. I know Odin wouldn't allow anything out of place in his car. He's always been like that, Bill. But Ellen hid it, you see?"

"Sammi," Black said with a restraining hand on her shoulder, "think about Ellen's call. *Think about it.* When did Odin break it off?"

"When we heard the truck. When he knew we'd figure out where he was."

"Yes, but only after we'd had plenty of time to hear it, you see?"

"You're saying he wanted us to hear it."

"Yes. Exactly. Odin Larsen is very, very smart. He wasn't fooled by your voice code, Samantha. Think about it. There was no reason for him to allow her to call you in the first place. Odin Larsen *must* be in control. At all times. That tells us, absolutely, that he wanted us to hear the truck. And he *wanted* us to think he'd been tricked."

With a horrible sinking sensation, Samantha realized Blake was right. The conversation had not been ended the first moment the sound had been audible. No, she'd gotten a good chance to hear it.

Odin had wanted her to hear it.

He had stood there like a patient spider, watching the truck, gauging the sound, waiting for her to realize where they must be.

He had forced Ellen to write 'mine' on the mirror and had left the compact where it could be easily found. Odin was carefully orchestrating her movements. He was taking an awful chance that she would simply send other officers, but he probably realized she couldn't wait to vector someone else in. She was a mother. She

could do nothing but go after her daughter, regardless of risk.

"It's a trap, isn't it?" she asked.

"I think so."

"What's he going to do?"

"That I don't know," Blake said. "But this guy desperately needs to be in control and he feels that way now. If we go up to the mine, we're doing what he wants."

"Bill, I haven't got a choice. I have to go up."

"Then so do I."

Radioing Steeples to get backup and meet her at the mine, Samantha sent the cruiser careening up the driveway to Lookout Point Road. There she came to a halt in a cloud of dust and shower of gravel.

"Why are we stopping?" Black asked.

Samantha quickly explained that Odin had not taken his car because it wouldn't make the run from Lookout Point to the old mineshaft. The Lookout Point and Old Mine Roads formed a long switchback. Driving to Lookout Point and leaving his car would leave him farther from the mine than just going up through the forest.

"No different for us," she said, climbing out of the cruiser. "This car wouldn't make it up there and we'd just waste time trying. I'm going to have to follow through the forest."

"Sammi, if he's planning an ambush we'll be walking right into it."

That much was certainly true. Following Odin through the dark, brooding forest could be tantamount to suicide. But there just wouldn't be enough time to wait for reinforcements. Looking towards the pass, she

could see a thick, billowing wall of smoke that marked the Snoqualmie blaze. Here and there along the fringes were flashes of orange that looked like obscene little flowers. For flames to be visible at that range, tinder-dry trees had to be virtually exploding. Blake's gaze followed hers.

"You don't have to risk yourself, Bill, and I wish you wouldn't," Samantha said, drawing her 9 mm and working the slide to chamber a round. "I don't have a choice, but you do."

"Afraid not," Blake said. "You guys are my friends. Let's go."

Samantha quickly unlocked her shotgun from the dashboard rack and handed it to him.

"Know how to use one of ..."

She broke off as Blake, showing a startling familiarity with the weapon, pumped a round into the chamber and set off in to the forest. She scrambled after him, noticing his long, loose stride that carried him effortlessly up the slope. She also noticed that his progress was nearly silent and he automatically took cover, moving from tree to tree, never presenting more than a flash of a target for a gunman up the slope.

Trying to emulate Blake's panther-like movements, she ploughed up the steep slope through murky twilight, clambering up fallen logs wherever possible, pushing through dense brush, pouring sweat and never feeling the branches scratching her face and hands. Her lungs were burning with exertion and smoke and she gasped for breath in eerie half-light, but their pace never slackened. They *had* to make it to the mine yard before Odin got his hostage into the shaft.

They were about halfway to their goal when they came across a smoldering circle of pine needles. The remains of a book of matches lay in the center. Odin had obviously tried to start a fire to cover his escape and perhaps trap Samantha.

Oh, God, and this forest was so explosive.

"Bill, we'd can't leave this," she gasped, nearly crying, "we just *can't*."

"I know," he said, breathing hard from his climb as he started an ungainly dance. Samantha, oblivious to the target they must be presenting, joined him in his Tipple two-step. Desperately, aware that precious seconds were slipping, they stamped embers, careful not to cause any to drift into the air. An errant breeze sighed through trees, fanning embers to a bright glow.

God, if a wind came up ...

It took the better part of five minutes before Samantha, almost crying in frustration, was certain the fire was out and they could set off again on Odin's trail.

It was close, but no cigar. They emerged in to brush at the base of a steep incline leading to the plateau without spotting Odin or his hostage. Again, Blake took cover automatically, shotgun at the ready. Samantha slipped in beside him.

"Look," she said, "over there. That tree. I'm going up on it to take a look."

The huge, fallen tree lay on the embankment with roots protruding over the top. She could climb up on it and use the roots for cover.

"Be careful," she heard Blake say as she worked her way through brush, "those roots might not provide much cover."

Cover or no, she had to see. Samantha leapt on the log and made her way to its huge, dry root ball, where she crouched and peered at a mine yard darkened by murk of evening and smoke from the Snoqualmie fire.

Damn.

She had not been in time.

Odin was hobbling towards the shaft, pushing Ellen ahead. She stumbled and it seemed to Samantha that her daughter was crying. The pair, between the shack and the mine, moved at an angle to Samantha, giving her a clear line of fire. Steadying her weapon on a large root, she thumbed the hammer back. It would be an easy shot. One 9 mm Hydra-Shok bullet and it would all be over.

And yet, she couldn't squeeze the trigger.

This was Odin. The young man she had watched grow up.

Danny's son.

From the corner of her eye she saw Blake start to work his way along the embankment towards the shack. Obviously going for a better position. She had to warn Odin. Had to make him give up this madness.

"Odin!" she called, foresight trembling. "Let her go and step away!"

Odin's response was chillingly fast, even for Samantha, who was all too well aware of his athletic prowess. He spun, locating her by her voice, and was suddenly aiming an army .45. There was a flash and an echoing crack. Samantha felt something slam into her left side, twisting her even as her 9 mm discharged. She saw a spear of gun smoke from her weapon pointing well wide of Odin. The man fell back a step and grabbed Ellen, placing his weapon against her

head. His face was pale and eyes blazed in gathering darkness. Locking his left arm around Ellen's shoulders from behind, he began a slow limp to the mine, dragging her with him. His intentions were perfectly clear and Samantha cursed herself for blowing her only chance.

"Odin, stop!" she cried, voice echoing in lengthening shadows.

His answer was to raise the .45 again. Samantha flattened herself as the gun blasted and she was instantly showered with wood splinters, dirt and pebbles. Then there was another shot and another shower. Samantha's left cheek stung and she spat dirt. The last one had been very close. There was a jagged exit hole in a large root less than six inches from her face. The heavy slug had gone through paper-dry wood as though it hadn't been there. She felt completely vulnerable, and tensed, waiting for the impact of a bullet.

But there was only silence and, when she risked a look, the mine yard was deserted. As though to mock her, one of the loose planks that boarded up the shaft suddenly fell off, landing with a puff of dust. Blake, who had emerged from cover and had been aiming the shotgun at Odin, was slowly lowering the weapon. Obviously he hadn't dared fire for fear of hitting Ellen.

That was that. Odin had made it into the shaft and he had a hostage. It couldn't have gotten much worse.

Knees trembling, Samantha slipped off the tree trunk and belatedly took cover behind the ridge. Blake did the same. Recalling the shock of something hitting her side, she looked down to see that part of her heavy equipment belt had been blown away. When she pulled

up her shirttail, she saw an angry red welt on the skin over her left hip. God, had *that* been close. The last two bullets had struck a heavy, gnarled root not an inch apart. It was incredible shooting and Samantha, chilled, realized that Odin had been able to see parts of her body through the tangle.

He could have easily hit her.

She was again conscious of stinging from the large sliver. Shutting her eyes tightly, she gave a quick tug and felt it come out. There was an almost immediate sensation of warm wetness and she wiped blood away with her sleeve.

That appeared to be it for injuries. Cautiously, Samantha stretched out on the small embankment and risked a look over the edge. There was still nothing moving in the mine yard and no signs of life at the shaft. Her trembling became nearly uncontrollable. She had to *do* something. She had to get her daughter away from Odin.

God, she couldn't stand this.

Samantha scrambled up to the mine yard and started to run towards the shaft, automatic extended. She had hardly gotten a few steps before long, lean arms grabbed her around the waist and hauled her down with stunning force. In a moment she was pinned by Blake and held helpless.

"Let me go," she gasped, "Goddam you ..."

"Stop it!" Blake yelled, penetrating her hysteria, "You can't do this! You'll just get killed and it won't do anyone any good! Lie still!"

Samantha's struggles subsided as years of police training asserted themselves. Blake was right. She had to keep her mind cold. It wouldn't do Ellen any good to

have her mother running right into Odin's field of fire. Or making a target of herself by going into the mine alone.

Why in hell had he gone into the mine in the first place? Why trap himself?

In any event, so long as the mine was guarded, Odin wouldn't kill Ellen. He'd need her for a hostage.

"You okay, now?" Blake asked.

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Okay, then, speaking of targets ..."

"No shit, Sherlock. Sorry," Samantha said as the pair crawled on their stomachs to safety over the embankment. Keeping out of sight, they worked their way parallel to the mine yard and took up a position behind the corner of the shack.

As they watched the mine, Samantha was suddenly aware that a hot breeze blowing from the east was riffling her hair and bringing ever-increasing clouds of wood smoke. Fine ash filtered down like large snowflakes. A necklace of orange flames ran all along Snoqualmie Ridge.

"God, Bill," she said, "I don't like the looks of that fire."

"It's pretty far away."

"No, it really isn't. Winds coming down this valley off that ridge have hit fifty miles an hour."

At those speeds the fire could start crowning, leaping from treetop to treetop. Its rate of progress would be utterly explosive. Once that started happening the blaze could be right on top of them in less than an hour. A water bomber, dwarfed by distance, swept in over the ridge and released its load of fire retardant in an orange spume. It banked and headed down the

valley towards her even as another aircraft started its bombing run. She could only pray their efforts would be enough.

High in the skies, thunderheads were massing. Good news if it meant heavy rain, but dry lightning storms would be the worst thing that could happen.

"Bill, I can't wait," she said, watching the distant fire in an agony of apprehension, "I've got to go in after him."

"That's crazy," Blake said. "You're going in silhouetted. He's looking out of the dark and he'll have a perfect shot. He'll kill you, Sammi. He'll kill you and it won't free Ellen."

Samantha saw in Blake's eyes an agony to mirror her own. His large hands gripped the shotgun so tightly knuckles were white and his breathing was ragged. He was clearly in the grips of powerful emotions and barely able to restrain himself, let alone Samantha.

"Okay, you're right, but we have to do something," she said helplessly, "we can't just leave Ellen in there with him."

"He's going to be tough to get out, Sammi," Blake said. "He has all the advantages. He has position, he has nothing to lose, he has a hostage."

"What can we do?"

"We could starve him out."

"Bill, you don't know Odin. You don't know what he's like. If he decides not to come out, we could starve him to death. He'd die and he'd let Ellen die."

"Look, honey, right now he won't hurt her. She's his only bargaining chip. We'll just have to find a way to talk him out of there."

In the heat of the instant the term of endearment slipped past Samantha. She was about to point out how difficult it would be to 'talk out' a man like Odin Larsen when there was the roar of a powerful V-8. The Tipple PD Range Rover burst over the plateau edge, bouncing on heavy shocks and skidding to a stop in a spray of draw slate fragments. Steeples sprang out as the engine died and sprinted over to take cover with them behind the shack. Black and Grady took cover behind the vehicle.

"He's in the mine?" Steeples asked unnecessarily.

"Ellen's with him, Harlan."

"Shit. What are we gonna do?"

"We'll need help. Got your cell phone?"

"In the Rover."

"Okay, listen. Go call the sheriff's department. No radios. Tell them what we have here and get the SWAT team up. Call off the roadblock and bring everybody they can spare. Bring a flashlight, too."

The wind was freshening, bringing an even heavier concentration of pungent wood smoke and fresh showers of ash. Everyone in the yard was coughing as Steeples, crouching and zigzagging, finished his call and raced back. He ducked back under the porch overhang while Black and Grady sprinted over to take cover with them.

"Harlan, I can't wait," Samantha said, fighting off rising panic, "I've got to go in."

"You have to wait, dammit," Steeples said, "you can't go in there alone."

"Sammi, you said you were going to wait," Blake said.

"That's my baby in there, and there's no goddam time. The fire, Bill, the *fire*. If the fire gets loose ..."

"Oh, Jesus," Steeples said. "Okay, I'm going in with you."

"Harlan, it's too dangerous. I wouldn't do it, but the fire ... You don't have to."

"I want to. Cover me till I get there."

With that, Steeples was off across the yard, taking an almost direct course to the mineshaft. Samantha, cursing because Steeples was actually in her line of fire, took a bead on the opening and prayed that he wouldn't be directly in the way if Odin showed himself. Moments later Steeples flattened himself against rough planks.

"Okay," Samantha said, "Bill, you stay here. If we can get Odin talking, one of us will come back and get you. Mac, John, you guys cover me. Keep your guns on the shaft, okay? If Odin comes out, shoot him. Period. Don't think twice about it, just do it. When the others show up, tell them where we are, but tell them not to come in."

"Sammi ..."

"I mean it, Mac," she said, recalling that Mac Grady had played wide receiver for the Coal Miners in Odin's first season and had a glorious year as favored target for the young phenom's long bombs. "Okay?"

"Okay," Grady said, reluctantly.

"John?"

"Okay, Chief. He shows, he's gone."

"Mac," she said, "loyalty is a good thing, but you're not wearing a football jersey now. I thought I knew Odin, too, but the man in there is a very dangerous

killer, and that's *all* he is. If he shows, I'm trusting you to do the right thing."

With one last look at Grady to make sure he got the point, Samantha was off, racing across the yard like a broken field runner, keeping her weapon pointed squarely at the mineshaft. Moments later she stood shoulder to shoulder with Steeples.

"I'm going to cross over," he said, springing across the opening to flatten against boards on the far side.

They stood in gathering smoke and darkness, straining their ears to hear the slightest rattle or scrape. There was only the distant drone of water bombers. Steeples pointed to himself, then to the shaft. Samantha shook her head. This was her daughter; it was her job. With a smile, Steeples ignored her, slipping quickly into darkness. Damn the man! Samantha, after a brief pause to see whether Steeples drew fire, slipped into the cold shaft and stepped quickly sideways, colliding with Steeples in darkness.

"Goddamit, Harlan, I said this was my job," she hissed, wiping sweat and soot from her face.

"It's *our* job, Sammi," he whispered.

"You could wait for reinforcements."

"And leave you in here? *Right*."

"You could get shot, Harlan."

"We could *both* get shot if we stand around here arguing."

That much was certainly true. Samantha was suddenly and uncomfortably aware that boards sealing off the shaft were not fitted tightly together. While the mine yard was in twilight and enveloped by smoke, it was still brighter than the pitch darkness down the shaft and the two officers must have been at least partially

silhouetted against cracks. If Odin stuck his head around the bend in the shaft, he'd have a perfect shot at them. He didn't seem to want to shoot Samantha, but Harlan Steeples would likely be a different kettle of fish.

"Okay," she said, giving up, "me first. You cover me. Two finger snaps to move."

She moved along the left wall, sliding her feet carefully to avoid stumbling over stray slate or a piece of timber. When she reached the first bend she paused, snapping her fingers twice. Moments later Steeples eased in behind her.

"I don't know," Samantha whispered, "there's still too much goddam light coming from behind us. I don't know if we can get around the corner without being seen."

"He might not be looking," Steeples whispered back, "let me check it. Two snaps."

Crouching low to present as small a target as possible, he started around the curve. A step, two steps.

"I think it's okay," he whispered.

But, flat upon that, came a stroboscopic flash, a gunshot boomed and Steeples hurtled backwards, screaming, "Fuck!" He landed heavily on his backside, knocking his breath out in an explosive grunt, and frantically rolled against the wall. Samantha was on the point of firing when she realized she'd have just as good a chance of hitting her own daughter as Odin. Maybe even better if Odin thought to push Ellen in front of him.

"Harlan, are you alright?" she asked.

"Yeah, missed me," Steeples gasped, "I think."

"We're going to have to hold here," Samantha said bitterly. "We can't take him on. Too much chance that Ellen or one of us would get killed."

"No shit," Steeples said, still on hands and knees.

"Okay, let's pull back."

"Wait a minute," Steeples' voice was urgent, "there's something wet down here."

There was a rustling and his flashlight snapped on. In the beam Samantha saw Steeples' left hand smeared with blood.

"Oh, God, Harlan, you *are* hurt."

"No, I'm not. This isn't mine. Look here."

Steeples held his flashlight close to the mine floor to avoid creating a large pool of light and played it slowly around. In the dust were several pools of coagulating blood and there were smears on rocks. Nearby was a blood-soaked piece of fabric Samantha recognized as part of Odin's shirt.

"Hell of a lot of it around," Steeples said.

"Oh, Jesus, I hit him," Samantha breathed, "I must have. I thought I missed. I saw the line of my gun smoke and it didn't look on target, you know?"

Obviously her hand had been moving at the time she fired. The muzzle had shifted in the split second between the bullet's leaving the weapon on target and the blast of smoke. That's why she had seen it going wide when, in fact, she had hit Odin.

Thank God the force of Odin's bullet had twisted her away from Ellen. What if she had shot her own daughter?

"That can be deceiving," Steeples said, snapping off his light. "I think you got him pretty good. What loads are you using?"

“Hydra-Shoks.”

“Are you sure you hit him and ... and not Ellen?” Steeples asked, articulating Samantha’s thoughts.

“Positive. I had him lined up and his bullet hit my left side,” Samantha said. “It knocked my left hip back so I twisted left and that’s when my gun went off. I saw the smoke going behind Odin.”

“He’s probably a pretty fair mess, then. If he doesn’t get the bleeding stopped in a hurry, he’ll go into shock.”

God, this was so *much* darker. Now she had a wounded Odin Larsen with her daughter. An armed, wounded killer who couldn’t get away. He’d have absolutely nothing left to lose. And, probably, an overpowering desire for vengeance.

“Odin!” she called, her voice echoing in the shaft. “We know you’re hurt. You have to give up. You need a doctor. You need to come out!”

Her answer was another flash and the smacking concussion of a heavy handgun in a confined space. A bullet caromed off rocks, sounding like something out of a Hollywood action thriller.

“No go,” Steeples said, “we’d better get out of here. We’re just giving him something to shoot at.”

“No!” Samantha hissed, momentarily losing control. “I’m going to get her! She’s my child!”

Before she could move, Steeples was pinning her to the wall of the shaft, using his superior weight and strength to control her struggling. “Sammi, smarten up! You’re a cop!”

“I can’t leave her in here!”

“You have to, Sammi. Just for a while, but you have to. If we crowd him, he’s as likely to shoot Ellen as anything else. Especially if he’s badly hurt.”

In bitterness and despair, she realized Steeples was right. God, first Blake and now Steeples. How many times would she need someone to stop her from doing something really foolish? She *had* to listen to her training, no matter what. There wasn't anything they could do in the mine except provoke a wounded killer. She was a trained police officer, and it was time to start acting like one.

"Okay," she said, "you're right."

"You mean it?"

"I mean it, Harlan."

"You're not going to do anything stupid?"

"No, I'm not. Not any more."

They worked their way back to the mine entrance, then paused, flattened against the wall, peering back into darkness.

"We'll be targets again as we go out," Samantha said.

"Larsen!" Steeples yelled, by way of a response. "I'm gonna fire a shot down there, so you fucking better get your ass out of the way!"

"Now," he said in a low voice, pushing Samantha towards the opening. Realizing that they probably had a second or two while Odin waited for the promised shot, she quickly slipped out into the hot evening, followed closely by Steeples. In the yard, a half dozen Pierce County deputies had arrived in two four-wheel Jeeps and were establishing a cordon while they set up floodlights and a large generator. Samantha's attempts to keep the standoff quiet had obviously failed, for a small knot of residents had gathered beyond yellow barrier tape, a replay of the day she'd found Dolly Jenkins. God, that had been quick. They must have

picked up radio traffic between the Pierce County Jeeps. It couldn't have been more than an hour since Steeples had made his call.

"Jesus, Harlan," she said, looking at the fire, "do those idiots know the kind of danger they're in?"

"Mac?"

"Yeah, they've been told to move on," Grady said, "but there's a jam up of four wheelers on the road. Nobody can get turned around. Even if they wanted to."

"Here, Sammi," Steeples said, "take this." He handed her a light blue jacket with the word 'police' stenciled in huge letters across the back. "Courtesy of our friends," he said, "keep us from getting shot by accident."

Pulling it on, she felt an immediate increase in body heat. It might have been better to be shot.

"Take this, too," Steeples said, putting a cup of lukewarm coffee in her hands.

"From our friends?"

"From our friends."

Another group came over the hill and joined the crowd.

"They must be parking on the road," Samantha said.

"Yeah, they are," Black said, coming up to them. He, too, was wearing a blue jacket. "We can't do anything with them. There's about a dozen lined up bumper to bumper right now, and more coming all the time. It would take an hour to move them off, and that's if nobody else shows up. It's just hopeless."

And, as if the gathering crowd was not bad enough, a news helicopter swooped down in a chattering roar on the far end of the yard. Samantha watched glumly as it disgorged April Watkins and a cameraman.

Covering mouths and noses with handkerchiefs, the pair raced towards the barrier. With a heavy sigh, she walked over and met a puffing, coughing April.

"Samantha," April began.

"I know," Samantha said, "you want a statement."

She waited while the cameraman got his lights on and focused on her.

"We have a hostage situation in the old Bentley No. 1 mine," she said, immediately regretting her choice of words. How she hated the word 'situation'. Everything these days was a damned situation. And *this* damned situation involved her only child. She felt herself slipping and barely maintained composure. April looked closely at her eyes, but said nothing.

"We have a gunman holed up in the mine and he has a hostage. The gunman is a suspect in the deaths of two persons. He is armed and considered extremely dangerous."

"Chief Bentley," April said, speaking into her mike, "is this in connection with the murder of Dolly Jenkins?"

"Yes, it is."

"Who is the other victim?" April asked.

"A local woman named Celia Larsen."

"Omigod," April blurted, then, "oh, God, we'll have to cut that out. Um, Chief Bentley, will you identify the suspect?"

"Not at this time," Samantha said, knowing that, as far as Tipple was concerned, she might as well have hired a skywriting plane to put up 'Odin Larsen' in mile-high letters.

"Chief ..."

"I'm sorry, I have nothing else at this time," Samantha said.

April motioned and her cameraman killed his light. She stuck the mike in her raincoat pocket.

"Off the record," she said, "as a friend, it's Odin Larsen, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Samantha said, fighting off tears.

"Christ, he'll be almost impossible to get out of there. There's something else, too, isn't there?"

"He has my Ellen."

"Oh, God."

Oh, God. That about summed it up. Despair settling in, Samantha wandered over to Steeples, standing with members of the SWAT team who were busy pulling on bulletproof vests and checking weapons. The team leader, by one of the four by fours, was holding a mike and, with frequent glances at flames glowing in the distance, in earnest conversation with his headquarters.

"God, this is all my fault," Samantha said, wiping her eyes, "I let Ellen talk me into letting her tell Odin about his father. She was going to break up with him and I let her go off with him."

"He already knew about Abel," Mac Grady said.

"What do you mean?" Steeples asked, "how in hell could he?"

"When we were heading out we got flagged over by Chummy McLarnen," Grady said, "we wouldn't have stopped, but he was really agitated. He told us he was in the alley when you two brought Abel out. He saw the cuffs and told Odin."

"So Odin already knew," Samantha said.

"Yeah, McLarnen said he figured Odin would want to go over to the jail and bail Abel out. Instead he got out Abel's old army .45 and said he had some other

business. Told McLarnen he'd kill him if he said anything."

"You never suspected?" Steeples said, looking at Samantha.

"No, he seemed totally calm. He didn't show he knew anything," Samantha said helplessly.

"Shows what we're dealing with, anyhow," Steeples said, "that guy is really cool."

"He really *is* a psychopath, Bill, isn't he?"

"He looks to be as classic a case as I've seen," Blake said.

"Okay, we're going in, now," the team leader interrupted. He was about forty years old, with pale blue eyes, a close brush cut, a prematurely lined face and a no-nonsense manner. His nametag read 'O'Connor'.

"Please be careful," Samantha said, "that's my daughter he's got in there."

"Yes, ma'am, we know. We'll do everything we can. We have a couple of canine units on the way, but they won't get here for a bit and we may have a serious time constraint," O'Connor said with a meaningful look at Snoqualmie Ridge. "Headquarters says the weather service is calling for high winds down this valley. If that fire starts crowning, we are going to have to nail that asshole and get out of here like *now*. We'll be as careful with your daughter as we can, but if we can't talk him into giving up ... Well, the fact of the matter is that we can't just leave him in there."

"I'm going in with you."

"No, ma'am, I'm afraid not," O'Connor said. "This team has trained to work as a unit and we can't have anyone in there that might do something unexpected."

"Sammi," Steeples cut in, "he's right. You're too much involved personally. We have to stay out and let these guys do it. If you go in there again, you might put Ellen at even more risk."

Samantha turned away, bitter tears stinging her eyes. Steeples was right. If she went in, she might do something that would tip the balance and cause the worst to happen. Somehow, she would have to do the impossible ? keep control and wait for the SWAT team to do its job.

"Let's see if we can at least make a *start* on getting these morons out of here," Steeples said to Grady and Black, pointing to the gaggle of locals standing close to the mine shack. "If that fire really starts ripping, people are going to die."

"We can't move them," Grady said, shrugging, "that idiot Gary Ainsworth tried to come up here in his Lincoln."

"Nearly made it, too," Black said, "before he went half off the road. He's stuck and we can't move him without a wrecker. Millie's waiting on a couple of forest service trucks before she comes up with the wrecker. Be at least an hour, probably more like two."

"Shit," Steeples said disgustedly, "I hope all those stupid bastards can run, then."

It seemed like hours as Samantha waited in heat and smoke. The storm lighting had been set up around the mine and in the shack where they'd set up their command post. Powerful bulbs made the night all the hotter.

Periodically, the radio crackled as the team reported its whereabouts via relays to officers on the surface. The mine, having been in production from the late

1800s to just fifteen years earlier, was a labyrinth and the team's progress was maddeningly slow. Over by the barricade, watched by Mac Grady and John Black, the crowd of expectant locals was growing rather than shrinking in the face of the Snoqualmie Ridge fire. When she looked at their faces in the harsh white glare of floodlights, alive with anticipation of something really exciting, Samantha wanted to scream. How could these people be so *stupid*? Most of them had grown up with mountains and forests. They knew what a fire could do, and they must know high winds were forecast.

Steeple had just handed her another Styrofoam cup of tepid coffee when she heard a fragment of radio traffic.

"... be nice if we had a map ..."

A map.

"Harlan, where's your cell phone?"

"I thought you didn't use cell phones," Steeple said, "cancer, remember?"

"These are desperate times," Samantha said, "I'm not going to be worrying about that now."

Taking Steeple's cell phone, Samantha punched in her home number. "Hattie," she said when the older woman picked up the phone, "I want you to do something."

"Sammi, how is Ellen? How is she?"

"We don't know yet. She's in the mine with Odin. Listen, there's something important. Are you listening?"

"Oh, God," Hattie said in a tiny voice.

"Hattie, get a *grip*. Are you listening?" Samantha said urgently.

"Yes."

"I want you to go up to the attic. I was up there just the other day and I didn't see a single spider, okay? *Not one*. Hattie, I wouldn't ask you to do this, but it's important. There's a steamer trunk under the west window. The west window, okay?"

"Okay ..." Hattie's voice eloquently conveyed reluctance.

"It's a black metal trunk with brass fittings. You can't miss it. It isn't locked. There's an old leather folder, sort of like a giant billfold, and it should be lying right on top. If not, it'll be right near the top. It's granddad's mine map. I'm going to send Mabel Murphy over to get it, okay? This is important, Hattie. It's for Ellen."

Only the fact that it was for Ellen's benefit would get Hattie Clarendon into that attic, Samantha knew. She called Mabel at the station and told her to pick up the map and meet Grady on Lake Road, where she had parked the cruiser. Grady would have to circumvent the traffic jam on Old Mine Road by cutting through the forest.

"What about the fire, Sammi?" Mabel asked, "We're getting tons of calls. People are really worried. Burt is here helping, but we're really swamped. Jesus, there goes line two ..."

"We're keeping an eye on it up here," Samantha said, "and so far it seems to be moving pretty slowly."

"People are asking me if they should evacuate."

"Tell them to be ready," Samantha said, "but not to panic yet. We've got everybody up here, so call ..." She had been going to say, 'call Odin and get him in to organize traffic control', but her days of relying on Odin Larsen were over. "... call Father Ralph and get him to man the phones. See if he can get enough people

together for traffic control. Give them those traffic bibs. When you see Hattie, tell her to get Elwood ready to bail out in case the fire starts coming this way. Mac will be down on Lake Road waiting for you. Let's move on it."

She expected a complaint from Grady when she gave him the detail, but he just nodded and said he'd be back as quickly as possible. In moments he had sprinted across the mine yard and disappeared over the crest. The glow of his flashlight, diffused by swirling smoke, illuminated tree trunks, then faded as he plunged deeper into the forest.

"We might be able to figure out from the map where Odin has gone, I don't know," Samantha said, handing Steeples his cell phone. She started nervously as TV camera lights came on at the barricade. April Watkins and her cameraman were canvassing the crowd, undoubtedly gathering information about Odin Larsen. A few seconds here, a few there, combine that with the danger presented by the fire, and it all added up to an incredible six o'clock news story. Undoubtedly picked up nationally.

"Good break for her," Samantha said, "as soon as we name Odin, she'll be off to the races."

"You already told her it was Odin?" Blake asked.

"Didn't have to. She came up with his name right off the bat."

"Didn't that seem strange to you?"

"Strange?"

"Odin is a pretty compelling guy, Sammi," Blake said, "he's a very successful simulacrum. I'd wonder why that woman came up with his name so quickly. I think it's something we might want to know."

"Let's find out, then," Samantha said, leading the way over as camera lights went off.

"I'm just getting some local color, Sammi," April said defensively, "I'm not letting the cat out of the bag."

"How did you know it was Odin?" Samantha asked.

"Just, um, well, a good guess," April said, clutching the microphone and a note pad in one hand while wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. She coughed and cleared her throat. "God, that's getting bad," she said.

"I don't think so," Samantha said. "It wasn't a guess at all. I think you had some other reason. Odin had to be the least probable person in Tipple and yet you came up with his name right away. We want to know why. We *have* to know why."

April looked troubled. "I don't know if I should get into this," she said, "nothing was ever proven, really."

"It could be really important. We'd like to know everything you know about Odin."

"Well, that's just it, I don't really know. It's just stuff that was around, you know?"

"What stuff was around?"

April said that during the time Odin had been the greatest high school football player ever produced in Washington State, and perhaps anywhere else as well, there had been persistent rumors amongst sports writers that he wasn't the clean-cut, morally-pure all-American boy he projected. There had been stories about drinking, drugs, prostitutes, gambling and several incidents in which women were beaten up and bought off before they brought charges. One woman had nearly died.

"The story was it took \$100,000 and her medical bills to keep her quiet," April said.

"I never heard anything like that," Samantha said.

"No, Odin was smart enough not to pull this shit in his own backyard. It was always in other cities. I heard that one was in Portland."

"I just don't believe it," Samantha said. "Who would have paid this woman off? Abel could never afford \$100,000 and medical bills. Never."

The rumor at the time, April said, was that Odin had already been signed to university in Tennessee, or maybe Georgia. The story was that the alumni association itself had scouted Odin and figured he was going to be the greatest quarterback in football history. It was a very rich association and would have paid anything to have the boy. The alumni figured that paying off the women and covering Odin's gambling debts would be good ammunition if he ever tried to cross them and go somewhere else.

"I still don't know why I never heard anything about this," Samantha said. "Why wasn't it front page news? All over the television?"

"Nobody could prove it," April said. "Oh, God, look, I shouldn't be telling you this, but Harvey Prosper found the woman. She was all set to go on camera and tell her story, and then she suddenly just clammed right up. Then she disappeared. Right off the face of the earth. Harvey was left with nothing. He told me about it one night, um, in bed, you know, and I promised not to tell."

Prosper, Samantha knew, had a heavy reputation amongst sports writers and had broken a number of scandals in the world of college and professional sports. The fact that even Prosper had lost out actually

tended to lend credence to the notion of an alumni association. It would take a very rich and powerful group to bury Odin's evil doing, but it could be done, at least for a while.

"Then Odin showed up here, playing for the Huskies, so everyone figured it had to be local people. We heard a few names. You'd know one or two of them. Harvey started working on it again, but Odin blew out his knee, so it wasn't much of a story any more," April said. "You know, instead of 'football hero rapes, beats women nearly to death, gambles and drinks', it was '*former* football hero'. There's nothing like the word '*former*' to gut a good story. So Odin was a has-been and those guys, whoever they were, were out a couple of hundred thousand or so which they could probably pay from petty cash, and life went on."

"God, I wish I had known," Samantha said. "I wish you had told me."

"I wanted to, but it was just hearsay. What if it just wasn't true? Nobody ever had any proof."

"I just don't see how these things could be kept quiet."

"I guess they couldn't. Not forever. But they managed to get a lid on it and I heard Odin had toned down his act."

"What else did Harvey tell you?"

"Sammi ..."

"What else, April?"

"He ... he said the woman told him Odin was the most dangerous man she'd ever met. She said there was something ... terrifying ... about him. He treated her like she was a *thing*, like a lump of meat. She just got the feeling he was *wrong*, you know? So she told

him she wanted out, that she'd hitchhike back to town, and he basically threw her out at thirty miles an hour or so. Then he came back and beat her half to death. She showed Harvey the medical report, but wouldn't let him have it. He said I just wouldn't have believed the damage to that woman."

"Oh, God," Samantha said, staring at the mineshaft. She had no doubt the story was true. Every so often, if she were honest with herself, she'd had those feelings about Danny, too. A sense that he was an incredibly violent and dangerous man who sought relief from dark forces in skydiving, martial arts and mountaineering. If she were really honest with herself, she'd admit that for a young Samantha Miller, that aura of carefully concealed menace had been one of Danny's chief attractions.

Like father, like son.

"Why did you say he'd be almost impossible to get out of there? Because he has a gun?" Samantha asked.

"That's not all. When we were kids, he was a big part of the Shafers."

"The Shafers?"

"What we called a gang of kids who hung out around here," April said.

"Like Matt Helprin and Calvin Jenkins?"

"Yeah, they're Shafers. It's a kind of gang that sort of came and went over the years, you know. I'm surprised Ellen never told you about it. She was in it for awhile."

"Ellen?"

"Yes. And me. And Odin and a whole bunch of others. It's sort of a revolving group. Older kids drift

away and younger ones come in. Sometimes there's a lot, sometimes not so many. Anyhow, Odin loved the mine better than anybody. He knew it better than anybody. If there's any place at all to hide in there, he knows it. If there's any other way out at all, he knows it."

"There isn't any other way out," Samantha said quickly.

"I don't know about that," April said. "There was one time we were partying and Odin went back into the mine, you know? Just about everyone saw him going down the shaft. He made a big deal out of it. Made sure we saw him go. He didn't come back. After a while some of the kids got worried and went looking for him."

"They didn't find him," Samantha guessed.

"No, they didn't. But they covered just about every square inch of the place. Took them hours. He just wasn't there. We decided to report him missing and a couple of the kids took their bikes all the way downtown. They got to the police station and there was Odin, sitting in the DQ across the street, laughing at them."

"He must have hidden and waited for the searchers to go by, then slipped out," Samantha said.

"No dice. That's what he said he did. But he didn't. I was one of the kids at the head of the shaft. We were right there, right at the only place he could have come out. We were there the whole time and he didn't pass by us. He *didn't*, Sammi."

"Were you guys straight?"

"We were blowing dope," April admitted, "but we had about three joints between us. It was hardly enough to

get a buzz on. Honestly, we'd have seen him if he'd gone by us."

"He can't walk through rocks," Samantha said, "he must have gotten past you guys."

"Honestly, Sammi, I was there. I don't know how he did it."

So that was that. Samantha had found out what April knew. Finding it out had passed some time, but hadn't done anything for her peace of mind. Flanked by Blake and fighting off an insane urge to draw her automatic and run into the mineshaft, she wandered back to the small group of sheriff's officers on the shack porch. The radio crackled as she got there and one of the men said something into the mike. Samantha didn't catch what was said, but several men shook their heads.

"Chief Bentley?" said the man with the mike, "Bad news. Larsen and your daughter are not in the mine."

"They have to be," Samantha said, shortly. "Unless Odin Larsen can walk through rock, there's no other way out."

The man shook his head. "Well, we've got dogs coming in. When they get here we'll make another sweep."

The group settled in to drinking coffee and waiting. As smoke grew even thicker, searchers trooped out of the mineshaft.

It was nearly 11 pm and totally dark from a combination of wood smoke and massive clouds obscuring the moon when Grady, covered with dirt, bark and pine needles, staggered from bushes with the map. Samantha, Grady, Blake and Steeples, flanked by a press of curious sheriff's officers, spread the fragile

sheet out on the old trestle table. The mine was a spider web of tunnels, galleries and shafts. Strangely, Samantha had known all her life that the old map was in the steamer trunk, but had never gotten around to looking at it. Now as she ran her eyes over the bewildering tangle of lines and cryptic notations that probably made sense only to God and a coal miner, she saw the SWAT team's problem. Not only did they have to contend with the incredible confusion of tunnels, but with the possibility of being shot at in the darkness.

"I don't know," she said at last, "I don't see anything."

"Just a lot of tunnels," Steeples agreed, "only one way out that I can see."

"Harlan, were you a Shafter?" Samantha asked suddenly.

"Oh, you heard about them?"

"Just now. I thought it was just kids like Helprin and Jenkins using the shack once in a while. I can't believe I never heard of a gang called the Shafter's."

"It was a kind of a secret," Steeples said. "I was one of the earliest ones, just after they shut the mine down. I hung around with them once in awhile. Not really in with them, though."

"Do you think there's any other way out of there?"

"I don't know."

It wasn't the response Samantha had been expecting.

A half hour later the Pierce County sheriff's department helicopter dropped into the yard and two officers got out, each accompanied by a large, dark-faced German Shepherd. From shouted commands, it

became apparent that these were Brutus and Cleo. Setting coffee aside, the SWAT team formed up again, faces showing a distinct aversion to another session in the mine.

"I'm going with you," Samantha said, walking up to O'Connor.

"Chief Bentley ..."

"I *am* going with you," Samantha repeated. It was crazy, she knew, but she couldn't stand another vigil in the mine yard while searchers combed for her daughter and a psychopathic killer.

O'Connor sighed and said, "All right, but stay to the back of the group, please."

Despite the relative coolness of the mine, it was hot, sweaty work, overlaid with constant fear of a bullet from darkness ahead. The barking of dogs and shouted commands of handlers reverberated in the narrow confines of galleries. On the farthest gallery the dogs suddenly seemed to pick up a fresh scent. There was a rattling as officers snapped safeties off and spread out to avoid each other's field of fire. Samantha's heart was pounding almost painfully.

Please, dear God, let Ellen be all right.

There were several side galleries and Samantha expected the dogs to veer into one of them. Instead, the animals made a beeline for the end of the main gallery that was nearly completely plugged with loose rock and debris. Paws scrabbling, they tried to make their way up a nearly vertical mound of rubble, but it was too much. They slid down in frustration, snapping and barking loudly. One of the deputies, keeping his 9 mm in one hand, climbed cautiously.

"Not a fucking thing," he reported, disgust in his voice. "Probably came up here looking for some way out and didn't find anything. Doubled back."

Brutus and Cleo, constrained on short leashes by straining handlers, continued to lunge at the slope.

"Chrissakes," someone said, "can't we control those fucking dogs?"

"You know so much, *you* control the fucking dogs," a handler shot back. "Brutus! Asshole! Get back here. C'mon, goddam it! Get back!"

"Okay, that's it," O'Connor said, "There's nothing to see. He was here, now he's not. We're pulling back. Come on, let's go."

With considerably less caution than they had shown going in, officers trudged back to the surface. They were getting tired of the mine, and body language showed it.

Once back in the yard, O'Connor confronted Samantha. "You traded shots with this asshole, right?" he said.

"Yes. He shot at me, I shot back. I hit him."

"Then?"

"He went into the mine."

"And you guys went in after him?"

"Yes. He shot at us and we came back out. We didn't want to endanger my daughter any more ... any more than she already is. We waited for you."

"And you guys never took your eyes off the opening?"

"We were watching it."

"Maybe you weren't watching it all the time. Maybe he came back out. Maybe you weren't looking for a few minutes and he got back out."

"I never took my eyes ..."

"You were on that tree when he shot at you, right?"
O'Connor said.

"Yes."

"Then, after he went into the mine, you worked your way over to the shack, right?"

"Right."

"But you kept below the crest, so there'd be a minute or two that you were *not* looking at the entrance. He could have come out then."

"When we went in there, he shot at us," Samantha said patiently, "he was still in there."

"You must have taken your eyes off it some other time, then. Maybe he used that stuff for cover and got behind those buildings over there," O'Connor said, pointing to several huge sheets of corrugated steel leaning against the rock face. "It's only a few feet from the opening to those sheets. Maybe he worked his way along behind those and got to the buildings. Then got into those trees. Maybe we've been on a wild goose chase."

"I never ..."

O'Connor turned his back on Samantha and ordered the handlers to take their dogs and search the ruins. Faces still showing a singular lack of enthusiasm, they tramped off through smoke, accompanied by several other officers who seemed just as keen. Only Brutus and Cleo were having a good time.

Samantha, catching a look from Steeples, said there was no chance they had missed Odin's dragging Ellen from the mine.

"God knows we didn't, Harlan," she said. "Odin dragged Ellen into the mine and they did *not* come out."

And we know he's in there, he *shot* at us, for God's sake."

"Well ..." Steeples said dubiously.

"What?"

"Well, when I went to, ah, whiz that time, did you and Bill take your eyes off the entrance?"

"No, not for a second."

"Okay, I believe you."

"Harlan, he's got to be in the mine. They *have* to be in there."

"*That*, I'm not so sure I believe."

"Dammit, there's no other way out. Let's take another look at the map."

Inside the shack, ignored by remaining deputies, they once again studied the old map. There just didn't seem to be any rational answer to the disappearance of Odin Larsen and his hostage.

"Maybe he took lessons from Mailman Mel," Steeples muttered, "maybe he learned how to drift through solid rock."

"April was telling me that there was a party once, and Odin disappeared down the mine," Samantha said. "She said he never passed the other kids on the way out or anything, but they found him downtown and he would never say how he did it."

"I heard something about that," Steeples said. "Now that you mention it. But I always thought those kids were drunk or sniffing glue or something and just missed him when he snuck by them."

"Yes," Samantha sighed, "that's what I think, too. There just isn't any other way out of the place."

Giving up, she walked over to the doorway. In a moment Blake joined her. The orange necklace on

Snoqualmie seemed closer, at least halfway down the ridge. She could see red and green wing lights of water bombers still dumping fire retardant on the blaze that was clearly far from under control. A puff of wind brought a fresh wave of stinging smoke to eyes and lungs and she coughed.

"How bad is it?" she asked one of the deputies, nodding towards the fire.

"Really bad," the man said. "Last we heard it was about three thousand acres. The good news is that it's moving more northwards right now rather than at us. We're getting about a half mile an hour creep this way."

Samantha estimated the fire front was now about nine miles away. At a half mile per hour, it would be something like eighteen hours before flames reached the mine yard. But smoke would drive everyone off the mountain long before that. And the forecast was for strong westerly winds. That would change the fire's direction and start it crowning. If it did that, it could reach speeds of ten miles per hour, leaving them with almost no time at all.

Dear God, why had she not shot Odin when she'd had a clear line of fire?

"Wait a minute," Steeples said suddenly. "Wait just one god damned minute. Right here, see? This crease? Maybe it isn't just a crease. Maybe it's a pencil line as well."

Samantha raced to the table and peered at the bottom left corner, where Steeples was pointing. Map edges were badly tattered and creased from long, hard years of use, making it difficult to separate lines from creases.

"This is where it was blocked, right?" Steeples asked. "Where the dogs were trying to get up the rocks?"

"You should have been a miner, Harlan," Samantha said, "nice eye." The crease Steeples was indicating ran right into the line that marked the blocked gallery. If the crease happened to be obscuring a pencil line, that line might indicate that the gallery ran on for a considerable distance past the blocked area.

"O'Connor!" Samantha called urgently, "anybody seen O'Connor?"

"Here," the man's voice came from the porch.

"There's something here you've got to see."

"I really doubt that, Chief," O'Connor said. "I think I've seen just about as much of this mountain as I want to see. We're going to have to pull out, anyway. I think we're going to be needed elsewhere before this night is over."

"Here," she said, pointing to the map, "look here. This crease. I think it might be a continuation of the gallery."

"I doubt it," O'Connor said, with a perfunctory glance, "looks like a fold to me."

"I want you to check it out. Please," Samantha said, grasping the man's arm. "I want to go with you. Please."

"I'm sorry, Chief Bentley, it's just too damn dangerous. We've got to think about clearing this plateau."

"*Please*," Samantha begged, "just one look."

"Chief, what's it going to take to convince you they are *not* in there?" O'Connor said. "They got out. That's that."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Blake said.

"Who are you, sir?" O'Connor asked in exasperation.

"This is Dr Bill Blake. He's a psychiatrist and, ah, he's working for us," Samantha said.

"Sergeant O'Connor," Blake said, "this man is extraordinarily bright and totally devoid of emotion. He's not going to panic. I can't say what his plan was, but I'll stake my professional reputation on one thing – he *had* a plan. He did *not* drag Miss Bentley all the way up here to do a hostage number in a mineshaft."

"He's not in the damn mine," O'Connor said.

"I'll stake my reputation on one more thing," Blake replied. "If Chief Bentley says he's in the mine, he's in the mine."

"All right," O'Connor sighed. "Once. Just once. And listen, we're getting good news, bad news and worse news from the weather guys, okay? The good news is we're going to get heavy rain. The bad news is that it won't be for a while yet. The worse news is that the wind is expected to pick up, big time. I have to tell you if that damn fire starts to crown, we're out of there, understand? I wouldn't do this at all, Chief Bentley, if your daughter wasn't involved. I'm putting men at risk here. Enough is enough."

Backed up by a dozen men, O'Connor, Samantha and Steeples made their way through the mine to the farthest gallery, leaving cops behind at strategic points for radio relay to the outside. This time they were far less cautious.

When they got to the rock fall, one of the officers, without a word from O'Connor, made his way to the top.

"Not a damn thing," he called. "Just fucking rocks."

"Can you move anything?" O'Connor said. "See if anything moves. Maybe there's some loose rock or something."

"Okay, just a sec ... nope ... everything looks pretty solid ... hang on a sec ... nope ..."

"Okay, you might as well come on down," O'Connor said.

"*Jesus!*" the officer shouted, causing the men below to raise assault rifles.

"What's going on?" O'Connor shouted, motioning them to spread out.

"There's a fucking opening here! I thought it was a small rock, but it wasn't. It's a piece of asbestos sheeting or some fucking thing. Jesus, there's a *hole* here!"

"Maybe the dogs *weren't* so fucking stupid," O'Connor said grimly, adding, "Put a light down there, but be careful. Keep your fucking head out of the way."

A moment later officers saw his silhouette as he peered into a tiny crawl space.

"Looks like this whole tunnel is pretty well filled," he reported, "but there's space between the rocks and the top. And I can hear something. Sounds like a creek or something. Water. Something like that."

"It's gob," Steeples said. "It's what they called the loose rock and debris left over from mining. When they finished with a gallery, they'd shove it all in there to get it out of the way. They finished this one and back-filled it. Must not go all the way to the top of the shaft. Jesus, my old man was a miner. I should have thought of that."

"George," O'Connor said to the man on top of the rocks, "can you get through?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Let's just put a stunner down there," one of the men muttered.

"Oh, *great*," O'Connor said disgustedly, "just what we need. A concussion grenade in a creaky old mineshaft. Bring the whole damned thing down on our heads. Sometimes I wonder what you use for a brain, Williams."

"I guess tear gas wouldn't work," Steeples said.

"I don't think so," O'Connor said, "feel those air currents? Tear gas would dissipate too quickly to do us any good. Needs a more confined space to be effective."

"Okay," he called to the man at the top of the debris, "slide through and see how far you get. But don't take any chances. If you see anything hinky, get the fuck out *now*. We'll be behind you."

The other team members scrambled up loose rock and took up positions around the tiny opening as the lead man forced himself through and disappeared.

"Okay, we can get through," his voice floated out, "just have to work around the rocks. Kinda like a tunnel."

Samantha reached the opening just as the boots of the man in front of her slid out of sight. The hole was less than two square feet, and, as she squeezed through, Samantha saw a piece of gray asbestos sheeting that had evidently been used to hide it. The sheeting was the same color as the rocks and had been punched into a hemispherical shape. She could see how it had blended in and escaped detection, even when dogs had been pointing right at it.

Worming her way through the narrow passage formed by boulders and broken timbers shoved in against the roof of the shaft was a claustrophobic experience. On several occasions she banged her face on boots.

After what seemed like miles but was actually probably less than fifty feet, she came to a steep slope as the shaft opened up again. Flashlights aimed at feet showed the SWAT team had spread out on the other side, taking cover against sides of the shaft. What had appeared on the map to be just a crease in the paper was in fact a sizeable tunnel that angled down in to Stygian blackness from which came sounds of rushing water.

"Christ, a creek," Steeples said, "a creek must go through here. That's how Odin did it. He must have gone through the creek." There was awe and wonder in his voice.

"Got more blood here," said the point man from about twenty feet down the shaft. "Lot more. Looks like he had it stopped up but it let go again."

The team began to leapfrog down the tunnel, one man covering the next until he found safety behind rock outcrop or piece of shoring. Samantha and Steeples, keeping as tight against the side of the shaft as they could, followed along.

It seemed like forever as sounds of water became ever louder, but it was probably only a few minutes until the point man called a halt.

"Hang on," his voice came out of the chilly darkness, muffled by roaring water, "looks like a hole here in the floor."

Other men inched forward, shining lights on the shaft floor. Walls and ceiling were intact, but it looked as though a small section of floor had simply dropped away, creating a manhole-sized opening. A half-inch piece of rope, tied off to an old piece of shoring embedded in gob, disappeared down the hole.

"Map didn't show anything like this," Steeples said, voice hushed. "It must have opened up in a quake or something after they backfilled this shaft."

"We know where he went, anyway," Samantha said.

"All right, this is mine," O'Connor said. "Someone hang onto my legs."

With two men holding him, O'Connor, armed with a flashlight, slid forward on his stomach until he was hanging into the hole.

"A little more," his muffled voice came back to them. With wary looks at each other, the men raised O'Connor's ankles skywards and lowered him still further.

"Better him than me," one muttered.

"Okay, get me back," O'Connor called after a moment.

It was the work of seconds to pull the man back into the mineshaft.

"It's incredible. There's a cave down there," he reported, breathing hard, "and a goddam creek. No sign of our boy, though."

"He has to be down there," Samantha said in desperation, "I'm telling you he didn't come out. He didn't. *Please!*"

"Okay, one look," O'Connor said.

Leaving one man back for radio relay the team, followed by Steeples and Samantha, quickly slid down

the rope and found themselves on the bank of a subterranean mountain stream, rushing, clear green waters cold and forbidding in flashlight beams. Water had been splashed on the rock and, before them, was a small pool of what looked like tar.

One of the men wiped a finger through it. "Blood," he said. "Looks like our boy came this way after all."

"If he went in that creek, he's dead," another said.

Samantha slumped against the wall and slid to a sitting position. It was true. If Odin had gone in there, he could not have survived. And neither could Ellen. The glare of flashlights swam in tears and Steeples gripped her shoulder.

"Where does this thing come out?" the team leader said.

"I don't know," she heard Steeples reply. "Must be under Elaho Lake. Like an underwater spring."

That was possible. The mine went a long way into the mountain, perhaps nearly to the Elaho Lake side.

"How far?"

"I don't know. It's on the other side of the mountain from where we came in. We might be most of the way there for all I know."

The officers began muttering, and Samantha caught fragments of the conversation. It seemed that nobody thought Odin or Ellen would have a chance of surviving.

"You know," Steeples said, "there must be air pockets all along in there. This guy once made it from here to the lake. I'm sure of it." The team gathered around Steeples as he related the story of Odin's trick. "He was sitting there drinking Coke and he had changed clothes," Steeples concluded. "There's no way

he could have snuck past and got out the main way. I've heard it from too many reputable kids who were there. He did not go past them."

"Was that in the summer?" O'Connor asked.

"Yeah. I think it was towards the end of the summer. Four, maybe five years ago. We had a really long, hot spell, just like this summer."

"That's it," O'Connor said, "it stays dry long enough, this creek must go right down. That's probably how he could find his way through to wherever."

"There's no big creek feeding Elaho Lake," Samantha said, "just the Elaho River coming off ..." Her voice faded as the implications sank in.

"It must feed into the lake underground, like a spring," Steeples said. "I remember the lake was real low a few years ago, too. Like it is now. He'd have to swim for it the last few dozen yards or so, but that's probably how he got out of here."

"Jesus," O'Connor said, playing his light over glacial water, "what sort of hump *is* this guy?"

"He's an incredible athlete," Steeples said, "absolutely nerveless. If anyone could get through there, he could."

"Harlan, that was before he tore up his knee," Samantha said.

"Yeah, but he's still pretty damn strong and coordinated," Steeples said. "I wouldn't want to take him on."

The radio held by one of the men crackled to life. The transmission was badly broken up, and they could only catch a few words, but one of them was 'fire' and another seemed to be 'crowning'. In the flashlight beams, they looked uneasily at one another.

“John,” O’Connor called up to the mineshaft, “you better find out what that’s about.”

“If that meant what I thought it meant ...” one officer said.

“Jesus,” another said, “if we get fire out there, we’re cooked.”

“It’ll stay cool down here,” Samantha said.

“Not a matter of being cool, Chief,” O’Connor said, “it’s a matter of oxygen and smoke. The fire will use all the oxygen and use it fast. These tunnels will fill with smoke. We’ll asphyxiate. Simple as that.”

There was a clattering of loose rock and the radio relay officer slid down, landing on the cavern floor with a grunt. “We got a stiff wind up there,” he said breathlessly, “the bastard is crowning. Coming this way fast.”

“How fast?” O’Connor said, motioning the rest of the men to silence.

“They’re not sure, but it’s gone across the fire break. Crews barely made it out of there. It was at about eight miles, could be moving anywhere up to ten miles per hour.”

“Worst case, about forty minutes,” O’Connor said, “and that’s till it gets here. We’re cooked before then. That’s it, guys, let’s pack it up.”

“Oh, God,” Samantha heard herself moan, “we *have* to find her. *Please*.”

“Look, he’s bleeding like a stuck pig. Must be down a couple of pints by now. No way he could make it, especially if he was dragging someone with him,” O’Connor said. “I’m sorry, Chief Bentley, but that’s the way I see it. They can’t get out, we can’t get in, and we sure as hell can’t hang around *here*.”

There was a muttered chorus of agreement. No way he could have made it, *that* was sure. Not wounded like that. And outside the mine something really bad was headed their way faster than any man could run in dense forest. It was definitely time to make themselves scarce.

"Okay, guys, that's it," O'Connor said. "Good job. Let's clear out of here."

With sympathetic glances at Samantha, the men quickly retrieved gear. O'Connor gripped Samantha's shoulder in sympathy.

It was the last man, the youngest on the team, who heard it.

"Hang on," he called out, hunkering at the edge of the fast-flowing creek.

"Come on, George, for chrissake," someone else said, voice betraying impatience born of frustration, weariness and fright, "you're going to get us all *dead*."

"Yeah, George, for God's sake *come on*," came another voice.

But George wasn't about to come on. Bracing hands on knees and leaning well forward, he eased into the stream, one tiny step at a time, straining to hear over the rushing water, until it was lapping at his fingertips.

"Abernathy, come on," O'Connor said. "Jesus, you can go spelunking on your own goddam time. Right now you're going to get us all killed."

"No, wait, Sarge," Abernathy said, easing still farther into the icy waters, "I heard something."

"You heard the goddam creek," O'Connor said, "now let's get out of here."

There was a round of "right ons" and "damn rights" from the rest of the team members. They had followed

the trail to the end, and that was it for their job. Recovering bodies would be up to divers or spelunkers, or just about anybody else. Right now the prime directive was to get Abernathy's ass out of the water and theirs out of this gallery before fire sucked oxygen out of these tunnels like a giant vacuum cleaner.

"There it was again," Abernathy called, "I can hear someone in there."

"Where?" O'Connor said, joining Abernathy in the creek. Water purred around their legs as they fought to keep their balance on slippery rocks.

"In there," Abernathy repeated, pointing to a wall at the downstream end of the little cave, where, with a sucking like a giant toilet, water was disappearing under a rocky shelf.

Samantha, heart in her mouth, waded into the glacier-fed creek. She was barely conscious of numbing shock from ice water, or of Steeples' hands on her hips, steadying her. When she bent over, nearly putting her nose on the surface, and shone her light at the rock face, she saw a narrow gap between overhang and water.

"There's room there," she said, "I can see it going in."

"I want to go in," Abernathy said. "I heard someone in there. I fucking swear it."

"Be serious," said O'Connor, "it's suicide."

"Get me a rope. I just want to go in a few feet," Abernathy said, walking to the creek bank and stamping wet boots to warm his feet. Samantha allowed herself to be gently drawn out of the water. It wasn't until she was back on dry land that she realized her feet were nearly numb with cold.

"C'mon, guys, we can't leave someone in there," Abernathy pleaded. "I'm telling you, I heard a voice. There's someone in there."

"Darryl," one man said, "the fire ..."

O'Connor waved him off.

"Gene, Vince," he said, "splice your ropes and do it quick. One look, George, and I mean one. In and out. You don't find anyone in there, you're coming out and I mean *now*."

"Deal, Sarge," Abernathy said.

In and out. A slim chance that Abernathy had really heard a voice at all, and only a fifty per cent chance that the voice was Ellen's. Yet hope warmed Samantha's freezing legs and made her dizzy. She nearly fell over as Steeples' arm went around her shoulders.

Two of the men were carrying short lengths of rope, and it took only seconds to splice them together to make a forty-foot length. Wrapping one end around his waist and securing it with a sheep shank, Abernathy quickly waded back in to the creek. Four officers manned the other end, cursing as icy water filled boots.

"Come on," O'Connor said, "you guys were bitching about the heat. Christ, are you never satisfied?"

"This is really dangerous, Sammi," Steeples whispered to Samantha. "We can't stay here long or none of us will make it."

"I know," Samantha shivered, "but we've got to find her, Harlan. We've got to."

"Sammi ..."

"We've got to. That's all. You can go, Harlan, but I'm staying. I'll go in there myself if I have to."

Abernathy had reached the middle of the stream, gasping and panting as water reached nearly to his waist.

"You're gonna be singing soprano, George," someone called out to a burst of nervous laughter.

"Okay, cut it out," O'Connor said, "you guys are going to play the rope out slowly, okay? George, you want to come back, two tugs. You feel us give a couple of tugs, you're coming out, no matter what. Got it?"

"Yeah, got it," Abernathy responded, his teeth beginning to chatter. "Okay, here goes!"

He took a deep breath and kicked out, sliding up to his neck in frigid water. Samantha heard the man's breath leave him even as he was sucked under the rock shelf and out of sight.

In the beams of the flashlights held by Steeples, Samantha and O'Connor, the taut rope quivered and sprayed droplets of crystal water. The men let it out slowly, muscles straining to hold the dead weight of their colleague.

"God," Steeples said in Samantha's ear, "I'd hate to go in there."

"I'd go," Samantha said.

"Yeah, so would I. I just said I'd hate to have to do it."

The rope suddenly went slack.

"Jesus," one of the men shouted as the group staggered back, struggling to maintain balance. One man failed and went under with a strangled curse.

"What's going on?" O'Connor shouted.

"Don't know, Sarge," came the answer, "the rope just went slack."

"Well, take up the fucking slack," O'Connor said, "he's gotta still be there."

The men pulled the rope back, obviously halfway expecting a frayed end to appear. When a few feet of slack had been taken up the rope again went taut.

"He's still there," someone said.

"Maybe we ought to haul him back," another added.

"Give him another couple of minutes," O'Connor said, "he's a good kid. He'll let you know if he needs to come back."

"Christ," someone muttered, "come on, Abernathy. I'm freezing my nuts off in here."

A minute passed, then another.

"Sarge?" one of the men asked. "The fire?"

"Okay, he's been in long enough," O'Connor said grudgingly.

At that moment the rope jerked once, then twice. There was a pause, then two more tugs.

"That's it," O'Connor called, "let's get him the fuck out of there."

The men began to draw the rope back, hand over hand.

"He's got something," one grunted. "It's a lot heavier."

Grunting and straining, the men heaved on the rope while Samantha and Steeples, hands trembling, kept flashlight beams on the rock shelf. It seemed like forever to Samantha before, suddenly, two heads popped into view.

Abernathy, blue with cold, hair plastered to his face. And Ellen, apparently unconscious.

Samantha sprang towards the creek, but Steeples held her back.

"You can't help, Sammi," he shouted, "you'll only get in the way. Let them do it. Let them do it, okay?"

She sagged against Steeples as men dragged the frozen pair from the water. Two of them immediately set to work on Ellen, while others helped a shaken Abernathy to his feet.

"There's a ledge and some breathing room about ten feet in," he gasped, "she was on it. Might be hypothermia. No sign of the guy."

"Okay, I've got a pulse," said one of the men working on Ellen.

"Sarge, are you guys okay down there?" a voice called from the far side of the tunnel.

"Yeah, everything is okay," O'Connor called back.

"Well, it's not okay outside," the voice came, "the wind has really picked up. We got a speed on the fire. Better than ten miles an hour, straight at us."

"How far?" O'Connor called.

"Ten miles."

"Shit, an hour, and that's till it *gets* here," O'Connor said, "We've got about a half hour. Maybe less. How's the girl?"

"She's not too bad off, Darryl," one of the men said. "Not sure she can move on her own, though."

"We'll carry her if we have to. Okay, leave your weapons, leave your gear. Nobody takes anything but a flashlight. *Let's go.*"

Samantha had only a few seconds to hug her daughter and trade weak smiles before she found herself back in the tiny tunnel, rubbing her face against the soles of O'Connor's boots. Once in the main shaft, one of the men took Ellen in a fireman's carry and the

little group moved ahead at a near trot, coughing in smoke now invading the mine's farthest recesses.

"Coast guard is in with a Sikorsky, airlifting all those assholes off," one of the radio relay men reported, "they'll come back for us, but they can't wait too long. Wind is really bad and getting worse. Air currents will be fucking impossible when the fire gets close."

"What about the bombers?"

"Can't get in. Too close to the mountain and they can't see what they're doing."

"How long have we got the chopper?" O'Connor asked, looking at his luminous watch face.

"They can't hold much past when it's ten minutes away or so," the man said, "we've got about twenty minutes to get out of here."

"What about that fucking rain?"

"Nothing yet, Darryl. You want to wait on it?"

It was a nightmare odyssey as they passed Ellen from one man to the next, legs trembling with weariness. Smoke grew thicker as they approached the surface, burning lungs and filling eyes with tears. Fifty feet short of the bend, right about where Dolly Jenkins' body had been found, Steeples, who had been carrying Ellen, staggered to a stop. "Hang ... hang on ..." he gasped, "can't make it ..."

"Okay," O'Connor said, "I'll take her the rest of the way. You guys ..."

From somewhere ahead came the sharp crack of splintering wood.

"Shit," someone said nervously, "what was that?"

"Nothing. Just something in the heat. Forget it."

"Plenty of time," O'Connor said, hefting Ellen in a fireman's carry.

"I ... I can walk ..." she managed, coughing weakly.

"Not as fast as I can carry you, sweetheart," O'Connor said gently. "Okay, let's finish this off. Let's get our asses out of here."

There was a splintering that sounded like a volley of pistol shots and they staggered as the floor heaved with a *whump*. A shock wave of hot, smoky, dust-laden air surged past. There was crackling and rattling, then silence. The group froze, hair prickling on necks, eyes gleaming with fright in flashlight beams. Whatever that had been, it had been *fast*. It was *over* and they hadn't had a chance to so much as move a muscle.

"George, take a look," O'Connor said, still carrying Ellen across his shoulders, "but be damn careful."

Abernathy edged out of sight around the bend. His light was eerily diffused by smoke and coal dust and his misshapen shadow loomed on the mine wall like some grotesque Nibelung.

"Oh, mother of god!" he called out, "it's down! It's all down! We're fucking trapped!"

Throwing caution to the winds, they rounded the bend to find the shaft choked with freshly fallen rock and splinters of timber. Smoke and dust swirled, nearly smothering lights.

"Christ, we're *dead*," Abernathy said, slumping to the ground, "oh, shit ..."

"This is no time for that, son," O'Connor said, setting Ellen down, "you guys get some light up there."

Several flashlight beams hit the new wall and played up to the ceiling. It seemed that a huge mass of rock had broken away from the ceiling and come straight down, sealing them off.

"God," somebody breathed, "if we were a few seconds earlier ..."

"So fucking *what?*" came another voice, "we're going to die anyway."

O'Connor's flashlight, playing along the top of the plug, picked out a narrow gap to one side. Rock had fragmented and several large boulders looked as though they could be shifted to widen the gap enough for a party of beleaguered cops.

"Maybe we can make enough room to get in there," O'Connor said, "same as down at the creek. Come on, *move!* Let's do it!"

Samantha sat on the floor of the mine in the hot, choking darkness, cradling Ellen as men scrambled on the rock fall and began throwing boulders down in a clattering avalanche.

"They'll get it honey," she said, rocking her daughter gently, "we'll get out."

"I ... I know ..."

"Where's Odin?"

"Don't ... know ... he ... he said he was going to take us through the mine and ... and nobody would ever find us ... I was his and he was going to keep me ... forever ..."

So that had been the plan. Odin, guessing that Samantha would figure out who the real murderer was and get roadblocks in place, had arranged to let Samantha know where he was taking her daughter. Then he made sure she saw him enter the mine with Ellen. That had been Samantha's true role. Not a victim, but a witness. That would explain the little fire? she and Blake must have been too close. It also explained a welt on her side and two bullets in a tight

pattern just wide, when Odin must have been able to see exactly where she was. Odin had known that Samantha wouldn't dare face him in the mine for fear Ellen would be killed in an exchange of gunfire. No, she'd have to do precisely what she'd done. Pull back and wait for reinforcements. During that time, Odin would make his way with his victim through Elaho Lake and in to the forest. While they engaged in a fruitless search of the mine, they wouldn't have the highway covered and precious hours could be gained. And why had Chummy McLarnen been so anxious to direct the Tipple PD to his best friend? So he could slip away and be waiting for Odin along one of the innumerable back logging roads?

"Did he say where he was taking you, honey? When he got you out?" Samantha asked.

"No ... just ... out a secret way ... spring under the lake ..."

The water had been low enough for Odin's plan to work. Ellen was a strong swimmer and likely could have made the passage, especially if Odin already knew where air pockets were. But he had been derailed by one unforeseen circumstance – a Hydra-Shok bullet traveling at better than a thousand feet per second.

"Did you see where Odin was wounded?" Samantha asked.

"You got him in the right side, Mom," Ellen said, "just under the ribs ... I think. It was ... bleeding pretty badly ... he ... he tore up part of his shirt and ... and stuffed it into the holes, and ... it sort of stopped for a while ... then it started again ..."

"Holes? It went right through?"

“Y-yes. He poked the shirt into the hole and I could see it coming out the back. It ... was awful ...”

At less than twenty-five yards, Samantha realized, the bullet would have been traveling fast enough to produce a phenomenon known as ‘cavitation’, in which the projectile forms both a ‘permanent’ cavity and a “temporary” cavity in which its wake pushes flesh outwards. The result is far more damage to surrounding tissue than the projectile itself would cause. Even if Samantha’s bullet had missed vital organs Odin Larsen, without medical help, was mortally wounded.

“Okay, we can get through here,” Abernathy called down from a perch near the top of the rubble. “It’s going to be close, but we can do it.”

“All right,” O’Connor called back, “get set to help the girl through. Miss,” he said, turning to Ellen, “can you make it?”

“Yes ... yes, I can ...”

“Okay. Give your daughter a hand, Chief, and we’ll go catch our flight.”

The men had managed to move enough loose rock to make a small tunnel to a hot, smoke-filled vault where rock had fallen. Once they squirmed into the open space left by the fall, they had to pick their way by flashlight across and around boulders. At the far side they stopped in dismay at finding their way blocked again.

“Come on,” O’Connor yelled, throwing aside a boulder the size of a breadbox, “let’s keep going! Come on!”

Several officers started towards him, then faltered. Samantha realized they were totally exhausted. With her own limbs feeling like lead, she scrambled over a

large rock to O'Connor's side and picked up a smaller boulder. Straining, she threw it behind and grabbed another. A few moments later two other officers joined them, grunting and coughing as they dug out smaller boulders and occasionally combining to roll larger ones. Eyes burning and almost swollen closed by sweat and acrid smoke, Samantha was nearly collapsing with weariness and pain when, right in front of her, a large boulder suddenly vanished and a fresh cloud of smoke swirled in on a shaft of orange light. An instant later Blake's frightened face was in the opening.

"Everybody okay?" he yelled, pulling away another rock. His hands were battered and bleeding.

"Yeah, we got everybody," O'Connor called back. "Get your daughter over here quick," he said to Samantha, "we got no time."

"Here," she heard Steeples saying, "she's right here."

The opening made by Blake was barely more than a foot square and they slithered through like rats. Several picked their way down rubble to the mine floor while others stayed to help their fellows out of the tunnel.

"Christ, look at that," Abernathy said, pointing to the mine roof. All eyes went to the fissure, clearly visible in the orange glow of fire beyond the barricade. Rocks vibrated and, even as they watched, the fissure seemed to get wider.

"All right, move it!" O'Connor yelled, "this thing is going go again! Come on, *move!*"

Steeples and Blake quickly put arms around Ellen's waist and started out. O'Connor was standing off to one side, patting each man on the back as he passed and shouting "go, go!"

Billows of thick, acrid wood smoke poured through barrier planks and enveloped the three. Samantha, years of police training asserting themselves, stayed with O'Connor to help the last of the men through. The last had barely cleared the exit when there was another sharp crack.

"Jesus, *run!*" O'Connor yelled, clambering down the last few feet, pushing a couple of men ahead of him. Galvanized into action and using their last reserves of energy, men started to run even as another section of roof came down in a clattering roar, sending boulders bounding around their legs.

"Shit!" Samantha heard someone yell and a man near her fell to hands and knees. She grabbed the fallen cop by his jacket and began pulling him. One of the man's legs was dragging. She took a panicked look and nearly screamed when she saw a bloody, glistening femur sticking through a rip in the officer's camouflage pants.

"Come on, come on!" O'Connor yelled, desperately waving at the last of the party. "It's going to go again! *Get out!*" He leapt to Samantha's side and grabbed the injured man. "I've got him, Chief, get going!"

Samantha's legs seemed like lead and her lungs were turning to charcoal as she ran the last ten feet, bursting into the yard to find herself and her companions in a scene straight from Dante's *Inferno*. The air was searing and so thick with smoke and ash they could barely breathe. Not half a mile off, roaring towards them like an express train, was the Snoqualmie Ridge fire, a sheer wall of brilliant flame shooting seventy feet into the night. Tree crowns

exploded into fire with bangs like a cannonade and huge showers of glowing red sparks swirled.

About fifty yards away the helicopter was waiting, twin rotors sucking smoke like giant drains and blasting it at the ground. The machine vibrated and bounced as the pilot held it a short step from flight. Exhausted men strung out in a line as they stumbled towards the aircraft and safety.

"Come on," O'Connor croaked, trying to urge his men to run, "come on!" He grabbed one man by the flak jacket and tried to drag him, but the effort was far too great and he dropped to his knees. Samantha staggered over and grabbed the fallen man under the arm. As they hauled him to his feet, she saw it was George Abernathy, face covered with soot, sweat and blood from a scalp cut. Drawing on her last reserves of strength, she pushed the two in the direction of the chopper and turned to look for Blake.

"Bill!" Samantha cried out, spotting him about halfway to the helicopter. Blake was on his hands and knees, head down, with Ellen sitting beside him. At the sound of his name he raised his head, but his expression showed helplessness. "Can't ..." he gasped, "Can't ..."

"Come on!" Samantha stumbled over to them and grabbed the exhausted doctor by the shoulder. "Just a bit more! Come on, you can do it!"

Blake and Ellen got to their feet, staggering and partly steadied by Samantha, who was herself close to collapse. But they could do it. Just a few more yards and they'd be safe. Blessing the flight crew for incredible courage, she started towards the Coast Guard Jayhawk, then realized there was something

terribly wrong. Bright yellow flames licked eagerly at the engine housing and ran along in little lines behind the cockpit. Samantha began a clumsy run, waving her arms in an attempt to warn the crew.

"Fire!" she screamed, coughing in stifling, smoke-laden air. "You're on fire!" The pilot, eyes hidden by a dark visor, gave her the thumbs up and smiled. "No!" she screamed, "You don't understand! Fire! You're on fire!"

The pilot, still smiling, nodded and signaled "Hurry up".

"Fire!" Samantha screamed, still staggering forward. "For God's sake, *look!*" She pointed frantically. The pilot stopped smiling and said something to his co-pilot, who also stopped smiling. "Yes! Look! *You're on fire!*"

Then time ran out. Chopper and crew disappeared in a tremendous explosion and a blast of searing air sent Samantha sprawling, ears ringing with concussion. She scrabbled to hands and knees as the helicopter was enveloped in flame and she could feel burning even over the blistering heat of the onrushing Snoqualmie Ridge blaze. In the chopper, crewmen still sat strapped in seats, burning bodies looking like carved blocks of carbon.

"Jesus, we're dead," O'Connor cried.

He was right, Samantha realized as she crawled back to Blake and her daughter. They were exhausted, injured and rapidly succumbing to smoke. They wouldn't be able to get off the plateau and already the fire was so close skin was starting to blister. The ground shuddered with the roar of flames.

"I ... guess ... we're not going to ... make it ..." Ellen said, resting her head against her mother's shoulder. "I'm ... sorry, Mom ..."

"There's nothing to be sorry about, honey," Samantha said, brushing Ellen's sweaty, matted hair from her eyes.

"If you have any ideas ... Chief ... now's the time," Steeples said. His face and hands were bloody and covered with soot and ash. He was coughing and bent almost double, knees trembling with the effort of standing. Samantha felt the same way. Even terror couldn't keep them going much longer.

"I don't ... I'm sorry, Harlan ... I'm sorry I got you into this ..."

"Mom ... it hurts ..."

"I know it does, honey, I know it does ..."

It was getting difficult to breathe and a red haze filled her vision. She prayed she'd be overcome by smoke before flames engulfed the tiny mine yard. She couldn't imagine how terrible it would feel to be burned to death.

"God," she muttered, "it's so damn *hot* ..."

She saw Abernathy drop to one knee, then slowly keel over, curling into a ball on baking slate. O'Connor crawled to him and clumsily patted him on the shoulder. As though that would make any difference. Two other men, who had made it nearly to the far edge of the plateau, toppled silently and lay still. Then another and another. Samantha felt herself growing faint. The little mine yard swam around her. Dear Jesus, they were going to be *baked alive* like grubs on hot coals.

"Oh, God, help me!" she heard one man scream.

"Help! *Help!*" another took up the cry.

Slate chips in the yard were red with reflected light from the roaring fire. Swirling sparks and ash were a glowing blizzard. Samantha's eyes streamed tears. She held her daughter tightly and burning pain seemed to recede. Perhaps this was what death by fire was really like. Perhaps Mother Nature looked after her own in final, terrible moments. Mercifully, Ellen had lost consciousness. Laying her daughter's head gently on slate, Samantha knelt beside her in the roaring oven.

Steeple lay beside Ellen, curled into a fetal ball. A few feet away Bill Blake was still, also curled up. Across the yard O'Connor, refusing to quit, was trying to crawl away. Even as Samantha watched, curiously detached and nearly blinded by smoke and brilliance, he slowly crumpled. All across the yard, men lay like piles of rags on roasting rocks. A few were moving arms or legs, but most were unconscious. They were the lucky ones, and Samantha said a little prayer for the blessing of oblivion.

Some two hundred feet away a huge lodgepole pine fairly exploded as leaping fire hit its crown and needles became a massive cloud of sparks whipped upwards by sucking winds.

Samantha looked away from the horror. She couldn't bear to see death closing on them.

Then she gasped in wonder.

Peering through an ocean of tears, she thought she could see someone walking towards her across the yard, completely oblivious to searing heat.

Then she saw the hooded jersey and mailbag. The shack, already smoking, was clearly visible through the figure.

The Mailman had come at last to take his revenge.

"Mel," she muttered through heat-cracked lips, "Mel, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry about your back. Please ... forgive me ... forgive me for the rock, *please* ..."

Then it seemed that a cool hand rested for a moment on her burning forehead. Nearly screaming from agony, she reached out to the ghostly figure, only to realize there was nobody there. She looked wildly around for The Mailman, but there was nothing save unconscious, doomed cops in the mine yard's surreal horror.

Samantha slumped to the slate, flat, sharp, hot rocks burning exposed skin. She slowly rolled onto her back and lay looking at orange and yellow reflections on billowing smoke and fountains of fiery embers as the inferno roared on, filling her world with the hellish light of Gotterdammerung.

The mine shack roof, as dry as a mummy's wrappings, ignited under a shower of sparks and the little building exploded into flame. It was only a few yards away, but Samantha barely felt additional heat. The ground rocked and vertigo made the entire plateau seem to tilt.

It was over. She felt a merciful blackness closing in. Death was, at best, only minutes away. And then The Mailman was standing over her, a smile on his unmarked face as he pointed to the heavens.

Suddenly there was a wicked hissing in superheated air and a brilliant flash threw the tiny plateau into blue-white light. Right on the heels of the flash came a clap of thunder so close that the concussion compressed Samantha's lungs and made her ears ring just as she was struck between the eyes by a raindrop half the size of a golf ball. Instants later another hit her on the

forehead, followed by a half dozen impacting face, neck and chest. Then it was as though a gigantic tap had been turned full on.

Torrential rain came down in a solid sheet, spraying off rocks and almost instantly forming huge puddles. Samantha realized she was laughing as stinging rain splattered against her sodden shirt and flailed at exposed skin. The roar of the inferno was now more a cosmic hiss and clouds of steam billowed where ugly orange flames flickered and went out, one by one. Another lightning bolt sizzled and the ground shook with thunder as rain fell even harder.

Blake, hair plastered to the sides of his head and sooty water dripping from nose and chin, was standing over her, supporting Ellen and holding out his hand. She took it and he pulled her to her feet. Through the downpour, Samantha saw several officers, including O'Connor, laughing hysterically and playing like little boys in a large puddle.

There was no sign of The Mailman.

Tipple, WA
Friday, October 30, 1998

Samantha pulled her cruiser up in front of the Larsen home. The front door stood open and a large Century 21 real estate sign adorned the lawn. Two cars were parked in the driveway and she saw, through the living room window, an agent showing a young couple around. The DA had decided not to go ahead with charges against a man who had only a few months to live. Abel Larsen had quietly packed some belongings and left Tipple. Nobody but the realty company had heard from him since, and his orders had been to sell the house and use the proceeds to pay off debts of Larsen Hardware. Samantha had no doubt he was spending his last days in a quiet little hospice somewhere.

So now, instead of the comforting presence of Abel Larsen linking her to her past, there would be strangers in the old green clapboard house. And, where Abel had presided over his motley collection of hardware old and new, there would soon be a video rental store and arcade. Tears stung her eyes. It was all so sad. She had been crying a lot lately.

Her radio crackled to life.

"Sammi," Steeples' voice came over the air.

Samantha picked up her mike. "Sammi here," she replied, noting that her voice was steady despite her precarious emotional state.

"Haven't found Jenkins, but we've got Helprin in custody, you going to be long?"

Matt Helprin.

With Calvin Jenkins unwilling to say anything about a knife and ten-year-old Marvin Hampton as the only other witness, the DA had ultimately decided not to file sex assault charges in the Dolly Jenkins case and Helprin had walked. For a couple of weeks he had been, so far as anyone had known, free of sin. Then someone had broken into Larsen Hardware, abandoned and boarded up, and word around the streets was that the culprit was Matt Helprin. She didn't look forward to another interview with the sneering youth, whose notoriety had gone up astronomically with his murder charge. He was a young man in his element, the area's undisputed top thug.

Samantha sighed. "No, not long," she called back. "Just a couple more."

She looked to the seat beside her. There were three envelopes left. The last of Mailman Mel's undelivered cargo. When the case against Helprin collapsed, they were no longer considered evidence. Samantha had decided to personally deliver them. It was such a trivial payback for breaking a man's back with a rock and helping hound him to his death. So far the letters had been of only academic interest to recipients.

She was about to pull out when two little boys wearing Halloween costumes, schoolbooks in hand and engaged in a heated squabble, walked past her car. She recognized them as brothers, Hartley and Harry Collings. Hartley, the older of the two, shouted, "If you don't fuckin' watch it, Har, Odin's gonna fuckin' get you."

"B-bullsh-shit," the younger one said, but his voice lacked conviction.

"Oh, yeah? I was fuckin' talkin' to him just last night. His fuckin' face was all maggots and he had these big red eyes. And big fuckin' teeth he's gonna use to bite your balls off," Hartley said.

Harry, who had evidently put up a brave front as long as he could, started to cry.

"Fuckin' crybaby," Hartley said. "Odin don't like fuckin' crybabies."

Oh, God.

Samantha got out and called the two boys over. Harry looked somewhat relieved to see her, Hartley just scowled. Looking at the older boy's sullen face, Samantha realized that here was a new recruit for the Shafters. It really was a generational thing. Of course there wasn't a mineshaft any more. The second fall-in had been devastating, sealing the old mine forever. What had been left of the shack and other old structures had been bulldozed, so they'd have to find someplace else to hang. Not that it was likely to be much of a problem. It would just be the Bigfoot Gang or something.

Squatting down, Samantha gave young Harry a hug and gently wiped tears from dirty cheeks. "You should be ashamed of yourself, Hartley Collings," she said, "there is no ghost of Odin Larsen and you know it. He's gone and that's that. There's no such thing as a ghost."

Despite what she had seen that terrible night.

Instead of looking chagrined, Hartley kicked a rock off the road shoulder and said, "Fat fuckin' lot you know."

"What?" Samantha asked, repressing an urge to soundly box the boy's ears, as she released Harry and stood up. "What did you say?"

"I was there when Brad Wilson and Johnny Depford found the blood," Hartley said.

"What blood?"

"After the fire. Down behind the big white rock at Elaho Lake. There was lots of fuckin' blood. It went off into the bushes. There was maggots in it and everything. Like the maggots in Odin's fuckin' eyes," he said, the last aimed at his younger brother.

"I don't think so, Hartley," Samantha said firmly, "I think you're making it up. Now take your brother and go home and I don't want to see any more fighting."

"You can't fuckin' stop us."

"Don't bet the rent on it, Sport."

Hartley seemed about to pursue the topic, but something in Samantha's eyes warned him off. "Come on, fuckin' Harry, you fuckin' pussy," he said, grabbing the younger boy by the collar and pushing him ahead.

Samantha, leaning on her cruiser, watched them out of sight.

Behind her the agent finished showing the Larsen home and drove off, followed by the young couple, and she was alone in gathering dusk. Her gaze went to towering mountains, pallid and ghostly under a baleful, three-quarter full moon.

Blackened by the Snoqualmie Ridge blaze to the edge of the old mine yard, slopes to the east were an ugly reminder of a night of horror.

It just couldn't be.

It had to be just another urban myth.

Searchers had found no evidence of Odin's being around Elaho Lake and there was no way blood could have lasted long in the torrential downpour that had brought the fire to an end.

On the other hand, Odin had been the greatest athlete the state had ever produced. She believed Steeples' story. Odin had been capable of negotiating the subterranean stream even without survival gear, something professional divers had failed to do when they'd tried to find his body by swimming in from the lake. Could he possibly have done it while desperately wounded?

Well, a couple more stops to deliver mail and then she'd head back to the station to deal with the current Helprin problem. Then home for dinner with Ellen and Bill Blake, who was rapidly becoming a Tipple fixture, then, maybe, a movie. Life went on.

She looked again at brooding mountains. No, it was impossible. Even if Odin had somehow made it through caverns and into the mountains, there was no way he could have survived his wound and exposure to the elements.

Unless he had somehow hooked up with his father. How much would Abel remember of his army medical training? For a big, clumsy oaf of a man his hands were amazingly deft and gentle. It might be possible, if he could remember enough, to do battlefield surgery on a badly wounded man and somehow pull his patient through. If his patient had the almost preternatural strength of an Odin Larsen. If the battlefield surgeon had the love and compassion of an Abel Larsen.

Samantha shivered despite the warmth of her uniform coat. Abel would have needed medical

equipment. Drugs, surgical implements. He might have had those in his medical collection, but how would he connect with Odin?

In the immediate aftermath of the Snoqualmie Ridge blaze, when Tipple had been swarming with news crews and residents had been trying to get things back to normal, nobody had been watching Abel. He could have been going into the hills every day and nobody would have been the wiser. And after less than a week, he had simply disappeared.

But to think that Odin Larsen could take a Hydra-Shok round in the side, lose tremendous amounts of blood and still swim hundreds of feet through an underground stream, surface in a lake and make it to shore, then hike into the mountains somewhere for a rendezvous with this father? Then survive crude surgery in septic conditions?

No, the idea was simply ludicrous.

Haunted mountains had a new ghost.



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