

The Dream

A Novel

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A Note from the Author

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For Jordan. Being a dad means there is always a purpose to life.

"The probability that we may fall in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just; it shall not deter me."

-- Abraham Lincoln

THE DREAM

CHAPTER 1

“Who’s that?” Jerry inquired, not really caring. Kenny squinted his eyes in the direction of the newest ship to enter port, as if squinting would focus him in on the figure standing in the unloading area. The docks often became foggy in the early mornings, especially after or before a rain. It had not rained for a few days, but this morning seemed unusually foggy, almost eerie. He knew to whom the tall, mysterious figure belonged.

“That would be Michael Deshay,” he answered, as if revealing a deep, dark secret. Even as the name eased from Kenny’s lips the fog seemed to play around the presence on the dock. It was almost as if he knew they were talking about him and he purposefully used the vapor for affect in his introduction.

Jerry said the name slowly a couple of times with the feeling he recognized it from somewhere. “I could swear I’ve heard that name before,” was all he could come up with.

Jerry wasn’t exactly the kind of guy you would expect to sit down and study the Wall Street Journal. In fact, he would more likely be used as a model for all dockworkers, if there were such a thing.

You did not have to be an avid watcher of CNN, though, to know who Michael Deshay was, and Kenny did enjoy showing off his knowledge of the business world. He simply stated, “Michael Deshay is the hottest young entrepreneur in America.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s right, he’s that hot-shot kid who’s supposed to give that Gates character a run for his money,” Jerry added.

Kenny just shook his head. Jerry looked out at the figure that had remained fixed patiently in the same spot for the last fifteen minutes. He added sarcastically, “I can’t believe they think some rich bitches’ spoiled brat can challenge that greedy bastard Gates.” Kenny gave Jerry a disapproving glare, even though he half expected such a comment from him.

“What?” Jerry said asked innocently.

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“For one, things are not always the way they seem, and two, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kenny answered.

Kenny was an intelligent young man who graduated from high school a year early with a perfect 4.0 GPA, because he couldn’t wait to get into college and then into the business world. He had thought several times of trying to start his own business and make it on his own, like Michael Deshay had, but his momma insisted on him getting his education. Now that he was so close to getting his degree in Business Management, he saw the value of momma’s words. There was so much to learn about the business world and it was probably better not to have to learn it the hard way, the way Mr. Deshay likely had to learn.

“Yeah, well, sometimes things are exactly the way they seem,” Jerry said knowingly.

“Jerry, you might want to get your facts straight before you talk about someone.”

“Is that right?” Jerry asked sarcastically.

“Yeah, that’s right. As a matter-of-fact, Michael Deshay has been on his own since the day he graduated high school. He started his first business at sixteen years old, selling donuts wholesale to mini-marts while still going to high school. After graduating he slowly built a fortune by starting other small businesses and making them more and more profitable, until all those small businesses became all those big businesses. He paid his dues and now he’s entering the ranks of the corporate giants.”

“What, are you writing the guy’s biography or something?” Jerry came back weakly.

Kenny decided to end the conversation with one simple statement, “No, Jerry, I read.”

“Hey, I read. It’s just that the sports section is the only thing worth reading these days. What with everybody killing each other...what’s the use?”

Kenny was surprised by the apparent concern for the world that Jerry expressed and took a moment to think about his statement. He knew him to be right about the amount of violence in the world, but he also knew there was a lot of good in the world that the media didn’t cover.

“Not everybody.”

Jerry always tried to keep a tough exterior. It had helped him survive the streets of Cleveland growing up and now it had become second nature. He brushed aside his moment of vulnerability, or weakness, as he thought of it.

“Screw ‘em all, that’s what I say. Ain’t none of ‘em done nothin’ for me.”

Well, the real Jerry was back. Kenny would have found it almost endearing if it

wasn't so pathetic. What kind of life can you have if you have given up on everyone?

"Excuse me?"

The voice at the large roll-up doorway to the warehouse took both Kenny and Jerry by surprise, causing them to whip around toward the large entryway, as if they were being ambushed. Kenny recovered from the surprise much quicker.

"Mr. Deshay...ah, out for an early morning shopping spree?"

Michael smiled as he walked through the door, "Hey Kenny, how are you doing?"

As they shook hands, Michael asked, "You still work here, huh?"

"A man has to make a living until his time comes. Then, he has to get rich."

"I had no idea you were a philosopher."

Kenny and Michael both laughed lightly, and even Jerry enjoyed a solitary chuckle.

"So, it's been what, four or five years you've been working here?" Michael asked.

"Five years, sir. I was here when you bought your first car off the docks; the Porsche 911 Carrera with the out-set wheel wells, you remember that?"

"Of course," Michael answered, leaning in slightly as if he were about to disclose an important secret, "You never forget your first," and they again enjoyed the light humor.

Michael thought back quickly to that night, "That's right, you were here then weren't you." He knew, of course, that Kenny had been there. In fact, after the last couple of days of discussions with his boss, Frank, and many of his professors, Michael was prepared to offer Kenny a job. Unfortunately, because Frank was late, which was unusual, now he was running late and didn't have time to discuss his job offer.

"Yes sir, I was sixteen years old and fresh out of high school. I lied about my age so I could work here because it pays a lot better than McDonalds."

"Lucky for you Frank didn't find out," Jerry added.

"Actually he did, but not until I was eighteen. He just happened to be reviewing my file and realized what I had done. He said he should fire me for lying to him, but since I was legal when he found out and I was a good worker, he let me stay on."

"Sounds like Frank has a soft spot after all," Michael stated.

Chuckling, Kenny agreed, "As unbelievable as it may seem."

Jerry let out a breath of air, as if bored with the conversation. Kenny figured he probably was feeling left out and Jerry was a very unhappy man who tended to take it out on everyone around him. Kenny usually left him to his own devices, but today Jerry was irritating beyond the status quo, so he took a deep breath and turned back to Michael. He

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enjoyed it when Mr. Deshay came by the docks, usually once or twice a year, to buy a new European sports car before it was converted to meet the tougher American laws for a car to be street legal and he didn't want the occasion spoiled by Jerry's negativity.

"You know, that day you bought that Porsche was my first day on the job. When Frank told me you were twenty two years old, I said, "Man, that dude must be selling drugs."

"Drugs? Catering to the rich, no doubt," Michael said.

"No doubt," Kenny agreed, slightly embarrassed at how he had jumped to conclusions back then. He decided to assuage his guilt by picking on Jerry after all, "You know, Jerry has his own theory to explain your wealth."

Michael and Kenny both looked over to Jerry, who took on the appearance of a deer caught in headlights at the sudden, unexpected attention. He put up a persona that he didn't care how people felt about him and he had no problem telling others his view on life and to hell with them if they didn't like it, but he didn't like being caught off guard, he thought it made him look stupid. Jerry had dropped out of school when he was seventeen and his dad managed to get him a job at the docks when he was eighteen. He knew he wasn't smart and never would be, but he wasn't dumb and didn't want to look the part, either. Embarrassed, Jerry made a feeble attempt to stammer out a few words of explanation for his "rich brat" comment, but it came out more like gibberish.

Michael offered the explanation for him, "Let me guess, I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth?"

As he often did, Jerry tried to cover his mistakes with sarcasm, so he offered "Hey, who knew, right?"

Michael was used to the presumptions about his wealth. Sometimes he would sit in his chair at the office and just look around at all he had attained, unable to believe his accomplishments. Even so, he was proud of the hard work it took to get there.

The atmosphere in the warehouse had become a little tense and Michael didn't know Jerry well enough to know if the good-natured ribbing bothered him, so he moved on.

"Kenny, shouldn't you be finishing up with college soon?"

Proud as a peacock, Kenny stood tall and answered, "Yes sir, in fact, this is my last semester. I've been taking night classes since I started five years ago and now I am finally, almost done. Then it will be time for me to begin my assault on the business world."

"You've carried quite a load as a near full-time student and full-time worker, I am very impressed," Michael said.

"Thank you, Mr. Deshay. It will all be worth it when I get my first big break with a good company."

"Yes it will," Michael said knowingly as he looked at his watch.

"So, where's Frank at anyway?" Looking at his watch again he continued, "We were supposed to meet outside a half hour ago and we all know Frank is never late."

Knowing him to be the most punctual man he's ever met, Kenny looked a little worried when answering, "I don't know, but it must be something important if Frank Schenelli is late for an appointment."

"I don't have a lot of time, but I want to take the car to an important dinner party tonight." He considered his options as he looked at Kenny.

"I'll tell you what," Michael said as he reached in his overcoat and into his suit jacket pocket. He pulled out a business card and said, "Could you go and tell Frank I'll be outside getting the car unloaded and ready to drive?" Then handing the business card to Kenny he finished, "Call me tomorrow and we'll see if we can put that education of yours to work." Then he turned and walked out the door.

Kenny and Jerry watched him go, both stunned to silence. The fog had mostly dissipated, but the little that remained did all it could to make the man's exit look as mysterious as his entrance.

Kenny did his best to get out, "Thank you," but it was probably not even heard. Quickly recovering, Kenny became so excited at the prospects of his immediate future that he almost didn't catch Jerry's sarcastic comment, "Smug prick, it'ny?"

That was just what Kenny needed to bring him back to reality.

"Starting tomorrow, it's my black-ass that's gonna be the smug prick."

Jerry looked disgusted and half-heartily said, "Yeah, congrats kid."

Although Jerry didn't exactly sound sincere, Kenny gave him a pat on the back as he left and said, "Hang in there, old man." He was immediately out the side door of the loading dock and into the hall that ran past the main warehouse and was on his way to Frank's office, leaving Jerry to contemplate what had just happened.

"A twenty-seven year old kid is almost a billionaire and a twenty-three year old kid gets plucked out of this hell hole just like that. I swear, old people are becoming extinct."

"Yo Frank, I qui...oh shit!"

Kenny had been looking forward to the day he could go into Frank's office and tell him he quit, not because he didn't like Frank, he did, but because he felt he was meant for more and strangely enough it seemed Frank felt the same way. He thought Frank would actually be proud of his newest accomplishment. However, the two men presently standing over Frank's body interrupted his moment of satisfaction. One man still had a hold of Frank's shirt and he was beaten badly, hanging limp from the man's grip.

After his initial oral reaction, Kenny found himself running faster than he ever had, back through the corridors of the warehouse that led to Frank's office. He didn't even know if the men had noticed him, but they must have heard him barge in, arrogantly blaring his ill-timed resignation. His momma had always warned him arrogance served no purpose other than to get you in trouble for something you should be proud of, but didn't celebrate properly. He never understood what that meant, until now.

Fortunately he had the advantage of knowing every nook and cranny of the warehouse, but unfortunately the disadvantage of being so scared he couldn't think straight, and he wasn't sure if the two men were chasing him or not. He hadn't heard any gunshots and he was still alive, both good signs, he reasoned.

Maybe Frank wasn't even dead, maybe they were leaning on him for unpaid gambling debts or something. Maybe there was no reason to even be running. Kenny slowed and then stopped to see where he was. He instantly looked back down the most recent hallway he had exited, but no one was following him...yet. He quickly decided getting out of there was the best course of action, it was always better to be safe than sorry, or dead. Surprised by how fast he had reached his present location, Kenny slowed to a walk and then stopped by a side door that led outside to the docks.

He looked out the window and saw Michael Deshay getting into a brand new Ferrari. He must have gotten tired of waiting for Frank, because he looked about ready to leave. It must be nice to be able to buy any incredible driving machine you want, in cash.

"Someday," Kenny said aloud.

Speaking into the silence instantly brought back the situation at hand. He was about to go out the door when he remembered Jerry was still in the warehouse and wondered if he could be in danger? Kenny never liked the guy, but he didn't want him to get hurt, or worse. He turned and could see the open doorway that led to the loading bay where Jerry was working, and then his attention went to the big warehouse where nearly fifty people worked, oblivious to his problem.

He wondered if there would be safety in the crowd, or would he be putting everyone else in danger if he joined his fellow workers. He was the only one in harms way at the moment and he wanted to keep it that way, but the only place he could go to spare these people of any possible danger, was home, and he rode the bus to work. He glanced down the corridor from whence he fled and startled at the sight of the two large figures that came around the corner.

For a moment, everything became surreal. The two men were walking, not running, walking confidently toward him. It was as if they knew they would catch him, so they were in no hurry. Without thinking twice about what to do he was out the side door and onto the main dock. Mr. Deshay was revving the engine to his new sports car, so he quickly ran to the driver's side door and knocked on the window before his mentor left.

Mr. Deshay turned and saw Kenny, so he rolled the window down. "Kenny, what's taking...are you all right? You look like you just saw a ghost."

Kenny felt a little panic building inside him. He didn't want to get Mr. Deshay involved, but he needed to get out of there and he didn't have a car, and he couldn't wait for the city bus to pick him up.

"Nothing's wrong sir, I, Uh, I was wondering if, uh..."

As he stuttered his way to an explanation he had yet to think of, he glanced back to the door and saw one of the men looking out the window of the door he had just exited. Kenny was caught in a trance looking at the door to see if it would open. The face vanished, but the door remained a barrier.

"Kenny? Kenny! Are you alright?" Michael yelled to get his attention.

"Huh, oh, yeah, uh, could you take me home Mr. Deshay?" Kenny blurted out. "The uh, bus won't be back this way for a while."

"Well, yeah, I could. I take it you quit then?"

"Yes, sir,"

"O.K., hop in."

Kenny ran around to the passenger side, with a quick glance to the door he exited...nothing.

He opened the door of the Ferrari and started to get in when movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. He looked over toward the open, large roll down door of the loading dock and saw the two men from Frank's office standing there looking at him. Jerry was with them, talking and waving for Kenny to go over there. He played

dumb and waved at Jerry to say bye, then he got in the car.

Michael asked him, “Does Frank know you’re gone? Even if you quit, you at least need to let him know.”

Kenny was rattled by the question. Should he let Mr. Deshay know? He was a powerful man and maybe he could help get things straightened out, but Kenny didn’t know if this would endanger Mr. Deshay. The only thing he knew for sure, at the moment, was that he needed to get away from there so he could think.

“Yes sir, I told him.”

“All right. Is he coming down, then?”

“No sir, he said you could bring the money by later, he’s busy now,” Kenny lied.

“So be it,” Michael said and took off.

Michael had Kenny direct him to a few backstretches of road to open the car up a little before he took him home. Kenny would have enjoyed it a lot more under normal circumstances. It did prove advantages, however, because there was no way anyone had followed them. Michael found Kenny’s lack of appreciation for the speed and handling of his new Ferrari, curious, at best. Kenny was well aware of Mr. Deshay scrutinizing him, but could not get himself to relax. He needed time alone to think, this whole bizarre situation had happened too fast.

Finally, Kenny couldn’t help thinking despite wanting to be pleased with the thrill of such an incredible machine, as they stopped in front of his house. He thanked Mr. Deshay for the ride and began to get out of the car.

“From your reaction to those men, I would say they’re not buddies of yours.”

Kenny was silent with indecision.

“Is there something I should know about, Kenny?”

“I don’t want to get you involved, Mr. Deshay?”

“You asked me for a ride and you’re coming to work for me tomorrow, I’m involved. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“No. I don’t know. It’s hard to explain. To tell you the truth, I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Kenny, I can’t have you working for me if you’re in trouble with the law. I worked very hard to build Deshay Enterprises into what it is today.”

“I’m not in trouble with the law, Mr. Deshay. In fact, it’s not even about me, it’s about someone I know and I don’t know what to do to help him. I just need a little time

to figure out what is the right thing to do.”

“What did Frank have to say about this?” Michael asked.

“Frank?” Kenny asked nervously.

“Two detectives show up at the docks asking about you, or your friend? You weren’t gone for long when you went to his office and you were very upset when you asked me for a ride home. Did Frank fire you?”

“No, Frank didn’t fire me.” Kenny got quiet a moment. He began to realize how bad he felt for Frank, who had always been good to him. Michael studied him again. He wished he knew what was going on. He had high hopes for this kid, who reminded him of himself when he was that age. They had different reasons for being passionate about business, but the fire was the same. Kenny had great potential.

“Alright, Kenny. I know you’re a good kid, so I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt...for now. I’m not going to give you the same speech that Frank probably already gave about getting into trouble because of the friends you keep, but you do need to get this figured out tonight. You have my card, call my cell phone if you need to talk, and if I’m unable to answer at the time, I check my messages often. I expect this to be cleared up by tomorrow, or have a very good explanation prepared.”

Kenny was to the point where he couldn’t keep his thoughts in order, so he asked, “Tomorrow, sir?”

“I took it for granted you accepted my job offer.”

“Oh, yes, of course, sir. I can’t wait to get started, it’s a dream come true.”

Michael still wasn’t convinced he had the situation under control.

“Be at my office at nine a.m. sharp, with an explanation, ready to work.”

“I will, sir, I promise,” and with that Kenny got out of the car. He was becoming so excited again at the prospect of the job Mr. Deshay offered him that he almost forgot his present predicament.

Kenny waved bye as he stood on the lawn out front of the small grey house he shared with his mother, older sister and younger brother. Then he realized how ludicrous it must have looked for him to be dropped off by a white man in a brand new Ferrari, at his low income house in an all black neighborhood just south of downtown Cleveland. He looked around, but other than old lady Barnes across the street, who was peeking through her curtains, no one was even around to see it. It would give her some gossip to spread, but then everyone thought she was crazy anyway so he had no real proof that he had been

in the car. Determined to brag to all of his friends anyway that he had ridden in a Ferrari, Kenny turned and went into the house. First, the squeaking of the tires to Mr. Deshay's Ferrari as he sped away, and then the empty house, deflated the brief respite of enthusiasm he had experienced.

He was alone.

Even worse, he knew he had to think of something fast before his family got home. Kenny walked through the living room with the realization that his family could be in danger, as well. He absolutely couldn't involve them in this mess. He stood inside the living room, listening to the silence. His fourteen-year-old brother would get home from school in about an hour and his mother and older sister would be home from their respective jobs in about two hours. He half expected the two brutes from the docks to come bursting through the door at any moment. That wasn't likely, though, because there was no way anyone followed him and Mr. Deshay in the Ferrari. Jerry didn't know where he lived, so his stupidity couldn't give him away. For the moment, at least, he was alone. For the moment, at least, he was safe.

"I should have told Mr. Deshay, maybe he could have helped. Maybe he could have found out what happened to Frank."

He realized he was talking to himself, but hearing his own voice was actually, almost, reassuring. Then, as would happen from time to time, especially during tough times, he missed his dad. *Pops would know what to do*, he thought, sadly.

His dad had been coming home from work one day two years ago and was hit head on by a drunk driver, dying instantly. The drunk driver lived. That was what bothered Kenny the most. Why does the drunk driver always live? They destroy families, but tend to survive themselves. It just wasn't fair.

In this neighborhood, it was normal to only have one parent, usually the mom, but Kenny's parents had been happily married. He had been one of the lucky ones.

His pops always made time for him, even when he came home from work tired. He would review Kenny's homework, because he knew school was important to his eldest son. His pops barely had a high school education, so he wasn't much of a help, but the fact that he cared enough to try meant a great deal. He talked to Kenny about work, about girls, and he would help him plan his future. He often told him how proud he was of him and made it a point to tell him he loved him everyday. A tear ran down Kenny's face.

I miss you, pops? Just like his pops, Kenny often thought about others ahead of himself. He taught Kenny that a real man didn't have to tell everyone how good he was, he just did good.

Kenny's reflections brought Frank's possible demise back to the forefront, and the picture in his mind of Frank's bloody face began to haunt him. Something bad had happened, he was sure about that.

"He didn't deserve to die, or whatever, and those men were not detectives."

He was talking to himself again, and then suddenly felt the overwhelming need to do something before he went crazy. He looked around, and then his eyes settled on the phone. He got an idea. He made an anonymous call to the police, simply stating there was some foul play going on at the docks and someone was either badly hurt or dead in the office at Import Goods, Incorporated, and then he hung up. He stood silent for a moment, thinking. *At least Frank is taken care of, whatever happened to him.*

"Now, what am I gonna do with myself."

He no longer cared that he was talking to himself. In fact, it seemed to help him organize his thoughts, although there wasn't much he could do, anyway. He had to wait on his family and once they all got home he had to figure a way to get everyone out together, without alarming anyone. If he told his mom, she would insist on calling the police. Kenny just wasn't convinced that was the way to go right now. Besides, he had just alerted the police to whatever happened at work and maybe if he just let that play out, the police would take care of everything and he would be fine.

Calling the cops and telling them everything was probably the right thing to do, though. Pops had told him to always do the right thing, even in the toughest situation. He wanted to do the right thing, but he just wasn't sure if that rule applied to something like this, and he wasn't completely convinced that would be the right thing to do for his family. He had notified the police of a problem at Import Goods and that would have to suffice for now.

He needed to think of a plan, but had no idea where to start. He could use some advice. Once again, Mr. Deshay came to mind. Could he really help with something like this? Tomorrow he could tell Mr. Deshay about everything and maybe he could use his influence to straighten things out, but tomorrow could be too long. Kenny looked around the house, searching for an idea. His eyes passed over the telephone again, and then he reached into his pocket and pulled out the business card Mr. Deshay gave him earlier that

morning; earlier that morning when everything was still right in the world, his world.

He had just been offered the opportunity of a lifetime by one of the richest men in America, and that type of thing doesn't happen every day. He walked over to the phone and started to dial the number on the card, then stopped. He remembered Mr. Deshay telling him he wasn't going to his office today. He had some big, important party he was going to this evening and had committed to help some way or another in its preparation, Kenny wasn't sure. Mr. Deshay was telling him about it on the way to dropping him off at home, but Kenny was so distracted he only caught pieces of what Mr. Deshay was telling him. He hung up the phone. He remembered Mr. Deshay telling him to call his cell, but...should he? What would he say? Mr. Deshay's party sounded important, so he probably would tell Kenny he would look into it tomorrow, anyway. He was back to square one, pretty much out of ideas.

He sat by the window and considered his options. He became increasingly frustrated by his indecision, but he had no other reasonable choice than to wait for his family.

His younger brother came home and wanted to play catch with the football. Kenny told him to do his homework first, and he would play catch with him later. His momma and older sister arrived home at their normal time, around dinner time. Momma worked for the local hospital and his sister worked for a computer company. He thought about how important they had both been in keeping him focused after pops died. They were always strong for him, and now he needed to be strong for them.

No other car so much as slowed down as they passed the house. Maybe those men weren't looking for him after all. If they were, they probably would have found him by now, he reasoned, and began to feel a little better about the whole situation. Frank was probably just getting roughed up for gambling debts and the two thugs wanted to make sure Kenny was willing to mind his own business. *I definitely am.*

He walked away from the front door where he had been checking outside, once again, and walked into the living room. He looked at his family and wondered if he was being naïve thinking the thugs were no longer looking for him. It had only been a few hours since the whole thing went down. Maybe he should go back to his plan to get the family out of the house for a while. They didn't go out very often because they were all saving together to get a new house in a nice neighborhood, so it would be difficult convincing momma to go out and spend money.

He decided to tell her about the job Mr. Deshay offered him. He was very excited

about telling her and he could use it as an excuse to get everyone out of the house. They would be going out to celebrate his new job...that could work. He just wished he could enjoy the occasion more. If he had shown up at Frank's office just five minutes later, the thugs probably would have been gone and he wouldn't have had to deal with it. He didn't mean any disrespect to Frank, but this was too much of a burden. His life was just about to take off. He was so close to the beginning of realizing his dreams.

Despite his present stress level, he was animated telling his momma about his new employment. He wasn't exactly sure what his duties would be, but he was convinced it was the beginning of his ascent up the ladder of success.

His mother was skeptical, of course. Momma was a very hard worker. Her mother and father had been poor, so she didn't have the advantages she had been providing for her own kids. She put herself through college, working full time, until she earned a degree in nursing. At her job she started at the bottom and worked her way up to the supervising nurse position. She did not believe in quick money. She believed people had to pay their dues and work their way to the top.

Kenny anticipated her concerns and was ready for the lecture, enduring it to the end.

"Someone does not go from dock laborer to a cushy business suit job overnight. How could you quit your real job before knowing for sure about this so-called dream job? Haven't I always told you to never burn a bridge?"

Kenny gently explained, "Momma, I have been paying my dues. I have been going to night classes and working full time for five years now and Mr. Deshay has known me that entire time. He respects me for my work ethic. Besides, it's not like he offered me the vice-presidency. I'm sure I'll have to start at an entry level position."

His mother still didn't look convinced.

Kenny got an idea.

"Wait here one second, momma."

Kenny ran to his room and came back out with a Fortune 500 magazine.

"Momma, this man on the cover is Michael Deshay, this is the man who offered me the job. They did a story on him, talking about how he got started and now Deshay Enterprises is a Fortune 500 company. Talk about paying your dues, you should read what he went through. He is exactly the type of person you would want me working for."

His mom looked at the magazine, "Let me see that," she said. She read the caption, then said, "How do you know this man, he is obviously very rich."

“Momma, you’re not listening to me. He buys European sports cars from Import Goods. He comes right down to the docks at least once a year and buys a car from Frank and my first day on the job five years ago, was the day he bought his first car.” Momma looked thoughtful and he sensed he was finally getting through to her, so he pressed on.

“He was impressed I continued to work there full time and go to school nearly full time. I told him I graduate after this semester, so he told me to show up tomorrow morning and he would put my education to good use. Besides momma, I told you I needed to have an internship to graduate and this will provide a much more appropriate one than the one Frank had me doing,” and Kenny winced at the mention of Frank.

His mother looked down at the magazine again, still thoughtful.

“This man said all of that to you?”

“Yes, he did,” he answered, a little offended.

With concern in her voice momma said, “Baby, please be careful.”

Kenny got very excited and gave his mom a hug. “Thanks momma.”

“Kenny, I’m serious. He may seem nice, but you have to be careful. For all you know you fill his quota of minorities in the work place now, but he won’t need you later. You know it’s more difficult for a black man to make it in...”

“Momma, I know,” he interrupted. “I know we are taught that all white men are evil, but you know that isn’t true. Believe me momma, I’ve had my share of discrimination, but that just isn’t the case. He treats everyone with equal respect. He’s one of the good guys momma. If we want them to respect us, don’t we also have to respect them?”

His momma beamed proudly and then kissed him on the cheek.

“You are a good man and I am very proud of you.”

“Thanks momma,” he said, smiling.

His momma paused again while looking at Michael Deshay’s picture.

“The man sounds too good to be true and he looks like a kid. I pray this is everything you hope it is, and if it’s not, then you prepare yourself to go back to Frank begging on your hands and knees for your job back.”

Kenny was about to laugh at his momma’s reluctant consent, but at the mention of Frank, his elation was smashed back into reality, again. He immediately went to the window and looked out...nothing. Not knowing was driving him crazy.

“Kenny, what are doing, I wasn’t finished talking to you?”

“Sorry, momma, I just wanted to see if it was dark yet. Don’t worry momma, I’ll

make you proud of me.”

“I told you, I am already proud of you. You just work hard and do your best and I’m sure you’ll be successful. Now, would you run to the store and get me some butter, bread and milk, so I can make dinner.”

Kenny felt a strange sense of panic in the pit of his stomach; he couldn’t leave his family unattended. What if those men were looking for him? His family would be helpless, especially not knowing the situation, they would be lambs to the slaughter.

He needed an excuse to stay. He wasn’t sure why, but he needed to be there.

“Momma, I have to discuss something with you, can you send one of them?” he asked pointing to his sister and brother watching television. His mother got a look on her face that told him he was about to get scolded.

“I could, but I asked you, now get your butt to the store.”

Talking back to his mom was out of the question, so he tried his original idea.

“Hey, why don’t we go out for dinner, my treat, to celebrate my new job?”

“Baby, you know we’re saving for the new house and we’re too close to get careless now. We are going to celebrate your job, but we’re going to celebrate it here, now go.”

His mother shooed him off and went back to the kitchen to begin dinner preparations. Kenny stood there a moment, thinking. There was no indication at all that anyone was even after him, and it was getting close to dark now and things were still quiet. He started to slowly convince himself everything was all right. Besides, the store is only a few blocks away. He wasn’t exactly comfortable with his choice to go, but if he hurried, he would only be gone for ten minutes, so he left the house running.

Kenny reached the store in record time, but as soon as his foot touched the doorstep, he stopped. A feeling of panic struck him like a ton of bricks, and the sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach was back, with a taste of bile in the back of his throat.

Somehow, in just the few minutes it took him to get to the store, everything had gone wrong, and he knew all his fears had come to fruition. He was in full sprint back home in the very next instant. He felt like he was on a treadmill, seemingly going nowhere, when he finally rounded the last corner, which left him positioned catty-corner to his house.

He stopped, frozen by the site of a silver Mercedes Benz parked in front of the house. Kenny’s eyes immediately went to the porch, where his momma was standing with one of the men from the warehouse beside her. He saw the front door open and the other bad man came out of the house and stood on the opposite side of his momma.

They occupied space as if they owned it, surveying the land in search of other prey...him. Kenny's fear for his mother was debilitating, he couldn't think, or even move. He was simply at a loss for what to do.

There must be some way out of this. He reached in his pocket and found Mr. Deshay's card again, maybe he could reach him on his cell phone. Mr. DeShay could probably get the police out there quickly. Hope spurred him to action and he began to enter his savior's number into his cell phone as he nervously glanced up at his mom, and realized both men were looking right at him. It was nearly dark, but he could almost feel the intensity of their scrutiny, seemingly boring into his soul. It was as if they knew his thoughts, they knew exactly what he was trying to do and they were challenging him, while they stood there with his momma standing helplessly between them.

Then, as if rehearsed, they both put on an evil grin at the same time, never relinquishing their gaze. Kenny felt a chill writhe over his entire body. These men were evil. He was amazed at the audacity of these two white men, standing in plain view on his porch with his momma, in an all black neighborhood, yet not one person in his neighborhood seemed to be the least bit curious. Did everyone know they were evil and like most people in times of trouble, they just minded their own business?

Kenny was startled from thought by movement. The man to the right of his mom moved his hand to the inside of his jacket, and then the other did the same. It was now more dark than light, but he knew exactly what the action meant. He stepped forward without thought, putting his cell phone back into his pocket. The decision he couldn't make on what to do next had just been made for him. He crossed the intersection, not even looking to see if any cars dissected his path, and there was no longer any debate in his mind of what to do. He had to face them on their terms, with the hope it would save his family.

Out loud, but meant only for his ears, Kenny heard himself say, "If we go, we go together," and knew he meant it. Talking to himself was no longer comforting.

"Did you tell your family what you saw?" The gunman on his left asked. Kenny stood about ten feet away from the porch. The long haired blond gunman on his right looked like a body builder, even with a suit on, but it was the other who caused a chill to

run up and down his spine. The one who asked the question. His eyes were cold, but very intelligent, and very confident. There was no doubt as to who was in charge. He was clean-cut and very business-like and the height of the porch made them both look even more menacing. Even with his fate tied so precariously to these two killers, this was the first time Kenny had gotten a good look at them; he wouldn't have been able to identify either of them. He and his family were going to die for no reason. The blond thug still had his hand inside his jacket, no doubt resting on his gun. The clean cut man stood with both hands calmly at his side now, but Kenny knew he was the one to truly fear. He looked at his momma. She was being strong as always. She was infinitely steadfast for her family, and Kenny could see that strength in her eyes now, lending it to him. Her hands were free, but the blond gunman held her forcefully by an arm. She couldn't speak, her mouth was taped shut, but momma never had to say a word to get her point across. Kenny did gather strength from her and he would not give up, thinking there must be a way out of this, at least for his family.

"I didn't tell anyone, my family knows nothing."

Both men studied Kenny for a moment. The blond turned to the other, wondering what to do next. The clean-cut gunman never looked away from Kenny's eyes and even though it made his knees weak, he determinedly held the killer's gaze, still wondering at the temerity of these two evil men. They were ready and willing to kill whoever, whenever and wherever they pleased. They didn't hurry or try to conceal what they were about to do, they didn't even try to hide their identity. How do they expect to get away with their crime? He was morbidly curious at their apparent power.

"I believe you." In one fluid motion, the clean-cut gunman pulled out his gun and as he pointed it at Kenny he said, "Your family will be spared," then he pulled the trigger. Kenny died immediately, perhaps with an instant of peace.

The shot pierced the quiet night, commanding the attention of every living thing, only the muffled, agonizing scream of Kenny's momma was heard.

The clean-cut gunman put his gun away, and walked to the car. He opened the passenger side door, got in and shut the door. The blond followed quickly, and then went to the driver's side of the car, surveying the neighborhood for witnesses. He got in the car and drove away.

Over the last two months, Kenny's mother kept telling the kids they were getting very close to having enough money to buy a new house. Now, the mother sat on her knees in

their front yard, with the body of her dead son cradled in her lap, crying. He would never see the new house, and he would never start his new job. He would never realize his dream of being a successful businessman.

“Why didn’t we kill them all?” The blond gunman asked.

“I didn’t kill them all, because I was only paid to kill the boy,” the other answered.

“But they can identify us.”

“If I was concerned with being identified, I would take steps to make sure I wasn’t.”

“I don’t understand,” the blond insisted.

“I have been an assassin twenty years and never been incarcerated, nor will I be.”

“Really? Damn.” After a moment, the blond asked, “But what about me?”

“Our employer has plans for you, I will teach you.”

“Oh.” The blond gunman realized his boss had apparently chosen his future for him.

“That’s cool.” The blond still had doubts about being recognized. “How do you stay out of jail if you never use disguises?”

“I never said I don’t use disguises. I could be in disguise right now and you wouldn’t know the difference. No one knows my true identity and no one can find me if I don’t want them to, that is how I stay out of prison. You will learn.”

The blond gave intermittent looks toward his counterpart as he drove, trying to notice any signs of a mask. He couldn’t tell.

“So, ah, you wearing a mask or somethin’ right now?”

The clean-cut gunman ignored him. The blond drove in silence for a few moments longer, and then asked, “What about the rich dude in the Ferrari? We could have asked the kid who he was, or where to find him.”

“I already know who he is and where to find him. Apparently Mr. Carmen has some history with the man, so we wait for him to decide what he wants to do. I believe Mr. Carmen is planning something quite sinister for him.”

“Mr. Deshay, how are you this evening?” chimed the valet parking attendant as he

opened the door for Michael's date.

Michael Deshay had a reputation around town as being a great tipper, so valets were always happy to see him. They also wanted the chance to park one of his exotic cars.

"I'm fine, thank you," Michael answered, always polite and friendly.

"Your date looks stunning tonight, sir." Brown-nosing valets were the usual for him.

"I'm sure she would appreciate that complicate more than I would," Michael said.

"Oh, right, sir, of course, sir," the valet stammered embarrassed. He turned his attention to the woman. "You look lovely tonight, miss."

"Lovely?" she asked. "You told Michael I looked stunning, have I fallen so quickly?"

Even more embarrassed, the valet responded, "No, of course not miss. You do look stunning tonight."

She smiled at Michael, then at the valet, "Thank you."

Michael smiled at Rebecca's teasing of the valet, *Poor guy*, he thought. A woman as beautiful as Rebecca Trudeau was enough to intimidate any man, but with her high intellect and quick wit, she was downright dangerous.

Looking to be rid of the embarrassing situation as soon as possible, the valet asked Michael, "New car, sir?"

Not a bad comeback, Michael thought as he answered the valet, "I picked it up this morning. Have you parked one of these, yet?"

"No sir, not yet," he answered excitedly as Michael slowly walked toward him, raising the keys into the air, holding them by the key chain.

He stopped in front of the valet, took a dramatic pause, and then looked the valet in the eyes. He offered the keys toward the valet and as the valet put his hand out, Michael dropped them into the valet's hand.

"Be gentle."

As assuredly as possible the attendant attempted to gain Michael's confidence while making his way to the driver's side door. He didn't want to give Michael a chance to change his mind.

"Hey," Michael said in a stern voice and with a serious face.

There it was. The valet knew Mr. Deshay would request someone who had driven the new Ferrari before and he would miss his chance.

Michael raised a bill of money in the air and said, "You forgot your tip," with a friendly smile on his face.

“Oh, yeah, sorry, I mean, thank you.”

Fighting further embarrassment, the valet made his way around the front of the car and collected the tip. The valet looked at the one hundred dollar bill and froze. His eyes went from the money, then up to Mr. Deshay, then back down to the money. Not knowing exactly what to say, the attendant put a serious look on his face and looked straight in Michael’s eyes.

“I’ll be careful Mr. Deshay, I promise.” The young valet went back around the car to the driver’s side, got in and pulled away, semi-smoothly, to park the car.

“Awful serious for such a young man,” replied Michael’s date.

Rebecca Trudeau was the daughter of Lawrence Trudeau, a highly successful businessman who made his fortune in international banking and more recently through the Forex money trade. A second generation American, by way of France, Lawrence was one of the richest men in the world and host of the party.

Retired, although still somewhat active in investments, Lawrence now spent most of his time playing golf, gambling and buying things for his beloved daughter. Nothing would make Lawrence Trudeau happier than to see Rebecca marry Michael, though this was only their first date.

“Tommy’s a good kid and a hard worker, he just gets nervous easy. I probably shouldn’t tease him so much.”

“You know the parking attendant?” Rebecca asked, a little surprised.

Michael offered his arm and she accepted. They began to walk to the entrance of her father’s mansion as he answered sarcastically, “Yes, sometimes I even talk to the help.”

“Michael, I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean, well, I guess I wouldn’t know what to say to them, it’s not like we have anything in common.”

Michael answered, “I have more in common with him than you may think. I told you I was not always rich...I’m ‘new money.’ Besides, I think a person should be treated according to who they are, not what they have.”

Rebecca turned her head to look at Michael and realized his answer was not a rebuke, just a genuine belief.

Rebecca replied, “I agree,” and they walked into the party.

Michael enjoyed these high society affairs, sometimes. They could drag on a little, especially if the people he talked to were boring, which they often were, but then there were the times when he had the opportunity to match wits with some of the most

influential men in the world. He truly loved being part of the business world and the challenges it brought his way.

Michael's ascension into financial prominence had been expeditious enough that he was often reminded by his own actions, compared to the affluent around him, that most of his ignorance of the world of the rich was related to the social graces.

There were those who saw a political future for him, but he wasn't sure about that, although it did present a great opportunity for doing good. He wondered if all politicians felt that way when they started out.

One thing was for sure, Michael definitely looked the part of the business and social elite. Tall, with an athletic build, chiseled face and wide shoulders, he had a strong, commanding figure. It didn't hurt that he was handsome either, always drawing a look when he entered a room, whether of affection or jealousy. Tonight he wore a tuxedo, his presence alone spoke of confidence.

It also helped to have a beautiful woman like Rebecca on his arm. Rebecca, a classic beauty with brunette hair and a tall, sultry figure would make any man look good. She had the look and bearing of the aristocratic society she grew up and flourished in.

As the two made their grand entrance to the party, Rebecca with her hand on Michael's arm, people whispered and smiled at how lovely a couple they made. Neither Michael nor Rebecca seemed to mind the attention. It appeared as if they were born for it. Well, Rebecca certainly was, *and I can always fake it*, Michael thought, self amused.

Michael and Rebecca spent the next few hours making their rounds through the party. Michael made it a point to find the business discussions, for there was no better place to meet contacts than at a Trudeau party. However, he had finally attended enough of these affairs that he just about knew all the major players, so he didn't make any new contacts this night, but he did manage to enjoy several interesting conversations and therefore considered the evening a success. All talked out now, he wanted to spend some quality time alone with Rebecca. This was a date, after all. He knew her more professionally than he did personally, so he wanted to find out if he would like her as much as a person as he did as a businesswoman. He was certainly attracted to her and he enjoyed the time spent with her during their business dealings, but you rarely see the true person based on a business relationship. So, he hunted down his date and asked her if she would like to go for a late drink.

"Sure, but we better say goodnight to my father first, he would be hurt if we didn't."

"I'm way ahead of you, he's over there talking to the governor."

The two walked over to the group her father was talking with, or to, mostly, politely timing their arrival with a break in the conversation.

"Hi daddy, wonderful party." You could hear the love and respect for her father.

"Bekka! You look beautiful. Everyone has been telling me how lovely you look, but I've only seen you from across the room all night. Governor, doesn't she look lovely?"

Lawrence Trudeau certainly was not shy. He was known to speak his mind on any occasion, no matter who he was speaking to at the time. A kind man with only the best of intentions made him well-loved by family and friends.

"She is beautiful as always, Lawrence." Turning to Rebecca, the governor reached to shake her hand and said, "It is always a pleasure to see you Rebecca."

"Thank you governor, it is good to see you, as well," she responded.

The governor turned to Michael.

"Mr. Deshay, I commend you on your work in the poor neighborhoods, your cleaning up of the east side of Cleveland has everyone talking."

"Well governor, I'm afraid I can't take much credit for that. The good people of that neighborhood did all of the real work, I've just been collecting my portion of the profits for getting them pointed in the right direction." Michael was known to joke his way out of too much attention and praise.

The governor of Cleveland was referring to an ingenious program Michael started, which allowed a neighborhood to, in a sense, become its own business. His methods helped them keep more jobs in the neighborhood while building new businesses, housing, and giving the schools the resources they needed to properly educate. The natural by-product was a happier community with record low crime rates.

Lawrence added, "Michael, you're much too modest, that program of yours is revolutionary. It will build the size of the middle class in an urban community and vastly shrink the size of the poor, and that means education will get better and crime will go down. Your program will save the lives of many, many people and bring a brighter future for inner city kids. The truly amazing thing is you actually make money doing it and you deserve it for helping those neighborhoods rebuild and strengthen."

"Thank you Mr. Trudeau. It's nice to see good people do well, so I am very happy for that neighborhood. They deserve to live happy just like everyone else."

"Indeed. Oh, hey, not to change the subject or anything, but I hear you bought

yourself another toy,” Lawrence said enthusiastically.

Michael smiled, “Yes, sir, I couldn’t resist the new Ferrari 430 F1 Spider.”

“It even sounds fast. You’ll have to take me for a ride sometime,” Lawrence said, then added, “I’ve been considering giving a sports car a try myself.”

Rebecca gave him a startled look.

“What?” Lawrence asked defensively.

Rebecca said, “You decide to get adventurous now, father?”

“Sure, why not? I never got to go through my mid life crises, I was too busy working.” The group laughed. Even though Rebecca was concerned over the thought of her elderly father in a sports car, she couldn’t help but join the merriment.

Michael added, “I would be happy to take you for a drive anytime sir, just let me know when you’re ready.”

Rebecca turned to Michael, “You’re not helping matters.”

Michael smiled shyly, “What?”

Lawrence smiled as he spoke to the governor, but said it loud enough for the entire group to hear, “The man will be one of the richest men in the world before he’s forty, yet he still calls me sir. Now, that’s respect. You don’t get that much with the younger generation anymore. Young people could learn a lot from us old farts, but they think they know everything.” Michael thought it a great compliment, but was once again embarrassed at the attention, fortunately Rebecca saved him.

“Daddy,” interceded Rebecca, “You’re very wise, but I’m sure your guests would enjoy more interesting conversation than the demise of today’s youth.”

“You’re right sweetheart,” Lawrence concluded, then said “See that?” speaking toward the governor, but once again addressing the group. “My daughter was able to tell me to shut up, while at the same time be polite and respectful to me.” This time the compliment embarrassed Rebecca.

“You two are a good example to your generation,” Lawrence said proudly.

Michael noticed Rebecca’s face had taken on a lovely shade of pink. He whispered in her ear, “I’m glad you could join me in the land of embarrassment.”

He smiled wanly as she looked up into his eyes and lightly pleaded, “Would you be a dear and rescue me now.”

“Rescue you? If I do remember, it was you who started this.”

“Me? Well, even if that were true, you are caught in the same embarrassing situation,

so actually you would be rescuing us both.”

“Good point.”

Michael turned his attention back to the group and found Lawrence was still leading the barrage of compliments. Lawrence smiled mischievously and said, “You know, you two make a wonderful couple.”

Michael looked at Rebecca, who turned a self-deprecating look on him in anticipation of his next move.

With his best winning smile he turned back to the group.

“Thank you sir, that’s very kind,” he answered as he looked at his watch. “Oh, it’s getting late and Rebecca and I were thinking of going for a late drink on the lakefront. Would you mind if we took off a little early?”

Lawrence, at first, was a little disappointed, but then realized the potential for the development of their relationship and he certainly wanted to encourage their future.

“Of course, you two run along and have a good time.”

“Thank you, sir, and thank you for the party, I had a good time.”

They shook hands and then Rebecca gave her father a hug, “Thanks daddy.” She kissed her father on the cheek and promised to see him tomorrow.

Michael and Rebecca said their good-byes to everyone else as quickly as possible as they made their way to the exit. Finally clear of the party they had the valet retrieve Michael’s car and left. Once they were on their way, there was an unusual quiet between them, likely because of the statement Rebecca’s father made about them being a couple. Suspecting as much and not wanting their first date spoiled by an uncomfortable situation, Rebecca spoke up.

“Michael, you don’t have to be uncomfortable with me, it is no secret that my father likes you, but I want you to know there is no pressure. We have been doing business with each other for two years now and because of that we have naturally built a friendship, but I don’t want all of that ruined because we are attracted to each other, as well. If something happens, great. If not, I hope we can maintain our friendship.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Michael answered, receiving the rebuke gracefully.

“Great, now you better hurry me home to change or we’ll never get to go out tonight.

Not going out is exactly what happened; upon entering her apartment, a simple kiss turned into passion.

"I have to go," Michael said apologetically as he stared at the ceiling.

Rebecca, lying beside him, looked over and said, "Okay."

He looked over to her, a little surprised.

Rebecca smiled, "Disappointed I'm not begging you to stay and grace my bed with your presence."

Michael smiled at the sarcasm and then feigned hurt feelings. "No, it's fine."

They both giggled lightly. They had agreed on no pressure, but the first time sleeping together brings the possibility of an uncomfortable moment. They visibly relaxed.

He leaned over Rebecca and kissed her. "I'll call you in a couple days."

"That's what they all say."

She watched him get out of bed, enjoying his nakedness and smiled at her mischievousness. When he had dressed, she decided to take the initiative.

"I have tickets to a musical, would you like to go?"

Michael turned to face her. He knew Rebecca to be a smart and ambitious woman and, in fact, that made her more attractive to him, to a point. He just wasn't sure if she was too much of a shark for his taste, but he had committed to dating her and seeing what happened. He looked forward to getting to know her on a more personal level.

"Sure, I've never been to a musical before, I'm game."

Rebecca smiled, "You uncultured swine."

He put his arms out, "Guilty as charged."

She continued, "This is my date, so everything is on me. I'll be by with a limo at six o'clock sharp on Wednesday. All you have to do is dress up and look handsome."

Michael was completely dressed now and ready to leave, so he knelt on the bed and leaned over her still naked body.

"I'll do my best," he said in a whisper.

He gave her a nice, short kiss and when they pulled apart, Rebecca was wearing the sexiest look in her arsenal.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay for one more go 'round?" she asked playfully.

She pulled back the cover, revealing her lithe, very feminine naked body. He took in the pleasure of the view and hesitated a moment.

"Yes, I would," he answered as he reluctantly looked up from her body, "But I'm

taking on a new assistant in the morning, so I need to actually sleep a little tonight.”

Rebecca slowly covered most of her body.

“We could try to sleep in the same bed and actually...sleep.”

Michael laughed, “Yeah, right. I’ll see you Wednesday, good night Rebecca.”

On his way home, he resisted the impulse to go back to Rebecca’s for her “one more go ’round” request and forced himself to think about how he would start Kenny out at the company.

That thought brought him back to what had happened at the docks that day when Kenny was acting very strange. Who knows, maybe it wasn’t that big of a deal and the detectives just wanted to question him about his friend or something he saw.

Well, Kenny would be at his office early and hopefully everything would be straightened out by then. He considered whether he should remind him in the morning about staying away from trouble, even if it meant having to give up friendships.

He reminded himself that people learn philosophies and tune out lectures. He should pace himself and share his philosophies with his new protégé over time. Once inside his own bedroom, he was immediately peeling off clothes. It was now three in the morning and he was tired, so sleep came easily. Michael dreamed.

CHAPTER 2

Derrick jerked out of sleep into a half lying, half sitting position across two seats on the bus. He was sweating.

He sat up and took a moment to get his bearings, looking around as reality came back to him. He had been on the bus for three straight days now traveling from Cleveland, Ohio to Los Angeles, California. His muscles ached and his eyes hurt, unable to get comfortable enough to fall into a deep, rejuvenating sleep.

Derrick had been in and out of juvenile hall since he was thirteen years old, “juvie” as they called it, was his second home. Then he became an adult and realized the party was over, for while juvie was difficult, prison was hell. Yet he still ended up looking through those depressing metal bars of the adult penal system of Cleveland on three separate occasions. He had finally come to the conclusion that the continuous cycle of being in and out of detention facilities had to stop.

He was twenty-seven years old and had absolutely nothing to show for it but a prison record and no future. He had become tired of it, vowing he would not go back. This new found conviction to stay out of jail led him, ironically, to where he was now, breaking the law. What else could he do? He had tried to get a job, but no one would hire someone with his record, not even the local construction outfits or the docks where ex-cons knew they had the best chance to get hired. It had finally occurred to him, in his new life revelation, that the best way to start a new life was to get away from the old one.

So, he began his new crime-free life by breaking parole and heading for the City of Angels. He laughed privately at the thought of him being something other than a criminal. An old buddy of his inside prison used to say, “Once a criminal, always a criminal.” Derrick considered and admitted to himself, *He’s probably right, but maybe I can fake it.*

What he would do or where he would stay when he got to Los Angeles was unknown to him at this point, but he had eight hundred dollars in his pocket and he was determined to figure it out. If it didn’t work out, well, then he would probably have to go back to

crime. Nothing like a firm commitment to his new life, he mused.

His parents died in a car accident when he was young, not that he really cared, his father was drunk most of the time, and abusive. He had been drinking when they got into the accident. Derrick lived with his grandparents for a time, but they didn't pay much attention to him since they had already raised their family (not very well) and they were too old and tired to keep up with him. They lived in an old run down trailer park and he had pretty much come and gone as he pleased. He looked like a nice kid, so the local drug dealers recruited him as a lookout when he was eleven years old, being less suspicious to police. He graduated to errand boy for those same drug dealers when he was twelve, and then on to petty theft at thirteen. The older he got, the worse the crime. His grandparents got tired of his nocturnal hours, and then there were all of the court dates and juvie stays, so they kicked him out of the house when he was sixteen. He didn't care, he had friends who let him stay with them.

He was twenty-seven now, with a history of bank robberies, home invasions, grand theft auto, and the occasional murder as a strongman over the last nine years, none of which were his specialty...guns. Dealing guns was what he wanted to do, but it was a tough gig to get into and even tougher to stay in.

He got caught on his only breaking and entering of a business because he took a job with some guys a buddy of his vouched for and one of them tripped the silent alarm. The private armed Security Company responded much faster than the cops ever did. He got away, but the others didn't and they quickly sold him out for less time served.

His last arrest, however, had been too close a call. The authorities thought they had him for murder, a hit he had been contracted to do, and would be able to finally put him away for good, but his lawyer proved police negligence and evidence contamination. He only stayed in prison for the six months it took to go to trial, but the proximity to a permanent stay woke him up. He was not interested in life in prison, with or without a chance of parole. He got along good enough on the inside, since he had friends and contacts there, but it just did not support his style of living. He needed lots of money and partying and women to make him happy. He just needed to find the right opportunity. If that came through crime, well, so be it, but it would have to be a guaranteed score with no chance of getting caught. Derrick knew from experience scores like that were few and far between. He gazed out the window at the passing landscape. Could he do this?

"Whatever," he said lightly, trying to reassure himself he could handle anything.

Derrick had become very calloused inside. His life started violent and he imagined it would likely end violent. It was not surprising he had a bad attitude. Unfortunately, the worse his attitude became the harder his life, which made his attitude worse and life more difficult. A vicious cycle that he could identify, but either couldn't or wouldn't stop.

Well, he's getting away from it all now and maybe that would stop the cycle. He'd get a fake I.D., another law to break, and use it to get into construction. He didn't have a choice, he needed the fake I.D. because of his record. He worked out a lot on the inside, so he knew he could handle the construction work, and he still looked like a nice guy, despite his hard life, so it should be easy to fool people. His nick-name back home was Pretty Boy, and Butcher was later added to the end of it. He always said he was ruthless and looked good doing it. He would have to work on being nicer to people he didn't like.

The bus driver announced they were ten minutes outside of Los Angeles and he couldn't help getting a little excited. Los Angeles was like a different country to most people in Ohio. A bunch of drugged out movie stars and fairies, they would say in prison. But still, Hollywood and beaches would mean lots of hot women. He wondered if he might run into a movie star. He could think of a few starlets he wouldn't mind partying with.

It wasn't long before the bus driver announced they were entering Los Angeles. Derrick hadn't even noticed they had pulled into the city. He got used to spending a lot of his time daydreaming because it helped to pass the time in prison.

He looked out the window at the city. The downtown area didn't look as big as he thought it would. He was under the impression Los Angeles was as big or almost as big as New York. He had been there once on business when one of his connections brought Derrick along for muscle on an arms deal he was brokering. New York was huge, beyond huge, just as he had imagined it would be, but the way everyone on T.V. and the news always talked about L.A., Derrick thought Los Angeles was just as big, but apparently it wasn't.

Well, he was here and it was time to get busy with his new life. He claimed his duffle bag, which basically contained his life and made his way to the outside of the crowded bus terminal.

There he stood with duffle bag over his shoulder in the city of opportunity. He surveyed the area outside the bus terminal, and then looked up and down the street. There was trash everywhere, and people walking aimlessly along the street and homeless

looking people everywhere. Some were laying down trying to sleep and some were just leaning against the wall staring at nothing and there were those buying and selling drugs openly on the sidewalk. Apparently, the city of Angels was no different than any other big city in America. Ignore the bad and show the good, who's to know the difference.

He left the station looking for a local bus stop. Due to his life of crime, it was normal for Derrick to be around black people, but it became alarmingly obvious that he was the only white guy around in a dangerous part of town. He had been in this type of situation before, in a few deals back in Cleveland, except he was always with someone who could vouch for him. He obviously didn't have any such person with him now. In Derrick's experience, black people in rough neighborhoods tended to hate white people, blaming them for their life in hell. Most of this hate derived from the government's inability to help the intercity, and then was attached to all caucasians. He would be more than happy to let them know he felt the same damn way about the government, but doubted the effectiveness of that strategy. So, he just continued walking down the street looking for the first bus stop, staring straight ahead looking at no one and nothing, but he could feel the attentions of the natives and worried they may be getting restless.

He double checked the 9mm in his waistband, hidden under his shirt, but it didn't give him much assurance, as it was possible that several of those walking by were likely to have their own. Finally, a graffiti laden bus came down the street, so Derrick quickened his pace to the bus stop, not wanting to miss it, and jumped on the bus the moment it stopped and the doors opened. It was nasty inside, with dirt and grime so embedded into the seats that it looked a part of the plastic coating, but he was thankful for its arrival. The people on the bus were a mixture of races that lived a hard life and those who just plain looked crazy. He sat down about half way back and soon discovered he was sitting across the aisle from an old lady talking to herself. It rather suddenly occurred to him that in his hurry to get on any bus that would take him out of the neighborhood by the greyhound terminal, he didn't know where he was going. He could be headed even further into a neighborhood where he would not be welcomed and not even realize it, Although with the mixture of people on the bus, maybe not. Not interested in tempting fate anymore than necessary, he went up and asked the driver how to get to Hollywood.

Two hours and two transfers later Derrick was finally entering the city of Hollywood. He had survived his first test in his new life and he didn't even have to kill anyone to do it. Maybe this would work after all. He thought about all he had seen in his first few

hours in L.A. The place was just as messed up as any other big city, and now he was here. Just what the city needed, a recovering devil.

Realizing that getting a place to live was his number one priority, Derrick bought a newspaper, but couldn't find anything cheap. There were advertisements for weekly hotels, but that was a temporary solution to a permanent problem, although he would probably have to pick one for a week while he looked for an apartment.

The hotels didn't sound too bad, really. The ad he was looking at said color T.V., phone and private bath, for a reasonable rate. He called the number and got directions. It was located right in the heart of downtown Hollywood.

"Cool," he said out loud when he got off the city bus on Hollywood Blvd. He followed the directions and found the hotel on a side street just off the Boulevard. It wasn't exactly what he had been expecting for that "reasonable" rate, but he needed a place to stay so he rented a room for the week.

He couldn't believe the liberty that had been taken in the newspaper advertisement. The Wilshire Hotel must have been at least a hundred years old, but hardly had been kept up at all. Once upon a time, it had probably been a nice little hotel in downtown Hollywood, but now it was simply an eyesore where people with little money could live week-to-week on whatever they could scrape together.

Derrick's room was on the third floor and you could see the front of the building and the street from his window. There was a queen-sized bed in one corner that sat with a slight lean toward the far corner, and every time he lay down or sat on it he was sure it would be the last before it collapsed, not to mention it was lopsided and worn. It had been there for a very long time. A small dresser along the wall by the door had a drawer missing, one that wouldn't open and another that had small remains of something he couldn't identify. He decided to leave his clothes inside his duffle bag.

The bathroom had a toilet, sink, and shower; standard. What wasn't standard was that they looked as if they had last been cleaned when the old hotel was actually flourishing. The hotel was unkept and dirty, and he saw no T.V. or phone anywhere. He stood in his room and looked around.

Hell, prison was cleaner than this, he thought, but it was a little bigger than his cell

and he didn't have to share it. Most important of all, he could do whatever he wanted. He thought for a moment, *Best of all...it's not prison.*

Finally accepting the room as his home for the week, he was bored, so he decided to find out where the mysterious T.V. and phone were located. He went downstairs to ask the front desk person. The man was watching T.V. as he had been when Derrick first arrived, behind bullet proof glass. He had been taken on this deal and he didn't like being lied to. His first response would normally be to get revenge, but he had to keep a low profile. If he got busted for anything, even jaywalking, they would find out he had broken parole.

Derrick spoke through the little speaker on the window.

"Excuse me?"

The front desk person turned and said, "Yeah?" while staying seated.

"The ad mentioned a T.V. and phone, where would they be?"

The person pointed to the T.V. he was watching in his private area and said, "This is the T.V., you can stand there and watch if you want and there is a pay phone at the corner just before Hollywood Boulevard."

Derrick stood there for a moment, making every effort to contain his anger. He turned and left the hotel, resolute to find an apartment or room for rent. He bought a copy of the Los Angeles Times, thinking he needed a job as well as an apartment. His stomach reminded him it was lunch time and with no kitchen in his room he would have to rely on fast food. Eating fast food all the time would add up quickly if he didn't find a place soon, but he needed nourishment and laughed that he thought of McDonald's as nourishment. *Desparate Times*, he thought, and found his way to the nearest golden arches for lunch, by way of directions from several rather odd people.

After a frustrating and fruitless apartment and job search all week, Derrick woke up on Friday morning with much on his mind, today was the day he had to leave the hotel unless he paid for another week. He had spent the week traveling all over Los Angeles and the surrounding cities, but he didn't have much in the way of job skills, except his strength, which meant construction. Normally, he could try signing on from construction site to construction site, except it was raining all the time and he had not found a

connection for a new I.D. yet.

Derrick read in the newspaper that Los Angeles had been going through a three year drought right up until the time that he arrived. All of a sudden, it had rained for a week straight and there wasn't much construction work available when it rains, even if they would hire him without an ID.

I thought it never rained in Southern California, he thought sarcastically.

Worst of all, he couldn't find a place to live that he could afford. He had no job and no place to live and his money was growing thin much too quickly. That afternoon, Derrick was on a bus going to the UCLA campus to check out the job boards and ads for roommates, but he was running out of ideas. The bus went through West Hollywood and then Beverly Hills. He looked at the houses in Beverly Hills with an almost evil glint in his eye. He thought it ridiculous for him to have no money and no place to sleep when those people had plenty to share. Their houses would likely have sophisticated alarms and although he could beat them with the proper equipment, he didn't have the money for said equipment, but it did get his heart beating a little faster.

After receiving no leads from the university or the newspaper, he began the hour-and-a-half bus trek back to Hollywood to pick up his bag, which he had hidden in some out of the way bushes so he didn't have to carry it everywhere he went. He didn't own much, but after a while the bag got heavy. Perusing the apartment and roommate ads one more time proved to be a waste of time, everything in Los Angeles was so expensive. *Nothing but a bunch of rich brats*.

With desperation slowly creeping in, he stared out the bus window as it made its way back through Beverly Hills. Then, at the border of Beverly Hills and West Hollywood he noticed some hills with an almost straight up grade. The abnormal grade caught his attention and he inadvertently noticed that the roads came to a dead-end at a retaining wall half-way up the hill, providing some rare greenage on the hillside before reaching the big houses at the top of the hill. It gave him an idea that he did not like.

Arriving back in Hollywood at the normal hiding place for his bag, he reached into the bushes and retrieved his belongings. It was damp from the rain that day and he could only hope the bag had provided, at least, minimal protection for his clothes inside. He shrugged it off as a minor problem and once again became a patron of the Los Angeles bus system, so he could get back to the steep road he had seen in West Hollywood.

There were several roads with a steep grade, but on the third one he found what he

was looking for, the hillside continued without houses. It appeared there was plenty of space between where he stood and the houses at the top of the hill. There was a three foot wall and then a steep hill that, being in good shape, he had no problem climbing, even with his bag over his shoulder.

About half way up the hill, he found a flat landing off to the right. It was hard to tell because of the ever increasing darkness, but there appeared to be a large water tank built into the side of the hill. On the near opposite end of the tank was a small mound of dirt that acted as a barrier to the back yard of the last house built on the dead-end street. The mound was large enough to make it impossible for the residents to see him. The water tank would be his bed until he found a cheap place to live. Derrick looked up at the partly cloudy sky, speckled spectacularly with stars. He thought perhaps it was clearing up, and then he looked around at his new camp. He was actually going to sleep outside. His mind reiterated the concept, *at least it's not prison*, and silently wondered how long he could use that reasoning before his patience ran out.

It turned out to be a nice warm night, but with summer over he figured it would likely get chilly at some point during the night, so he dressed three layers thick with sweatshirts and a jacket, and two pair of pants. There was no rain so far, so maybe his luck was changing. He was thankful for the now nearly clear sky, because this was his first night in Los Angeles with no rain. Sitting down on the edge of the water tank he looked around and contemplated his situation. Looking up toward the top of the hill he could see a few large houses. There were about a hundred yards between him and those houses, so he stood up and began ascending the hill. At about forty yards from the closest house at top of the hill he stopped and turned to look out over the city. "Nice," he said out loud as he sat and looked at the skyline. Bundled as he was, he was sweating lightly.

He couldn't help remembering the scene when he first got off the bus in Los Angeles, homeless people and drug dealers all around, with trash everywhere, but under the cover of night, with all the lights on...it was beautiful. The night hid a lot, which brought Derrick's mind to thinking about the houses behind him again. If he kept thinking about his bad situation, he knew he would end up talking himself into a late night unwelcome visit to someone's house. Los Angeles was supposed to be a new life for him, so he

turned his thoughts from burglary and concentrated on the next day and what would be his next move. He didn't know. *This is going to much harder than I thought.*

After viewing the overlook for another half hour and coming up with what scarcely resembled a plan, he stood and began the descent toward his set up. He took a couple of steps and stopped, turned half way back toward the hill and looked up to the top. He focused on the house. It was a very nice house. Without thought, his right hand felt the ever shrinking bulge of money in his right front pocket. He had just under six hundred dollars left and had regrettably put himself on a tough diet. The money was leaking fast. Still looking at the house he said, "Three days," sealing the personal bargain.

Upon entering the cleared area around the tank, his foot caught on something sticking out from a bush, and looking down discovered it was a long cushion. He didn't even pay attention to the dirt on it, or the small rips in the fabric in several places. He simply laid it on the tank and then lay on top of it. It occurred to him that someone else had used the cushion for the same purpose and could be returning tonight. Hopefully someone had abandoned the sleeping spot or there could problems. Derrick learned to be a light sleeper in prison, aware at all times. He never trusted anyone.

The cushion was hard and worn and his feet hung off the end of it, but it was still more comfortable than the steel plate covering the tank, which would have been his bed if he had not discovered the mat. The important thing was it was made of plastic, and therefore it was reasonably dry, having resisted the rain of the past week and a half, except for the small spots that were ripped.

He tossed and turned for a couple of hours, uncomfortable with so many clothes, but the air did become increasingly chilly as the night wore on. A couple hours past midnight it was downright cold. His eyelids began to ache from being so tired, but not being able to fall asleep.

Finally, in the late morning hours, exhaustion put him to sleep. As he drifted off he vaguely wondered if he was too tired to dream. He was not. Derrick slept...and dreamed.

CHAPTER 3

Michael was cold. He could feel it in his bones. As he dozed between being half asleep and half awake, he vaguely hoped he wasn't getting sick. He wanted so much to return to sleep, because he was still tired. His hands reached for the blanket, but it was already covering him. It was early autumn, just a couple of weeks removed from summer, but still warm enough to fold back the down comforter to the end of the bed and sleep under the sheet only. Even the sheet was only used as a partial covering, so he must have pulled it up to his neck sometime in the early hours of the morning when it was the coldest.

"Man, its cold."

Michael opened his eyes. He was awake now and would not get back to sleep. He glanced at the clock, it was 6:55, five minutes before his alarm was to go off. He growled, at least he meant to growl but it sounded more like a whine to him. How could he be so cold when it was barely autumn and he was snug under his heavy blanket. This thing had kept him toastie all winter.

He half sat up, leaning on his elbow. He tried to wipe the sleep from his eyes, but they still hurt from lack of sleep. He felt kind of weird. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but something just wasn't right. He fell back against the pillow and thought for a moment about his night with Rebecca. It was nice. He hadn't felt that once-in-a-lifetime connection with her, but it was nice.

Beep, beep, beep, beep! The alarmed blared what seemed to be louder than usual, causing him to spring forward into a sit-up position. His hand slammed on the alarm and he slowly crawled out of bed, declaring aloud, "I hate that alarm."

Lisa was asleep on her back on her brother's bed, still dressed as she had been the night before when she tearfully went through her brother's things. Her hands clasped a

picture of her and her younger sibling at the Cedar Point Amusement Park, and together they rested on her chest. The Johnson family had been up half the night taking care of business at the hospital and police station, regarding their murdered member, Kenny.

When they arrived home they prayed together, cried some more, then each, unbelieving the course of events that evening, succumbed to restless slumber.

Everyone, except Lisa. She couldn't sleep, so she went to Kenny's room to look through his things. There had to be an explanation for his murder. This wasn't the usual neighborhood drive-by shooting. This was two professional looking white men, dressed in suits, in an all black neighborhood. Why? She knew it wasn't drugs, Kenny was too smart to get caught up in that, but what else could it be? It didn't make sense.

Lisa looked around Kenny's room for hours until exhaustion finally took hold of her. The last thing on her mind before falling asleep had been the memory of her and her brother's day at Cedar Point. They had their picture taken together there, the picture she now clutched in her hands. He had complained to his mom for the entire week leading up to going that he didn't want to drive two hours in a car to spend all day with his sister. If he was going to Cedar Point, he wanted to be free to pick up girls and go have fun with his friends. His mom insisted he go with his sister so as not to hurt her feelings. After all, it was his sixteenth birthday present from her.

They ended up having so much fun that Kenny spoke of the day with his sister for weeks. Lisa was so proud she made him happy.

"Lisa, Lisa honey, wake up, you're late for work," momma said lightly as she gently shook her.

Lisa knew she was fatigued, but she was sure her momma just said she was late for work. She sat up and looked her momma in the eyes, remembering everything in a rush of emotion.

"Momma, what are you talking about, I can't go to work today," she managed.

Momma fought back the tears with all her might, for being strong for her family was her job.

"Lisa, Kenny will always be in our hearts, but we cannot stop living because of our pain. Tomorrow we grieve at the funeral, but after that it is important we live our lives in celebration of his. Now come on baby, you must go to work."

Momma had always been a disciplinarian and workaholic, and Kenny and Lisa were raised to listen to their parents even if they disagreed. It was ludicrous to go to work after

losing a family member, though. She realized momma was trying to be brave, as always, but she was going about it the wrong way. Lisa almost always listened to her momma, but this would not be one of those times. She had thought about many things last night while she looked through Kenny's things, trying to find any clue why this tragedy had happened. Even though she had not found anything helpful in solving the mystery, she was determined not to give up until she found answers. She would let momma believe she was obeying her, but then she would continue her investigation.

"Alright momma, I'll go to work," Lisa answered.

She was so deep in thought as she went to exit her brother's room that she almost missed her first real clue. Momma was speaking out loud, but not necessarily to Lisa.

"Well, I would call Kenny's new boss to inform him, but I don't even know where to call," she said.

Lisa turned quickly to face her mother. "New job, what new job Momma?"

"The job he kept going on and on about last night," Momma said. "Didn't you hear him tell me he was starting a new job today?"

"No, I didn't, I must have been watching T.V. with Terry."

"He was very excited about it. He was sure it was his big break. He said he would be working for the man from the magazine. We were going to celebrate at dinner, but I sent him to the store..."

Lisa was almost bursting from curiosity, but she didn't want momma to know.

"What man from the magazine, momma?"

Kenny had shown momma the magazine in the kitchen, so she figured it was still there and left the room to get it without saying a word. Lisa didn't know if she should follow or if she was supposed to stay there. She looked around his room for a few seconds trying to decide, when she heard momma coming back down the hall toward Kenny's room. When momma got there, she handed the Fortune 500 magazine with Michael Deshay's picture on the cover, to Lisa.

"That's him, there."

Lisa raised the magazine and looked at the picture on the front. There was a handsome man that looked very young to be on the cover of Fortune 500.

"Him? Are you sure, momma?" She asked with surprise.

"Yes," momma said simply, then finished with, "Kenny said he bought exotic cars from Frank, off the docks. I guess he had known him for some time."

Momma noticed Lisa's intent expression while staring at Kenny's magazine. She became instantly worried.

"It doesn't matter now, you should get to work dear."

Lisa glanced up to momma, then back down to the magazine.

"Poor, Kenny," she said, and then she quickly kissed momma on the cheek and rushed from his room to hers, with magazine in hand.

Momma watched her go, not knowing what to think, but wearing a look of worry that perhaps she didn't even realize she had. She knew Lisa too well. She was afraid Lisa wouldn't let things rest.

She whispered under her breath, "Please baby, go to work," and then she left, using her own job as a way of escaping the pain of her son's death, just as she had done when her beloved husband had passed away.

Bzzzzt.

"What is it!" the voice showered with annoyance, inquired.

"Mr. Carmen, there are two..."

"Let them in," he retorted aggressively, obviously not caring how rude he had just been to his secretary.

The two large hit men entered, with the business looking one at the lead. The blond walked slowly behind, observing the room with the excitement of a child.

"Cool office, sir," he exclaimed.

Mr. Carmen ignored him, his eyes focused on the other man.

"Joseph, it is good to see you."

"Mr. Carmen," Joseph replied respectfully.

The blond haired hit man took a double-take and then peered at Mr. Carmen a little closer. He couldn't believe the amount of respect he saw in his boss's eyes and heard in his voice when he spoke to Joseph. The blond looked at Joseph. He realized it was the first time he had heard the man's name. There was no doubt the man was respected by Mr. Carmen and it was a respect he had never seen from him toward anyone, until now. "This man must be very dangerous," he thought.

After Mr. Carmen and Joseph shook hands, they sat down. Mr. Carmen in a high

backed leather chair behind his desk and Joseph sat in a comfortable looking Suede leather chair on the other side of the immense cherry wood desk. The blond was not included in the affair. In fact, he had been completely ignored since they arrived.

Mr. Carmen looked at Joseph a moment, then his eyes shifted to his hands laying clasped on his desk in front of him. "I was hoping to hear from you last night," he said politely. Mr. Carmen's eyes returned to the gaze of Joseph. He was trying to be stern, but was careful not to offend.

If Joseph was offended he did not show it. His reputation spoke for itself, demanding the respect of the biggest crime bosses in the world. No one was untouchable to him.

"Kenneth Johnson is dead," he stated evenly.

Mr. Carmen smiled and his demeanor changed visibly.

"Of course he is." His smile took ten years off his face. The blond had been his private bodyguard for only about three months now, having recently been given a promotion from simple building security, but he actually found Mr. Carmen's company to be pleasant when he was in a good mood. When he was in a bad mood, it was best to keep your mouth shut, stay out of his way, and let him ignore you.

Mr. Carmen opened a desk drawer and pulled out a bulging envelope. There was no doubt it was stuffed with an enormous amount of money. He pushed it across the desk toward Joseph.

"I had the greatest amount of confidence in you Joseph. You have had assignments ten times harder than this and you always get your man."

Joseph calmly reached out and grabbed the envelope, then put it into his suit jacket's inner pocket.

The blond didn't think before speaking, a mistake that had gotten him into plenty of trouble over the years. "Aren't you even going to count it?"

Mr. Carmen laughed as he looked at the blond for the first time since the two men had entered his office.

"You have much to learn, Jeffrey. No one would short Joseph."

Mr. Carmen turned to Joseph and smiled. "You have quite a project on your hands. I will be forever grateful for your help."

Joseph nodded.

Mr. Carmen smiled again, but this time with the excitement of a child. A very wicked child. "Now, Joseph, about Michael Deshay."

It was 10:30 a.m. and Michael sat in his office doing paper work, disappointed Kenny had not shown up. He buzzed his secretary Judy for the fourth time in the last hour.

“Judy, any word from Kenny?” he asked politely.

“No sir,” Judy replied, slightly annoyed he continued to pester her with insistent inquiries. “Michael, if he calls, I promise I will contact you immediately. That is if I haven’t jumped out of the window by then.”

“I get the point Judy, I’ll stop bothering you.”

“I’m sorrow he hasn’t called Michael. I’m sure there is a legitimate reason.”

“I’m sure there is, thank you Judy.”

Michael couldn’t understand it. He had such a good feeling about Kenny, who reminded Michael of himself at that age and he was seldom wrong about people, it was one of his most important business talents, invaluable when brokering a deal. Absentmindedly, he remembered the two men at the docks and couldn’t help wondering if they had anything to do with Kenny not showing up. He was supposed to work the problem out or contact him. He checked his voicemail again, but still no message. Maybe the problem was bigger than Kenny realized and now he was in trouble with the law.

In his mind, he analyzed the detectives more thoroughly, and began to recall details that had not immediately registered. He was fairly confident the suits the two men wore were too nice for cops. Could they be FBI? He just couldn’t picture Kenny in trouble with the law, especially not on the federal level, but if he was covering for a friend they could be trying to scare him and that was why Kenny couldn’t contact him. Maybe he should call some friends in the local government and see if he could find out if Kenny’s name came up for anything? He brought up his confidential phone list on the computer and decided to start with the police. It could be a simple misunderstanding and he could speak on Kenny’s behalf. He picked up the phone, but then Judy buzzed him.

“Yes, Miss Jenkins?” He hoped Kenny had finally arrived.

“I’m sorry for interrupting Mr. Deshay, but there is someone here to see you.”

“Is it the appointment I have been expecting?”

“Uh, no sir,” Judy replied.

Politely annoyed by Kenny's further absence, Michael asked, "Did I have another appointment that I was unaware of Miss Jenkins?"

She glanced up at the visitor standing in front of her desk and smiled apologetically.

"No sir, you did not have another appointment scheduled, but, uh, Lisa Johnson is her to see you and she says it is urgent that she speak with you."

Lisa Johnson? Lisa Johnson? Michael felt he should know that name, but couldn't place it. "Who is... then it occurred to him who it could be, with a last name the same as Kenny's. It was so obvious, yet he had almost missed it.

"Oh, yes, of course, please show Mrs. Johnson in."

Realizing that Lisa Johnson was no doubt a relative of Kenny Johnson, probably his mother, his worry became less, but not much less. Was he in jail? He was probably over-dramatizing the situation. From talking with Kenny over the years, he knew his mother to be a very hard working widowed single mom who didn't believe anything came easy. Kenny certainly wouldn't have it easy working for him. He had a lot of hard work ahead of him as he paid his dues and worked his way up the corporate ladder. Maybe she was just checking up on him and his business before she was willing to let her son work there. He was a twenty three year old man, but it was nice to see a mom who cared so much.

Michael met Judy and Lisa at the door to his office, half expecting to see Kenny with his mother. Judy introduced Lisa to Michael and vice-versa. The beautiful woman standing before him was definitely not Kenny's mother and he knew Kenny wasn't married. Before embarrassing himself for staring, he invited Lisa into his luxurious office and motioned her to the comfort of the lounge area. He thanked Miss Jenkins and followed Lisa over to the black leather couch and chairs. Michael hated to be at his desk all day, so he would often retreat to his lounge area and conduct business from there. Complete with all of the comforts of home and the latest multi-media equipment, he routinely had conferences with his biggest clients within the comforts of this lounge.

Lisa was impressed at the expanse affluence of the office. She had never seen anything like it before. It was simple contemporary, with glass everywhere. Lisa sat down on the couch, trying not to be intimidated, realizing she was in the presence of a very successful man...and Kenny was supposed to start working for him today?

Michael asked her, "Can I get you something to drink, coffee?"

"No thanks," she replied.

Michael went without a drink as well and sat in his favorite chair, opposite her. He certainly couldn't displace her beauty, but she was very serious as she looked down at her clasped hands in her lap. Who was she anyway? His sister, maybe?

"How can I help you Miss Johnson?"

After a moment, a moment in which she noticeably composed herself, she asked, "Mr. Deshay, my mother tells me Kenny was supposed to start working for you today?"

She had managed to meet his eyes at the end of the statement. He was taken aback by the pain he saw, a vicious pain. What had happened to Kenny?

"He is, yes. He is going to be my personal assistant, my protégé, if you will."

"Protégé?" Lisa was caught off-guard. "My brother?"

It was an obvious case of big sister not realizing how much her little brother had grown up. And the mystery of who she was had been answered. "Yes, your brother."

"My baby brother was going to be your protégé?" She asked again. She often referred to both of her younger brothers as her baby brother, to what had been Kenny's continued embarrassment."

Michael continued on, vaguely wondering at her use of the past tense.

"I've known Kenny for a little over five years now. Every time I went down to the docks to do business with Frank, Kenny's boss, which was at least once a year and sometimes two or three times a year, I was more and more impressed with your baby brother. He has a remarkable work ethic and inspiring dedication to doing the job right the first time. Frank often bragged to me about how smart he was and reminded me several times over the years that Kenny was attending night classes, as well. I was downright impressed, and on top of all that, he was always friendly and polite and that makes a big difference with me. He was obviously raised very well.

"What really stood out though was his passion toward business. He liked picking my brain about current business situations in the news. It's no great wonder that we quickly became friends. I got to see a fine young man grow up to be a very impressive perspective employee. As with all perspective employees, I did a background check."

"Background check?" Lisa knew this to be standard procedure, but she was surprised that all of this pertained to her little brother.

"This wasn't your standard background check, though, this was much more thorough. I had been considering taking on a protégé for months, but I hadn't found the right person. A couple of weeks ago I was on the phone with Frank ordering my new Ferrari

and I mentioned to him that I wish I could find someone. He immediately said he knew the perfect man for the job...he said Kenny.”

“Frank?” The information being fed to Lisa was becoming more amazing by the second. All of Kenny’s hard work really had been about to pay off. It made his death that much more tragic and she had to fight back the tears with all her might. She needed more information, she wanted to hear more wonderful things about her brother. This was all she had left of him. Lisa looked over to where Michael had been sitting in a large black leather chair across from her. She hadn’t even noticed he had gotten up and made his way to his desk.

“Do you have any idea how well Kenny is doing in school?”

His constant use of the present tense stung her and once again she had to fight fiercely to maintain control of her emotions.

“Pretty well, from what I understand.”

“Very well,” Michael said as he crossed the room and handed her a folder. It was the folder he was going to go over with Kenny when he arrived.

“When I went down to Import Goods yesterday, I wasn’t going just to buy a car.”

Lisa rummaged through the folder, sifting through Kenny’s school transcripts, letters of recommendation and academic awards. He was carrying a perfect 4.0 average in college, just as he had done in high school. She looked up at Michael, slightly dazed.

“I believe you underestimated your little brother, Miss Johnson,” he said with a smile.

“Along with his very impressive transcripts, you will see letters of recommendation from several of his professors, as well as two from Frank at Import Goods. You’ll see such words as ‘brilliant,’ ‘driven,’ ‘ambitious,’ and ‘delightfully confident.’ I began to see Frank was right about Kenny, so I called him back to discuss my interest in hiring Kenny and he wouldn’t shut up about him. He kept going on and on about how if I didn’t hire him then I could never buy a car from him again. That was when he insisted on faxing me another letter of recommendation even though I assured him the first one would be enough. He actually put on the new recommendation that he would never sell me another car if I didn’t hire Kenny.”

Lisa couldn’t help herself, she had to laugh at that, but it also sprung the tears she could no longer hold in. She had never been more proud of her brother, or more ashamed of herself. How could she live with him all this time and not realize the scope of his accomplishments? She knew he was smart and always did well in school, and she knew

he was working and going to college, but how well did she really know him. She rarely asked him how school was going anymore, nor did she ask him if he needed help with anything. He was doing amazing things and she was too wrapped up in her own world to even notice. It was fine to be an individual and be proud of your own success, but she didn't have to be so self-preoccupied that she didn't stay current with her beloved family.

"I don't hire just anyone, Miss Johnson. I hire the best. And that is why I hired Kenny Johnson."

"I'm sorry," she said with tears now streaming down her face.

"No, I'm sorry Miss Johnson, I didn't mean to make you feel bad, I just wanted you to understand that Kenny deserves this."

Lisa managed, barely, "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

Michael leaned forward and assured her as nicely as possible, "It's all right Miss Johnson, there is nothing to be sorry for. It's good to see Kenny's family looking out for him, checking to make sure his new job will be good for his career. Deshay Enterprises is a Fortune 500 Company, so I assure you Kenny will be in good hands."

Lisa lost it. A small amount of control she may have had was completely gone. She began to cry uncontrollably. Michael bent down on one knee and gently touched her hands, which were clinging together in her lap.

"I'm sorry, Miss Johnson, I...really didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

Lisa cried some more and slowly showed signs of getting control of her emotions.

"Kenny is dead." It came out quickly, and just as quickly she lost control again.

A cold chill of shock hit Michael like a sledge-hammer. His worst imaginings for Kenny's continued absence did not even consider death. His stomach clenched as he looked at Lisa and felt his heart break for her. Michael reached for Lisa and gently pulled her to him. She was surprised, but didn't refuse. She leaned her head against his chest and wept. He wrapped his arms around her and she found it surprisingly comforting to be in his arms. Michael couldn't believe Kenny was dead. It was a horrible thing to happen to such a gifted young man.

"Dude, I've worked for Mr. Carmen for, like, three years and that's the first time I've seen his office, and that includes the last three months that I have been his personal

bodyguard. I usually have to stand outside the door and wait for him.” Jeffrey looked over at Joseph in the passenger seat and noticed he showed complete disinterest with the conversation, but he continued anyway.

“So, I hear you’re a pretty big hitter, dude?” Still no reaction from Joseph; this guy was way too serious. “Hey, by the way, my name is Jeff.” He reached across the seat to shake Joseph’s hand, but none was extended.

“That’s cool,” he said, and then he once again tried to be friendly.

“So, what’s our first move?”

Joseph turned to look at Jeffrey, who was constantly turning his head front ways to drive and sideways to try and start a conversation.

“Well Jeffrey, I suppose our first move would be to clear up a few things. We are not working together, I work alone. I am simply training you for Mr. Carmen.”

Jeffrey glanced quickly toward him and then back to the road. He couldn’t help wondering for what he was being trained.

“Our second move would be to establish a complete file on Mr. Deshay.” Joseph’s gaze remained on Jeffrey for an additional second, and then returned to the scenery.

Jeffrey had stopped looking over at Joseph entirely, but he felt the menacing gaze Joseph gave him that last second. He considered silence, but curiosity ruled.

“You’re training me? For what?”

“Mr. Carmen has plans for you. He seems to trust you. He believes you capable of being more than just his bodyguard.”

“Really? I’ll be damned. So, what am I training to do?”

“That will be revealed when it is necessary.”

Jeffrey glanced sideways, “Right.” He wondered why all the mystery, was he training for something that important? He found it interesting how Mr. Carmen didn’t even ask him if he wanted this special training. It was becoming obvious that his life was no longer ruled by his own choices. He hoped he would be doing something exciting.

He thought about their assignment and decided that if he was going get another promotion, then he must be expected to contribute more to the task, except he didn’t understand why they couldn’t just go up to Michael Deshay and shoot him like they did the kid. He had a lot of questions for Joseph, but he thought better than to ask them right now. He didn’t want to admit he was afraid of Joseph, so instead of fear, he thought of it as a healthy respect.

Lisa had eventually regained control of her emotions and explained what little she knew of Kenny's murder. What she knew basically covered what momma had told her. Lisa and her youngest brother had been tied up in her bedroom while the evil deed had taken place. Michael sat in his favorite chair, trying to get a handle on the situation, it just didn't make sense.

"Kenny is one of the most likeable people I've ever known, why would someone..."

"We didn't live in the worst area, but even so, a black man getting shot in my neighborhood is not highly unusual."

Michael didn't know what to say. There probably wasn't much of a chance Kenny's killers would be found. In the poor neighborhoods police were usually inundated with gang crimes. Maybe he would make that call to his contact at the police after all, if only to find out what was being done with Kenny's case.

He had been friends with Kenny, but that was not the only reason why he would help. He felt a little guilty his attraction to Lisa was one of the reasons.

"Well," he began, looking over to her, "I have a few connections with the local authorities, so I'll call and see what is being done."

Lisa looked up, surprised. "That is very kind, thank you."

They were interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Yes?" he inquired.

Judy Jenkins opened the door and leaned partially into the office. Michael looked at his watch, surprised by the time. "I'm sorry Judy, it's past your lunch."

"I didn't want to disturb your meeting, so I was eating at my desk, and I noticed something in the paper I thought you should know about right away."

Judy walked over and handed him the front page. He took for granted she was referring to Kenny's death.

"Yes, I'm afraid I know about Kenny," he said softly, glancing at Lisa.

Judy didn't know what he was referring to about Kenny, but realized he was not talking about the article she wanted to show him.

"This article is about Frank," she said politely.

"Frank?"

Michael looked at the paper and began skimming articles.

“What happened to Frank?”

“At the bottom.”

His eyes jumped down to an article at the bottom of the page that mentioned an incident at Import Goods Inc. He read quickly, and then shuffled through the paper for the continuation of the story. When he had finished he thanked Judy and she left. He thought for a couple seconds, and then looked at Lisa.

“I believe I know why Kenny was murdered.”

By the end of the business day Joseph had compiled a complete history of Michael Deshay and he now sat on the couch in his hotel room reading the file. Jeffrey was walking around the penthouse suit, more impressed with the living quarters than the painstaking research Joseph had done.

“Dude, this thing is more like a mansion than a hotel room.”

Joseph held back a smug grin and calmly commented, “Nothing but the best.”

“Dude, you must make a ton of money.”

Joseph was back into the file on Michael Deshay, dislodging from Jeffrey’s ramblings, but ever-aware of his actions.

“So, Joey, are you saying, if I get as good as you, I’ll be living like the frickin’ King of England, too?” Jeffrey was nearly exploding with excitement.

Joseph looked up, annoyed. He was staring straight ahead, even though he knew Jeffrey was to his left and slightly back.

“Don’t ever call me Joey, it is unprofessional.” His words had a way of commanding the complete attention of everything around him, even, Jeffrey imagined, inanimate objects listened when he spoke.

Jeffrey became as still as a statue, unsure of what to do. He had never backed down from anyone, so there was a possible serious situation developing here. This was the second time he had been sternly corrected as if he were a child. Anyone else and he would have been kicking some ass by now, but instead he couldn’t move. Maybe this was more than a healthy respect, maybe this was fear. After Joseph let his words sink in and he was satisfied that Jeffrey was not going to argue, he continued.

“You will never be as good as me, but yes, you can live comfortably. And Jeffrey, England currently has a Queen, not a King.”

He returned once again to his file, but Jeffrey stayed immobile. For a minute there, he wasn't sure if he was going to die or not. Would the guy really kill him for calling him Joey? He decided he didn't want to find out. He was just about to move, finally, when Joseph stopped him with his words again.

“One more thing, Jeffrey, you must start being more professional, do not call me dude. You know my name, my proper name, use it when addressing me.”

The man didn't look up from his file when he spoke that time, but the steel nerve of his words had the same effect. Jeffrey didn't like the special training he was being given any longer, not that he had a choice in the matter. He held his spot for the moment waiting to see if anything else would be said to him.

Silence held court for the next few minutes until Joseph revealed, “It appears Michael Deshay will not be vulnerable through his family, he doesn't have any.”

The man acted as if the moment of awkward disciplinary action had never occurred. Jeffrey partially relaxed and cautiously moved within eye sight of Joseph. Joseph raised his head from the folder and looked at Jeffrey with a wry, devilish grin.

“I'm sure we can find something.”

He returned to the file.

Jeffrey got goose bumps.

Michael had been at his desk all day receiving calls with information about Kenny and Frank's deaths. He had talked to a Captain, a Lieutenant, and two detectives he knew from Cleveland's police department, but none of them had much of anything to tell him. Although, one of the detectives let on in a roundabout way that everyone was being hush-hush about Frank Schenelli, the now dead manager of Import Goods, Inc. He found that to be a bit curious, so he called up several private detectives he had used for background checks before and set them to work gathering information about Frank, Kenny, and Import Goods. He didn't know what kind of information he was looking for, or if it would do any good, but he he needed to do something.

It was now night time and the calls had finally slowed to a stop over the last hour.

Judy went home at five, as usual, and Lisa was asleep on the couch. She had been skeptical of what he could accomplish on the phone and the internet and then her emotional exhaustion became overbearing and she dozed off.

He was tired, as well. He closed up the file of information, which had slowly but surely become rather extensive. He took a moment to stretch, then his green eyes landed on Lisa's slumbering figure. He enjoyed a few minutes of just watching the beautiful woman sleep. He hated to wake her, but nothing else could be done that day. Michael stood up and walked over to her, bent down on one knee and gently shook her.

"I'm going to take you home now, Lisa," he said, barely above a whisper.

She blinked her eyes a few times and took in her surroundings. She came back to reality with a look of urgency in her face and jumped up into a sitting position. The abruptness of Lisa's movement nearly knocked Michael off his knee.

She straightened her outfit, an impressive dark blue and black business suit. She quickly added "I'm sorry, I must have dozed off for a minute. Uhm, I better go, I have a lot of work to do."

Michael stood up and said "Lisa, it's nearly 9:00 at night." He was kind and understanding.

"9:00? It can't be, I closed my eyes for just a minute. I couldn't have been asleep for..." She turned toward the window and saw only darkness. She thought back, but couldn't quite remember what time it was just before she fell asleep. They had eaten lunch in the office and she had helped Michael organize the information they were receiving for a couple of hours, then...

"You've been asleep for almost four hours," he said.

Now she was embarrassed. She couldn't even look at him, she was so horrified. "Oh, my God, I'm sorry. I don't understand what happened?"

"It's all right Lisa, you were exhausted. You've been through quite a bit in the last twenty four hours. Why don't you let me take you home?"

She glanced up and their eyes met. Once again she noticed he was a handsome man, and once again she felt ashamed for it, under the circumstances. She couldn't make herself look away this time, though. She was held by his eyes, not just because of his looks, she saw something else. She saw a person who was genuinely concerned for her. She saw kindness. She saw a good man. She caught herself staring and experienced embarrassment anew for the awkward situation.

“Thank you Mr. Deshay, you’ve been very kind, but I have my car.”

“Please, call me Michael,” he said as he handed a large black notebook toward her.

Lisa received the notebook with curiosity.

“What’s this?”

“This is the information we’ve been gathering all day. It is still incomplete, but there may be something in there that you recognize. There could be a name you’ve heard Kenny mention, or perhaps a place he’s been to...”

“Nothing personal Mr. Desh...Michael, but I doubt these people you hired will get much information off the streets and most of the information we have gathered today is related to Import Goods. I think I’ll get the information I need from my own neighborhood.”

“Lisa, I know what you’re getting at, but this isn’t about black and white. This is about good guys and bad guys. There are good guys in every race and bad guys in every race. So many problems could be solved if the good people of every race got together and fought against the bad people of every race.”

Hesitantly, she looked up. It was a fine thought, but it wasn’t based in reality. “In principal, I suppose that makes sense, but you know it’s not that easy.”

“You’re right, it’s not that easy, because people won’t let it be that easy. What if it could happen, though? Even if it was a slow process that advanced over time, but then it eventually happened, can you imagine the power we would have as a society? Think of it, all the good people of every race joined together to fight against the bad people of every race?”

Lisa managed a smile. “You’re an idealist. Under better circumstances I might find your ideals worth consideration, but right now they do not help me avenge my brother.”

“I have a theory.” Michael waited a moment to see if she would give him a chance to explain. Lisa expected more of his idealistic rederic that once upon a two days ago she would have found interesting. She was so tired, though. However, if she let him give his little speech, his theory, maybe he would let her go home and go to sleep. She wanted to sleep a very long time and then wake up and find out it had all been a bad dream. She would awake to her brother’s smiling face once again. She would ask him how he was doing in school and at work, she would want to know everything, but no...that would never happen. He was gone and would never be back, and to make it even worse, the bastards who did this would get away with it...unless someone could help her, which

brought her back to Michael. She looked up at him. Her hopes seemed to rest on a very successful, very handsome, white businessman. She gave a big sigh and nodded assent.

“All right, there is one common theme for every bad guy, money rules their world. The streets have loyalty to only one color...green. Fortunately, I have a great deal of that and I have hired the best private detectives money can buy. I don’t exactly know how they work, but for how much they cost I am guessing they are very good and get results. Frankly, I probably don’t want to know how they get their info, but the guys I use are ex-cops, so I’m sure they use their connections well. Whatever the case, they are busy establishing connections on the street.

“That’s great Michael, but that doesn’t help in my neighborhood.”

“Uh, Lisa, not every detective I hired is white.”

Lisa couldn’t help but smile a little. Of course, he could hire black guys to go undercover on the streets to get the information for him, and she wouldn’t need to endanger her family. Plus, he mentioned they were former cops. That should be helpful.

Once again he took her silent consideration as a good sign. Maybe he was finally making some headway. Headway towards what? Why was he trying so hard to convince her to let him help her?

“Lisa, I know how bad you want to get these guys, I really do.” Michael turned partially away from Lisa and stopped, “Sometimes, a person needs help.”

Just before he turned away, she had seen...sadness? Maybe even a little regret?

“I know.”

Michael turned back to her. She looked in his eyes and also saw...anger. There must be something in his past to cause such emotion, but it wasn’t her place to ask. Michael looked at the notebook she had given back to him and placed it on the intricately designed glass coffee table. She followed the path of the notebook to the table, and then looked up into his eyes. For the first time since she stepped into his office, Michael felt like he had her full attention.

“Sometimes, you just need to trust someone.”

He turned and walked over to his desk on the other side of the oversized office. Lisa watched him go and then looked down at the notebook. She briefly wondered about his moment of inner turmoil. She picked up the notebook, wanting to believe it would help in some way to find her brother’s killers. It didn’t hurt to review the information, since they were at a dead-end anyway. She decided to take the notebook and leave while she

still had some dignity left. He had been nothing but kind to her and she had been nothing but rude to him. Lisa got up from the couch with the intent to end her embarrassment by heading straight for the door, but when she opened the door she paused. What was she doing? Just leave...but she couldn't. She could feel Michael's eyes on her back. She turned to him, but couldn't hold his look.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to take a look at this stuff."

She glanced over to him sitting at his desk. Michael smiled warmly. He knew it had been very difficult for her to make that simple goodwill gesture. Lisa turned to leave.

"Just promise me one thing," Michael stated. Lisa ducked backed inside the door, with a look that said, "Now what?" He had a very serious look on his face.

"Don't make a move without me."

Lisa thought a moment and made an attempt to speak, but Michael interrupted.

"I have already read the folder, while you were sleeping, and as the information was coming in. I'm not an expert and I don't know for sure, but this could involve organized crime. If it is, there are dangers involved here that you just don't understand."

Lisa was visibly taken aback.

"Organized crime? My brother?"

"I don't believe he was involved, just unlucky and even that is speculation on my part, based on what I know of Kenny. Truth is, nothing I know is certain right now. I am making a few assumptions solely based off of the information in this folder, so please read it. It isn't even near concrete enough to take to the police, but my people continue to work on it even as we speak."

In the short time Michael had spent with Lisa that day, one thing was obvious, she prided herself on being tough and independent. At the mention of organized crime, though, she was just plain scared, and she could not hide it. Michael saw it and hoped it would be enough to keep her from doing something stupid and getting herself killed. He had already lost a friend, he didn't want to lose...whatever she was becoming to him.

"Will you call me after you have reviewed the information?" he asked.

She had no choice now, she had to read it.

"Yeah, I'll call you when I'm done." She was still rattled, but determined.

"Good, and try to get some sleep."

"I will, thank you," she answered and was gone.

Michael took a few minutes to ponder the day's events. What kind of a mess was he

getting involved in? It wasn't just her beauty luring him in, striking as she was. He had managed to get emotionally attached to this woman in less than a day. And her eyes, there was a fire ablaze in those eyes that awoke something very personal from his past, something extremely painful. He made his way over to the lounge area in his office once again, this time he sat on the couch instead of sitting in his favorite chair. The couch was still warm from Lisa sleeping there. He pushed aside his own pain of how he lost his parents, not wanting to deal with it at the moment. Instead, he thought about Kenny. What a waste. It angered him that something this awful had happened to such a good young man, even though he knew bad things happened to good people all the time.

He lay down on the couch, in the warmth of Lisa's former touch. It angered him that something so devastating could happen to such a nice family, even though he knew that bad things happened to good families all the time. What about Kenny's family? Why did they only kill him? Wouldn't they want to get rid of witnesses? According to Lisa, they were all there. They should probably all be dead, but Michael was very thankful that Lisa was alive. He shook off where those thoughts would take him and once again concentrated on the mystery of Kenny's death.

He thought about the day before, when he offered Kenny a job. Frank had not shown up for his meeting with Michael on the dock. He had asked Kenny to go find Frank and tell him he was waiting for him and Kenny soon came out to the docks very nervous, and then there were the two big guys in business suits.

Michael thought for a moment and realized that if Kenny had stumbled across those two men killing Frank, it was because he sent him to retrieve Frank. He was beginning to feel emotionally drained, as well, and he was so tired he could barely stay awake. He didn't even remember lying down.

Michael had been friends with Kenny, not great friends, but friends, and he may have sent him to his death; and now there was Lisa. Too many emotional attachments.

He knew better than to get emotionally attached to anyone. People had a tendency to disappoint or disappear...or die. If you don't get attached, you don't get hurt.

This was going to be trouble if he didn't stay away.

Michael was drifting now, ever so close to sleep. He was struggling between awake and asleep. It probably wouldn't matter, he seriously doubted if he would ever hear from Lisa again. As he fell asleep he wished he would get to see Lisa many more times. Then, Michael dreamed.

CHAPTER 4

Derrick was up at the crack of dawn, not that he had any choice in the matter. Even with the padded mat he found in the bushes the previous night, the water tank didn't exactly provide a night of comfort and rest. Then there was the beautiful California sun, introducing itself to the displaced outlaw for the first time even though he was now beginning his eighth day in the golden state, shining warmth on his face. Not to be outdone, of course, were the sounds of a big city coming to life with the dawning of a new day. He certainly wouldn't complain about the sun, it was a welcome sight after all the rain he had seen since he arrived in LA. With the extra layers of clothing he wore through the night, he was beginning to feel like a Thanksgiving Day turkey, and the sun was quickly gaining strength. He disrobed from the extra layers and packed them into his duffle bag. Had he only slept for fifteen or twenty minutes? He had the slightest thought of dreaming, although he couldn't remember it, so he must have slept longer.

There is nothing more annoying than not being able to remember a dream, especially when the shades of remembrance are just out of your grasp. Oddly, he felt like something very sad had happened in his dream, but he couldn't quite recall what it was, and he was too tired to pursue more than a cursory recollection. Most of the night had been spent in fitful slumber, mostly because of the cold. He did wish he could recall his dream, though, because at least then he would have some proof of sleep.

Well, it was a new day and he had to hit the pavement and find a place to stay. He looked around at his surroundings...he actually slept outside. The truth of the matter was, he was homeless. He needed housing and he needed it now. He glanced up at the house on top of the hill. Whatever it took, he would not sleep outside again.

Derek stuffed his duffle bag under a bush and took off in pursuit of a residence. He spent most of the day searching every publication he could get his hands on, but to no avail, so he was on the bus to UCLA once again. Derrick looked out the window of the bus as all the beautiful houses raced by his view. Maybe he just wasn't meant to be anything but a criminal. He could rob a place, just jewelry and cash, take the stuff to a

pawn shop and be in an apartment by the end of the day. If he got caught, he would be extradited back to Cleveland and put away for a very long time.

Then again, he had become a good criminal and the chances of getting caught were small. There were ways around alarms, even without the good equipment. It called for an empty house, a big rock, knowing exactly what you're looking for, and a pre-planned getaway route.

However, this was Los Angeles and he didn't have any connections, so he would have to work small and learn the area. All the work it took him to put together his connections in Cleveland and it was all gone. Derrick felt small-time burglary was a waste of his talents, but he would have to be patient until he established a reputation out here. Things would be a lot different in LA. He suddenly realized he was thinking as if he had already decided to get back in the game. As the bus arrived to take him to UCLA, he dismissed his planning as preparation for the inevitable.

"Finally." He actually had a lead on a place to stay. There was an ad in the student paper for a garage for rent. It was just a garage, but at this point, he would take just about anything. Besides, it was the only thing close to his price range. He no longer had an activated cell, worried about using his real name to sign up for a plan. He really needed to get a new identity. Derrick found the nearest pay phone and talked to the man renting the garage and was soon on his way to see it. The place was in North Hollywood and even though it was in a less than pleasant neighborhood, it was just what he had been looking for...a deal.

He paid four hundred dollars for six weeks, under the stipulation that he clean out the garage and fix it up to be lived in, presumably for the next sucker. The guy hadn't been able to be there till 9:30 at night to show it, but eventually Derrick got it and that's what counted. However, by the time he saw the space, discussed the terms, agreed on the price, and filled out the lease papers amateurishly put together, it was now just after 11:30 p.m.

The problem was the garage was completely full of junk, which was the reason he got the deal in the first place. He was sure the next person who lived there would pay more because of his efforts. Derrick stood in front of the now open garage, faced with a

mountain of little more than refuse, so much that he couldn't even squeeze in a little cove somewhere to sleep. The grim reality was he couldn't stay the night in the garage because it would take him half the night just to clean it enough to sleep in. Not to mention the noise of moving things around would probably make the neighbors angry and he would have to ask Fred where to put everything. He would not be sleeping in the garage this night.

So, once again he was faced with a night of having no place to sleep. He asked about sleeping on the couch, but apparently that space was currently taken. He just stood there looking at Fred for a few seconds waiting for the punch line, but apparently he was serious. The man was renting every open space in the place to make money. That was why he couldn't show the place to Derrick until nighttime, he didn't want any of the neighbors to get suspicious and report him. Derrick didn't mention that someone was bound to notice how many different people were going in and out of the apartment. At the very least they would probably think he was a drug dealer, but he figured it wasn't any of his business and he wasn't expecting to be there long anyway. Things were either going to turn around for him or he was going to get back into the game, that much he was now resigned to accepting. Either way, he would be into his own place before the six weeks were up.

He jumped on the bus with the thought of another night outside heavy on his mind. Tomorrow, he would clean the garage to make it livable and then work on finding a job. The bus pulled up to a red light and stopped. Derrick looked out the window of the bus and saw a hot girl in the car beside the bus. He certainly could go for one of those, actually, both of those, the car and the girl. Then an idea came to mind, *Of course*, he thought, *why didn't I think of that before?*

Derrick got off the bus in Hollywood where he had seen some clubs earlier. He couldn't really afford to spend any money because of his depleted funds, but there was a cover charge everywhere. It appeared most of the clubs on this strip were rocker bars, so he chose the closest one, and just his luck he ended up in a hard rock bar. Not his style, but at least rocker chicks had a reputation for being hot and loose. Besides, even though he would have fun doing it, tonight was business.

He sat at the bar at The Roxy and reluctantly bought a beer for six dollars. *Are you kidding me?* He thought angrily. He chose a position at the end of the bar, easy to be seen, and drank very slowly. It wasn't long before a tall blond girl came by and walked

straight up to Derrick and stopped, making the extra effort to size him up from head to toe, and then leaned close and yelled over the music, “You don’t look like you belong.” The music had reached the point of annoyance, even in the short time he was there. Now, it was making it very difficult to hear this big-breasted woman, clad completely in leather. She was apparently being a smart-ass. Derrick looked at his drink and gave it a smirk, and then he turned and returned the same evaluation to the girl as she had given him. With his finger he motioned her to come closer, “Tell you what, why don’t you share some of your leather with me, then I’ll fit in and you’ll have less on. It’ll make both of us happy.” She smiled and answered, “Cute, what’s your name?” Derrick smiled and thought, *Five minutes, a new record.*

“I’m sure we can work something out, Tiny.”

“Thanks Fred, and, uh, hey, if you need me to kick anybody’s ass, just let me know.”

Fred was an entrepreneur of a different sort. He had already come very close once before to being busted for running a less-than-legit escort service, so he had been trying to think of a new scheme with less risk. That was when a chance of a lifetime came his way. One of his ex-wives knew the owner of a small apartment complex in North Hollywood who had just fired his apartment manager. He no longer wanted to pay a guy for managing a complex of only nine apartments, one of which was the apartment the manager lived in for free. All that was really needed was for someone to collect the rent each month and just keep an eye on the place. Fred got a bright idea and convinced his ex-wife Carrie that they could live there together and make money off the place by renting it out like a hotel.

Carrie didn’t want to get a real job any more than Fred did, so she talked to her friend about them living there, and since her friend had already decided he didn’t want a real apartment manager, he gave Fred and Carrie the manager’s apartment for half price and in exchange they would unofficially look after the place. The owner was happy because now he was saving money by not paying them to be full-time managers, and he was going to get half rent from the apartment. It was an added bonus that he still would never have to go and look after the place himself. All of this made Fred supremely happy because the owner would never check in, which was very important for what he had

planned.

Fred had been married four times and Carrie was number three. Carrie had been married five times and was currently engaged to a man in prison. Sleeping with her fourth husband Fred was just a way to keep up appearances for her friend who rented them the apartment. Fred originally met Carrie when he hired her into his escort service. They married, but he later divorced her for another of his lady employees. Even so, they remained friends after their divorce and talked from time to time. After all, they ran in the same biker circles. It was Jerry Springer heaven.

But that was all in the past now, and this was an opportunity for them both to get back on their feet. They now had a two bedroom apartment with a den and a garage. They put two bunk-beds in the second bedroom and kept the master bedroom for themselves. Before long, they had the two bunk beds filled and some guy from Greece had paid extra to have the den to himself. He had just moved to America and was trying to save money while he started his own business. Fred didn't care, he only saw dollar signs. He had even rented the couch to an old man for \$50 a week. The old man didn't work anymore but even when he had worked it was mostly part-time as a repairman, so he had no pension and very little money, which meant he couldn't afford one of the beds. In fact, he could even afford the couch, but his brother reluctantly paid the \$50 dollars a week.

The old man had been living at his brother's house for about half a year, but his brother's wife and kids wanted him out. Who knows what the guy did, nobody was talking and though Fred was dying of curiosity on that one, he couldn't get the old man's brother to tell him. He told them he needed to know so he could decide whether or not the old man could stay, because he didn't want any trouble. The brother reminded Fred he was running a hotel out of his apartment and suggested they leave it at that. Fred agreed. Besides, he had just rented the garage to some kid, so the "hotel" was now full. He would have a monthly income larger than any job he would ever be able to get and he didn't have to do a thing. He couldn't believe his luck, and then it got even better.

His old friend, Tiny, from the biker town where Fred grew up, and Tiny's girlfriend had just shown up out of the blue. They had fallen on hard times and were sleeping in Tiny's van when Tiny heard Fred had a place. So, here they were. Out of the kindness of his heart Fred was willing to rent them a space on his living room floor. Then Tiny asked him if he could help out his friend, as well. Apparently, they were sleeping in the park. Fred knew who his friend was and he didn't particularly like him. The guy was known as

“Maddog” and had a reputation of being a little crazy, but it was a chance for him to make even more money than he had originally planned. The problem was he didn’t have any more space available. He thought about changing the deal with the kid in the garage, but the kid probably had more money than those ingrates, so that wasn’t going to work.

Fred was looking out the window toward the back of the lot, as he contemplated removing the table from the dining area and letting Maddog and his girlfriend sleep on the floor in there, when he noticed a small tool shed or something that used to resemble a tool shed in the back area. It was within the apartment property line on the other side of the driveway. It was a mess, very small, and the roof had caved in, but it had four walls, even though there were probably rats living in the place. They could always clean it out and put a cover over the roof. It was better than living in the park, barely. All of the neighboring apartments were out front, and there was just an open field behind them, so there was a pretty good chance no one would see them living in the shed. What the hell, they could have it if they wanted it, it didn’t matter to him. It was all bonus money. Fred told Tiny it was all he had. Tiny talked to his friend later that day and surprisingly, Maddog said he wanted it.

“Not bad,” Derrick said to the blond as he began to browse her apartment.

“Yeah, well, it never hurts to have a rich daddy, does it?” She sounded angry and bitter at her father for something, but Derrick had a little trouble feeling sorry for daddy’s spoiled little brat. He wasn’t the type to waste words on anyone, especially a poor little rich girl looking for pity because her life was so difficult.

He started to turn toward her while taking off his coat, only to be confronted with a barrage of kisses. The blond was trying to help him take off his clothes and lead him to the bedroom at the same time. Before long she was on top of him, on her bed. He was down to his underwear, but she was still fully adorned in skin-tight leather.

She climbed off of him, went over to her stereo and pushed the “on” button, literally and figuratively Derrick mused. Then she began to gyrate her hips very seductively to the hard rock music and proceeded to give him a strip show. He enjoyed the performance and before long the girl was now down to just her G-string and provocatively danced her way over to the bed. He looked up at her and smiled, “This could get nasty.” She smiled

and climbed on the bed, “It better.”

Eventually, when it was all over, Derrick lay there quite pleased, but then he considered his stupidity. If he had thought of this earlier he would have been living good and having all the sex he wanted. He had too much pride to let a girl take care of him, but under the circumstances, this could be useful. He had a place to stay now, the garage, but it was hardly ideal. He looked at the blond who was fast asleep and decided the perks were definitely much better with her. For the first time since he arrived in Los Angeles he could truly relax and enjoy a nice long sleep, which came to him quickly after the previous night’s unsatisfactory doze and a long tiring day of looking for places. Derrick fell into a deep sleep...and dreamed.

CHAPTER 5

“Mr. Deshay, Miss Johnson is her to see you.”

“Thank you Miss Jenkins, please send her in.”

Judy could hear the strain of the last two days in Michael’s voice. He tried to remain cheerful and pleasant, but she could tell he was tired. Judy had worked for Michael since almost the beginning of his business, when he was selling donuts wholesale to mini-marts. His little venture had grown quickly enough for him to hire a secretary as soon as he graduated high school and become a full time businessman; he had been so young then. She had never had a job before, had never needed one, because her husband had taken very good care of her. At least she thought he did. The reality was they had lived above their means, unbeknownst to her, and their debt became formidable. At his death, the responsibility became her albatross. She lost everything. The big house, the cars, the vacation house, everything except a few keepsakes from her husband, for she was forced to sell it all. Once Michael hired her, she worked very hard, and eventually paid the balance. She still loved and missed her dearly departed.

However, just after her husband’s passing, she had been a forty-five year old homemaker who needed a job, but didn’t have any experience. Michael needed a secretary, but couldn’t pay much at the time. She went to the job interview, expecting to get turned down, yet again. He gave her the interview, expecting to be told once again that he didn’t pay enough. It was a perfect match.

As Michael became more and more successful, he was able to give Judy generous raises and continuously hire more employees. Despite his young age, his employees respected and admired his business skills and he was considered a fair and honest employer. Many of his original employees still worked for him and became integral parts of his management team.

Judy was special, though, and they became very close. Michael more or less adopted her as a second mom, or she adopted him as the son she never had. Either way, it worked out well for both of them.

Judy opened the door to Michael's office and led Lisa Johnson inside. Lisa had read the file Michael put together and was very impressed, but she still didn't feel right about the situation. Yes, this man could help, she was now convinced of his resources. His money and contacts could get them information she never could on her own, but that wasn't the only reason she had come back. Her guilt for wanting to see him again remained, but did not keep her away.

"Miss Johnson, please come in," Michael invited, gesturing to the lounge area.

"Thank you, Mr. Deshay," she answered politely.

Lisa walked in and sat down on the couch in the same spot she had slept the day before. There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence.

Judy looked at the two of them and smiled. She already knew what they both were trying so hard to avoid. She just wished it was under more amiable circumstances.

"If there's nothing else, Mr. Deshay?" Michael detected the subtle sarcasm put on the saying of his name and although it didn't surprise him, he was still a little embarrassed. Judy noticed his attraction to Lisa so easily. He could only hope he wasn't as transparent to Lisa. It just wasn't the right circumstances to think about her in a romantic light.

Michael gave Judy the semi-evil eye as he answered, "No, Judy, that's all, thank you."

Judy departed and Michael turned nervously to Lisa. He wasn't exactly sure how to begin, so he paused a moment to collect his thoughts. When he had finally settled on a conversation starter, Lisa took the initiative.

"Mr. Deshay, I think it's only fair that I be completely honest with you, since we are going to be partners." She caught Michael off guard with the partners reference. He was so surprised he hardly noticed her aggressive posture. She was pleased by his surprise because it gave her control of the situation.

Upon entering his office she had been nervous, scared, and unsure of herself. She had a speech prepared to unequivocally declare their relationship as business only, but up until her first words, she didn't know if she could pull it off. It was less than forty eight hours since she lost her brother and she would not allow an attraction to Michael. She would fight familiarity at all cost, and thus remain free of the associated guilt.

"Partners?" Michael inquired, raising his eyebrows.

Damn, Lisa thought. She was supposed to continue straight through her speech, not allowing any interruptions, in order to keep control of the conversation. She had been sidetracked for only a moment and he pounced on the chance to get the control back. She

could hear it in his voice. By announcing they would be partners, she admitted he had done good putting together information in the folder and now he had the control and she struggled to get it back.

“Yes, well...I, uh,” and now she had lost her place in her speech. She must not allow him to have control. *Forget the speech*, she rebuked inwardly and took a deep breathe.

“Mr. Deshay, I’m sure you’re a nice guy or else my brother wouldn’t have been friends with you.” Her voice sounded strong, but inside she was shaking. It was still very difficult to mention her brother without getting emotional. Once again, she used all of her inner fortitude to maintain control of her feelings.

“This is strictly business for me, I’m not looking to make any friends here. I just want to find out who is responsible for my brother’s murder and make them pay.” There, she said it. It wasn’t as polished as she had practiced, but at least she maintained control.

Michael sat there, considering what she had stated, holding eye contact with her the entire time, knowing that would be the only way he would find out what she truly felt. He wasn’t sure of everything, but he had an idea what was going on inside that beautiful head of hers. He believed she was scared. She tried to maintain a tough exterior, but she was scared to death inside. It was understandable, but not practical.

“I’m afraid that’s not good enough, Miss Johnson.”

“What?” she asked coldly. “What do you mean that’s not good enough?”

“Your brother was a friend of mine and was supposed to become my protégé.” He could see the emotion building in Lisa. He considered pursuing gently, for her sake, but instinct told him to be direct. Not ruthless, just direct.

“Kenny and I had a lot in common, so it would have been impossible for the two of us not to become friends. If you’re going to spend all your energy trying not to become friends with me, then we’re wasting our time. Lisa, this isn’t going to be easy. We’re not going to go out tomorrow and find some secret letter or tape that says, ‘I killed Kenny Johnson’ on it. Most of the time will probably be spent looking into dead ends and this could become a long, tedious, painful process. I can guarantee it is going to stretch your emotions further than you ever thought possible. Whether or not you become friends with me should be the least of our worries, but if it happens, it happens.

“I am not the enemy and you are not here to fight me. Partners mean we work together, it means we could very well become friends. It means we must concentrate on business, but not get sidetracked from that business by trying to avoid being friends.”

Michael paused a moment, fearing that he had pressed a little too hard. He had negotiated many tough business deals in these very seats. He was an expert in word manipulation to make the client see his way was best and therefore seal the deal. Sometimes that meant going easy and taking his time, and sometimes it meant a straightforward approach, laying everything on the line right from the outset of the meeting. It all depended on the client, and he was very good at determining which approach worked best for which client.

Lisa was not a client, but he used every skill he had to assist him in determining the best approach to working with her. Yet, he was more unsure about her than any client he ever had. She was a very honest, upfront woman, and he liked that. He respected her honesty because that was the same way he did business. But she had tragedy to contend with and that had a way of scrambling your normal thought process.

Michael sat back in his favorite chair, respectfully silent as Lisa considered his words. She looked down at her hands and made a conscious effort to control her temperament. She didn't really mean to have an attitude toward Michael, it was her misguided way of handling Kenny's death. Besides, she wasn't worried about becoming friends with him, she was worried about where being friends would lead. She would just have to make sure nothing more than friendship surfaced. She would be his partner and she would keep her mind focused on the task at hand, and that was it.

"Alright Mr. Deshay, all pretenses are off," she sighed. "You give me a clean slate and I'll give you a clean slate. I'm afraid, under the current circumstance, that's probably the best I can offer you."

She looked tired. Perhaps exhausted was a more suitable term. She was physically and emotionally drained and they had barely started this difficult endeavor.

"Fair enough." Michael felt saddened when he looked at her and he felt partially responsible for her mental fatigue. At least they had a fresh start now.

"Well, now that we got all of that out of the way, I guess the next step for us would be to dispense from all the formalities. Yesterday, when I asked you to call me Michael, I didn't just mean for that day. I think it would make things much simpler if we stop all the Mr. and Miss stuff, please call me Michael."

Lisa smiled. "O.K."

Lisa looked into Michael's eyes. *He is a good man*, she thought, and was able to relax a little.

“I think that’s a good idea and I’m sure we’ll get along fine,” she said.

Michael suddenly felt much better about this whole arrangement. He had just started to question his involvement in the peculiar situation once again, but then she smiled and everything suddenly became all right.

“I’m sure we will,” he agreed and returned a smile.

“Hey, isn’t that chick the sister of that kid you killed!”

Joseph had already noticed Lisa Johnson come out of Michael Deshay’s office building with the man himself walking at her side. Jeffrey was a little slow, but not bad.

“Interesting,” Joseph said meaningfully intrinsic. Jeffrey looked at him and innocently wondered why his training with Joseph didn’t include him sharing his thoughts. How else was he going to learn whatever he was supposed to be learning? He wasn’t willing to ask, though. Joseph came back from deep thought, somewhat surprised to see Jeffrey sitting in the driver’s seat of the BMW 5M, as if he had completely forgotten about him.

“I will not have time to explain everything to you as I go, so try and learn as much as you can by observing.” Only time would tell if he was asking too much of Jeffrey.

“That’s cool,” Jeffrey answered, eerily wondering how the guy always seemed to know what he was thinking.

The two hit men got out of the BMW and crossed the street. Jeffrey began walking north on the pathway, as if to follow Michael Deshay and the girl, only to find he was traveling in the opposite direction of Joseph. He hurried to catch up to his unusual teacher as they entered the Deshay Enterprises building, opening his mouth to speak.

“I suggested you observe, not decide,” Joseph said.

“Sorry, dude.” Jeffrey felt like a scolded child once again, but now he was getting used to it. Joseph stopped inside the lobby of the building and just stood there staring coldly at Jeffrey. Jeffrey stilled and waited, confused and uncomfortable for what seemed like an hour, but then realized why Joseph gave him such a menacing stare.

“I mean, sorry Joseph.”

“Better, except never apologize.”

Joseph took a step toward the elevators, then stopped and turned back to Jeffrey.

“Better yet, never have to apologize.” Jeffrey nodded. His training had become the greatest challenge of his life.

“Excuse me, ma’am.”

Judy was startled by the bold, but smooth voice before her. She hadn’t even heard anyone enter through the glass doors.

“Uh, yes? May I help you?” She regained control quickly.

“I am here to see Mr. Deshay,” he stated. Although polite, in a weird sort of way the stated sentence sounded more like a command. Or, perhaps, it was the man himself whose presence made the command.

“Mr. Deshay is not in at the moment, may I take a message?” she asked pleasantly.

“No, that won’t be necessary, thank you.” The man smiled and turned to leave.

“May I ask your name so I can tell him you stopped by?”

Joseph turned back. “Well, he doesn’t know me,” the man began.

The longer he was in the office, the more Judy became uneasy.

“My name is Matthew Barlow from Heritage Computer Products and Lisa Johnson works in my department. Her mother called and told me about the unfortunate death of her brother and we are a very close knit group, so everyone at work is a little worried about her. As the boss, I was voted as the representative to hand deliver her care package and let her know we all have her in our prayers. Her mother told me I would probably find her here. She is a bit worried about Lisa, as well.”

Acting as though he cared was probably the hardest part of the job for Joseph, although he did enjoy the deception.

“That’s very kind of you, Mr. Barlow,” Judy said, wondering if he had mistakenly left the care package in his car. “Unfortunately, I wouldn’t expect the two of them back today.” Judy appeared truly sorry, which added to his satisfaction.

“Oh? I was hoping they would be back from lunch by now.” He was feeling more and more confident he would get the information he needed.

“Well, they were going to a late lunch I believe, but Mr. Deshay told me he had business to take care of and did not expect to be back. I could try him on his cell phone.”

“No, thank you, you’ve been more than helpful. I’m sure Lisa will contact us when

she's ready. Thank you, again." Joseph turned to leave, smug with the information he came after.

"You're welcome Mr. Barlow. And don't worry, Miss Johnson is a strong woman, I'm sure she'll be back to work soon," she said in her ever encouraging way.

Joseph stopped and turned slightly toward Judy with a half-smile, "Oh, I'm sure she will," he answered and was out the door.

It was a good thing Judy watched him go or she would not have noticed his departure either, for his exit was as silent as his entrance. Not understanding why, she felt relief once he was out of sight.

As instructed, Jeffrey had remained down the hall. "So what did you find out, dude?"

Once again, Joseph had forgotten about his obnoxious apprentice and ignored his annoying destruction of the English language, this time. "I found out things are progressing just as I anticipated."

"Cool, how's that?" Jeffrey inquired.

"Connections of mine have reported someone seeking information about the death of the kid and that useless fat slob at the docks. They were sure it wasn't the cops. Now I know it was Michael Deshay and his pretty little side-kick. I expect they will be spending quite a lot of time together." Joseph thought he was laying matters out simply enough for Jeffrey, but he stared blankly at the floor.

"Yeah," Jeffrey said without confidence.

"Remember how much trouble we had with her when we went to the kid's house?" Joseph asked with a bit of irritation in his voice. Jeffrey didn't notice, he was in deep thought. "Yeah, she was a real fighter," he remembered, absentmindedly covering his crotch protectively. Then he figured it out. He actually understood what Joseph was getting at. "Oh," he exclaimed proudly with excitement.

"Yes," Joseph began, "she won't let matters rest, I'm sure of it. Just watching her these last two days I am sure she expects to get revenge."

Jeffrey added excitedly, "She will actually come after us."

Joseph was thinking again. "Yes she will, and she is a beautiful woman. The poor guy has no idea what she's leading him into."

"I hope they hurry, this could get real fun."

Joseph looked over to him. "Well, maybe we should help them along."

Once again, Jeffrey felt a chill, except this time he smiled.

It had been a long morning, and now the banging on his office door just about put Jerry over the edge of the sanity cliff. He was already in a bad mood, even though it was mostly due to the phone ringing constantly. Any interruption, at this point, became a nuisance. Everybody wanted to know if Frank's death was going to hold up their order. *Nobody cares the poor sap is dead*, he thought, *they just want their damn orders*.

Jerry liked the raise he got for taking Frank's position, but he just wasn't made for office work. Over the years he had become pretty good with numbers, at least those that pertained to his job as Shipping Manager. Frank's job wasn't much more difficult, there was just a lot more of it to do.

"Who is it?" he yelled, no longer caring for tact, not that he was ever the most congenial person.

"It's Michael Deshay," the annoying disturbance answered.

He had forgotten "his royal highness" was stopping by after lunch. "Come in," he replied, less than inviting.

"I thought I recognized that voice. When I called, the secretary said the boss was at lunch, but she didn't say who the boss was."

"Yeah, well, I thought I had finally got my due, but after one day I'm already about to give up pushing papers and get back down to the warehouse."

Michael appraised Jerry's office, which was best described as a disaster area. His desk had paper scrambled everywhere, in clumps. It looked as if Jerry was a wino collecting material to sleep on.

Michael sought to be encouraging, "Pushing papers is boring and tedious, but you'll get used to it. Once you get organized it will be a piece of cake. In fact, you might want to hire a temp secretary to speed up the organization process."

"Yeah, that's all I need, some ditzzy blond getting in my way. Come to think of it, a ditzzy blond ain't such a bad idea," Jerry said thoughtfully as he glanced at Lisa. "Sorry, miss," he apologized without conviction, sizing her up and down approvingly.

Lisa ignored his apology knowing it wasn't sincere. It was obvious her disgust for the man was growing rapidly by the second.

"Jerry, this is Lisa Johnson, Kenny's older sister." Perhaps meeting Kenny's sister

would encourage Jerry to be more respectful and less obnoxious. It was a long shot.

“Oh, sorry about your brother, he was a good kid.”

“Thank you,” Lisa said shortly.

“So, Jerry, have you had a chance to go through this...heap,” Michael inquired.

“Actually, I’m very close to having this ‘heap’ organized just the way I want it.”

Jerry was looking at the papers as if wondering where to begin.

“There are a few irregularities, but other than that...” he left it hanging as he began to sift through papers.

“A few irregularities?” Michael asked.

“Ah, just some numbers crunching.”

“That happens to be my specialty, maybe I can help?” Michael inquired innocently, not wanting to let on it was information he was after. Jerry looked at him speculatively. He shouldn’t tell anyone, but the guy was highly successful...maybe he could help.

“Well, I can account for nearly every dime that went in and out of here, as far as merchandise goes, over the last five years. I was in charge of the shipping and receiving before Frank bought the farm, so that part was easy, but then there seems to be money missing from the profits out of nowhere.” He began shuffling through papers.

Considering the circumstances, those numbers could be useful information, but Michael continued to play his interest as casual conversation about Jerry’s new position.

“Well, I wouldn’t worry about it, I’m sure it’s there someplace, or you could check with the bank. They are likely to have records of everything you need.”

“I called and they do, but...this is information I should not be discussing with you.” His guilt tugged at him ever so slightly, but then he realized there was a chance to make a few extra bucks. Michael Deshay’s innocent act didn’t fool him for a minute. *Are you freakin’ kidding me, I’m Italian, I can smell a hustle a mile away.*

So there’s more to Jerry than meets the eye, Michael thought. Not only had he already been more thorough with his paperwork than Michael would have expected, but the man had discovered his attempt to gather information.

“C’mon Jerry, it’s just between us old friends,” Michael said as he raised a one hundred dollar bill.

“Yeah well, I’m starting to believe its easy money that got Frank in trouble.”

“Really, what makes you say that?”

Jerry looked at Lisa with a frown that said she wasn’t invited into the conversation.

She rolled her eyes and looked at Michael. He gave her a look that said they were about to go down in flames if she didn't learn to be nice to this male chauvinist pig. She gritted her teeth and forced a smile. Michael smiled back at her to encourage more friendliness. She attempted to relax and turned toward Jerry as she donned an innocent smile and sat on the side of the desk. Jerry's eyebrows rose as he noticed her long legs.

"Jerry, just between the three of us, what were you saying about those irregularities?"

The ploy worked initially, for Jerry was definitely sidetracked for a moment, but he recovered well. He looked up at Lisa and then at Michael, then he looked at the one hundred dollar bill Michael was still holding up. Jerry knew he wasn't in the girl's league, he wasn't that big of an idiot to have any delusions of grandeur, not that he cared, those were some great legs. He was going to take the money and give them the information anyway, but at least he got to look at a great set of legs in the process.

"Yeah, well..." Jerry reached out and snagged the hundred dollar bill and then looked at Lisa like he actually had a chance with her. He did that just to piss her off; it was obvious she didn't like him. "As I said, I can account for nearly every dime that went in and out of here, as far as merchandise goes. But there are chunks of money, small and large, that disappear with little to no explanation. I talked to the bank and they have the same records I have."

He picked up a piece of paper and looked at it speculatively. Michael produced another hundred dollar bill. Jerry wasn't exactly hurting for money, but a hundred dollar bill was a hundred dollar bill and if he worked it right, he would have a decent little collection gathered by the end of this meeting. A bonus would be if the hot shot kid could help him figure out this mess. On further consideration, the pretty lady's legs were the bonus, but he would try to get the kid to help him anyway.

"There are notations for items the business needs or suggested investments to be made, but the dollar amounts for the purchases and sometimes non-purchases just don't make sense, so I must be missing something. If I could make heads or tails out of this mess I might be able to find the missing money." He looked disgusted with his desk once again. "I told them I was good with numbers, but I'm not a miracle worker."

Michael and Lisa shared a meaningful look. The reason for Frank's death was obvious, but still incomplete. They needed to know more about the missing money, so Michael pressed for more information.

"How much are in these chunks you were talking about?"

Jerry hesitated. “Well, I’m not sure I should share that.”

Michael held up another one hundred dollar bill. “Why don’t you just say it will cost me another hundred?” Jerry took the money with a feigned look of hurt feelings.

“You should know a man can never have too many friends.” He looked back to the pile of papers on the desk. He sifted around a little and came up with the paper he was looking for underneath one of the many disheveled stacks. Michael was amazed Jerry could find anything amidst his untidy work area.

“The bank has records dating back two years ago that would be of a consistent pattern to what I’ve discovered over the last few months. These chunks of money seem to start at five grand and go as high as fifty grand. It appears early on the amounts were usually between five and ten grand, but gradually increased and by the last three months they were almost always between thirty and fifty grand. I’ve totaled the entire amount at just over two mil.”

“Oh my goodness!” Lisa exclaimed. “What was it for?”

“Who knows,” Jerry said. “I’m thinking I don’t want to know.”

Michael stood for a moment in thought. He didn’t really mean it to be heard, but said lightly, “You probably don’t.”

Jerry and Lisa both regarded him with their own moment of speculation.

Michael felt their scrutiny. He knew he would end up sharing most of his thoughts with Lisa, but he didn’t want to get Jerry involved. He had a bad feeling Jerry had been hand picked for this position because they thought he would be easy to manipulate. He was hopeful it was because they believed he wasn’t smart enough to catch on to what had really been going on around this place. Jerry’s stupidity could keep him alive.

“So what do you think is the deal with the money?” Jerry asked, curious to see if Michael was as smart as he acted.

“It’s hard to say without being able to see the records,” Michael began, knowing that would never happen, “but off the top of my head, I think you should go back to those bank records again. A company doing as much business as Import Goods would have so many different records of deposits and credits, and it is possible that Frank had lost track of some of the money needed for other areas of the business.” Michael knew this was only half true. What he didn’t say was that Frank probably increased bank activity on purpose to make it more difficult for the company accountant to match bank records to different company expenses or purchases or whatever it was that Frank was using to help

him embezzle money. That much was obvious...Frank was embezzling money and it got him killed. Michael could very easily help Jerry solve his little money mystery, but he truly felt it best that Jerry not figure it out. Whoever was behind this would reveal what they wanted Jerry to know and not know.

Jerry thought for a moment. He agreed with the kid about going back to the bank records, but he also felt like Michael wasn't telling him everything he knew.

Michael asked, "Anything else interesting?"

Jerry smiled. "You two are up to no good, aren't you?" Lisa had already moved from Jerry's desk and was now standing back in her original position. She looked at Michael, but he just smiled back at Jerry.

"Like you said, you probably don't want to know."

Jerry lost his smile. "Right. Well, you keep me out of it. I'm just going to do what they tell me and keep my nose out of any business that doesn't concern my job." He held up the paper with the financial figures on it and hesitated with an innocent glance to Michael, "But there is something interesting." Michael produced another hundred.

"Frank got greedy. He might even have pulled off his little scheme if he had stayed small time. I'm not greedy though, I don't have to be rich. I'm happy with my set up here, so, I think you two should probably go before your little Sherlock Holmes escapade gets me killed.

So, he did know. The question was how much.

"Don't worry Jerry, we're not going to get you involved. There's probably not even anything to get involved in, and we were leaving now anyway." He pulled out another hundred. "So, is there anything else you can think of as we're leaving?"

Jerry gave the money a hard look for a moment, and considered just how easy of a target he was. "There is one other piece of info you might be interested in." He stopped and leaned back in his chair, waiting, until Michael furnished another hundred.

Not greedy, huh? Michael thought.

"Frank managed to keep the records of everything so that these withdrawals came from the company account without showing as profit. In other words, he was skimming from the top, without them knowing. Well, at least for a while. For two years the company was making more money than they knew about. The funny thing is, it wasn't really hidden that well. I mean, I'm no genius, but I'm good enough with numbers to tell you Frank was no genius either. At some point these guys were going to get audited and

then there would be hell to pay.”

“I see. Well, thank you Jerry and good luck in your new position.” He began to usher Lisa out the door, leaving as he had promised.

“Yeah, sure. I’m just helpful Jerry, aren’t I? First the cops, then you two; at least you pay for your info.”

Michael stopped and stepped back into the office, “Did you give the cops the same info you just gave us?”

“Not the first pair. I had only just started through this mess when they came by, but I told the second pair of detectives that money was missing, but at the time I still had a lot of papers to go through. I just found out the rest.

“There were two sets of detectives in the same day?” Lisa asked.

“Yeah, the first set came by in the morning yesterday and the second set came by later in the afternoon. That second set were arrogant S.O.B.’s. Big guys with real expensive suits, so I figured they were probably the bosses, I hear those guys get paid pretty good nowadays. I guess it’s only fair, putting their life on the line and all.”

“Yes, they do,” Michael said, waiting to see if Jerry would offer anymore information without him pressing for it. He thought it strange that two different sets of detectives would cover the same crime scene. In his experience, the bosses only came out to the crime scene if there was a positive media opportunity, and that rarely happened. He worried the wrong people could easily get to Jerry. If the enemy found out they were asking questions...well, that couldn’t be good. Jerry was still talking as Michael readied to get out of the conversation and out of that office.

“The first detectives were much more professional,” Jerry surmised.

The less Jerry knew the better, but something about the two sets of detectives bothered Michael. He needed to know if both were really detectives, then he would go.

“What do you mean they were more professional?”

“I don’t know, just the way they acted, their questions were better, too. They asked about Frank and the kid.” Jerry glanced at Lisa. “May he rest in peace. They asked about Import Goods. The assholes didn’t ask much at all, they asked if I saw anything and then they asked if you two had been by to see me.”

Jerry looked at Michael to see if that would get any reaction from him. Michael did his best to show no emotion. He was a highly successful businessman who was an expert with the poker face.

“That is weird,” Michael said. “Well, we’ll let you get back to work.”

“So how are you two mixed up in all of this?” Jerry asked.

“We’re not Jerry. Lisa just wanted to find out more about where her brother worked and the detectives have to check out everyone who knew the victims.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Jerry said unconvinced.

Michael and Lisa began to leave, and then Michael turned back again.

“Now what, I’ve given you all I know,” Jerry said.

“I almost forgot. One of the reasons I came by was to find out who was in charge, so I could make arrangements for paying for my new car. Now that I know it’s you, I don’t have to be concerned. I’ll just have someone bring the money over later, if that’s all right with you?”

“Yeah, sure, why not?”

“Great. We’ll do business with my next car.” Michael and Lisa left.

“Sure, no problem, I’ll just have someone bring by the \$300,000 cash...asshole. I could retire on what he’s going to pay for that car. Then again, look where stealing got Frank. Poor, stupid son-of-a-bitch.”

Michael’s mind was racing with ideas without quite knowing what to do next.

“You are going to tell me what’s got you so entranced in thought, aren’t you?” Lisa asked.

“Of course, I’m just trying to get things organized in my head so it all doesn’t come rambling out in as big a mess as this whole situation appears to be.”

“Ramble away, I’d like to know everything before you organize it. If you organize it in your mind, that means you’re throwing some things away that you have dismissed and if you do that we could lose something we need. Let me hear everything, even those things you consider inconsequential.”

“Yeah, alright, good idea. Well, let’s see, knowing Frank, I am fairly certain we can dismiss gambling debts as the reason for him skimming money. Although, as you said, we shouldn’t dismiss anything at this point, but I don’t see it being gambling. I would also be surprised if it turned out to be straight embezzlement, Frank was a pretty honest guy. I think there must have been a legitimate reason why he would do it.”

“Wait a minute, you were buying exotic cars from him, directly off the docks, isn’t that illegal?” Lisa asked.

“No. I mean, not everyone can, the paperwork is difficult to get through, but Frank made sure that everything was handled properly. I liked to get the European cars before that were made street legal, so I could experience them in their raw form, the way they were intended. There is a fine if I don’t have them converted for driving in the United States immediately, but I am willing to pay it, for the experience. It’s no big deal.”

“You’re polluting the air.”

“So is everyone else.”

“You’re polluting it more.”

“It’s just for two weeks, and then I pay the fine and get it street-legal.”

“That’s just like rich people, thinking only about yourselves. As if the ozone layer isn’t a big enough problem already. We have the technology for electric cars but the oil companies are too powerful, so the alternative fuels technology creeps along at a snails pace to protect big business. It’s more important that some people get rich than for them to figure out a way to be successful with alternative fuels and saving our planet.”

“I agree they should bring alternative fuels into prominence and when they do I will use them. I don’t think me driving my car for two weeks without a conversion is making that big of an impact. I’m just one guy.”

“What if everyone who owned a car could do what you’re doing? What would the pollution problem be like then?”

“But they can’t.”

“Exactly what makes you better than everyone else? Why is it O.K. for you and not for everyone else?”

Michael stopped at a red light and thought about what Lisa said. She was right, and there was no way around it. He had been acting selfish and taking advantage of his status, and now he was embarrassed, even though he felt she was blowing things out of proportion. Maybe if he just let it go.

She continued to look at him, still expecting him to answer. “Well?” she asked.

Michael turned toward her, “Well what?”

“I asked you two questions and you have yet to answer either.”

He looked innocently confused. “What?”

She looked disgusted. “I asked what do you think pollution would be like if everyone

did what you're doing and I asked what makes you better than everyone else."

"I know what you asked. I thought they were hypothetical questions."

"They weren't."

He looked at her again, surprised. "Look, can we just drop it?"

"No. I want to know what makes you better than anyone else. Is it your money?"

"Of course not."

"Then what?"

He didn't answer. He sat there, staring straight ahead at nothing in particular.

She pressed on. "What?"

Michael finally lost his temper. Some was directed at Lisa, but most of it was self-reclamation.

"Nothing. Nothing makes me better than anyone else. I was selfish and I wasn't thinking about the effects my car made on pollution."

Lisa pressed even more. "Why didn't you just say that when I asked you?"

Michael hesitated a moment. "I was embarrassed. I was embarrassed that I had acted so irresponsible and selfish. I take pride on helping my fellow man, and then I do something like this."

She knew from the moment she met him that he was a good man, but she wanted him to understand that even he could behave badly under the right circumstances. Even the man with everything could learn a lesson every now and then. She smiled, but wasn't smug, she was pleased. She had tested his mettle and he took it like a man by admitting he was wrong. *He does have potential*, she thought, then scolded herself for such thinking. She pointed toward the front of the car and said, "The lights green, for the second time."

He turned to look at the light, then looked back to her and smiled. "And now I'm wasting gas. I am a wretched soul," and drove on.

Lisa laughed, "Yes, but I think there is still hope for you."

"Well, that's reassuring."

She smiled again, but then forced herself back to business. "We were talking about Frank, and we know that he was a fairly honest guy."

Michael noticed the sarcasm and glanced over to see a mischievous grin on Lisa's face. She couldn't help herself. Michael smiled and looked back to the road.

"Yes, we know that."

Lisa continued, “Even so, we can’t dismiss that he embezzled the money, got caught, and was killed for it.”

“True. You know, I think it might be a good idea if we were to create two or three scenarios of what may have happened, based on the information we have and explore each one separately. We can add and subtract information to those scenarios and hopefully eliminate the wrong scenarios along the way until we have put together one very strong scenario for what likely happened.”

“I agree, and we probably have scenario number one already. Frank embezzled money, got greedy, got caught and died because of it. What would be scenario number two? Someone forced him to do it? That would take us back to something like a gambling debt. Someone could have blackmailed him into embezzlement to pay off a gambling debt.”

“That could work. I suppose we can’t rule out anything at this point, so let’s make that scenario number two.”

She said, “All right, now scenario number three?”

They both thought for a moment.

Michael began thinking out loud, “Well, we know he was skimming money from Import Goods.”

She added, “We know that although the bank has records of the money being taken from the accounts, he was able to hide where it was going through the paper trail.”

He picked up where she left off, “And all of this was money the company didn’t even know about.”

Lisa finished, “Yeah, they were making more money than they knew they had.” They both stopped talking to think. Through all of their discussions, she had been pointing the directions out to where she lived and now they were there.

“That’s my house on the right, the grey one with the blue car in the driveway.”

Michael pulled into the driveway, put the car in park and sat for a moment. Lisa glanced at him wondering if she should get out of the car or if she should wait to see if he had thought of something. She was just about to initiate the good-byes when he turned the car off and then turned toward Lisa.

“Bare with me a second, this may sound a little far-fetched, but we need scenario three anyway.”

“O.K.,” she encouraged.

“What if the company knew it was making more money than it thought?”

Lisa scrunched her face thinking. “What?”

“Yeah, what if the owners of Import Goods knew they were doing better than they thought? Every big company has experts that speculate what their profit margins will be when a product of theirs hits the market and there are a lot of variables that can change your intended earnings. If somewhere along the line, all of these variables lined up just right, a company could end up with more money than it ever intended. Most companies would report that money, so as not to get audited, but there are always a few who think they can hide it from the IRS and keep it for themselves. What if Import Goods was one of those? What if they went to Frank and forced him to help them hide that money, so they could embezzle it.”

Lisa thought about the possibilities. “Can they really do that?”

“They can try. I know of a few who went to jail for the attempt. Jerry said the amounts started smaller, then got bigger and bigger as time went.”

“So then the company got greedy,” she reasoned.

“That’s what I was thinking at first, but it didn’t leave any reason for Frank to die.”

“That’s true,” she agreed. She offered, “So, they got bigger because Frank was keeping some for himself.”

“Exactly,” Michael said excitedly.

“They obviously found out and killed him,” she finished.

“Yes,” he agreed. “It still seems like a very risky move for someone as conservative as Frank, unless he wanted out and was putting together the extra money so he could make a run for it.”

“Maybe,” Lisa said thoughtfully. “At any rate, I think those three scenarios give us a good place to start.” After a moment she said, “The only thing I don’t understand is, if they were going to kill Frank, shouldn’t they do it somewhere else and make it look like an accident?”

Michael answered before thinking. “They probably were going to...”

She probed hesitantly. “Then maybe Frank wasn’t dead. Maybe they were just roughing him up before taking him somewhere else to finish the job. He probably wasn’t even dead when Kenny entered.” She stopped, fighting her emotions. She had been strong all day, but now it all begun to come back again. She began to cry.

When Michael saw that she was close to losing control of her sorrow, he made a

move to comfort her, but then held back, unsure what to do. He longed to soothe her pain, but didn't know if he should.

"I'm sorry," he said as he slowly reached out to touch her shoulder. She startled at his touch, and then she gave in to her emotions about the loss of her brother and her feelings of helplessness in finding his killers. She leaned into Michael's chest for comfort as the tears continued to fall. She was falling for him and her guilt could no longer keep it from happening.

Michael accepted her collapse with gentle surprise. This was what he wanted, after all, her in his arms. He didn't want it under these circumstances, but he did want it. However, Lisa needed him to just be there for her, and that was exactly what he would do. He put his selfishness aside and made himself available to her, even if it was just a shoulder to cry on.

After some time, in the safety of Michael's arms, Lisa began to get back control of her emotions. She was embarrassed for showing weakness and worried how he would accept her for leaning on him for support. Had he lost respect for her? He was a kind man, but this may have been too much. She slowly pulled away and glanced up into his eyes, unwilling to commit too much. She needed to see if there was contempt or compassion in his eyes. She not only saw compassion, but there was something else as well. She saw the same thing in his eyes that she knew he could see in hers.

They kissed.

It was one short, sweet, but very passionate kiss.

She lost herself in the pleasure of the moment for those few brief seconds and all pain was gone. Then it was over and the formidable truth of her life came back in a rush.

"I'm sorry," was all she said and she was out of the car and running to her front door. Michael was still caught in the moment of the kiss. Lisa's abrupt departure took him by surprise at first, but he understood. He knew she had been working very hard to be strong over the loss of her brother. At least he thought that was what upset her. He hoped she wasn't upset over the kiss, for it had been such a perfect moment. She entered her house without turning around.

"It's O.K.," he thought. He pulled out of the driveway and headed home, already thinking he couldn't wait to see her tomorrow.

Just inside the door to her house, Lisa leaned up against the door, wanting to run back outside to Michael, but she must not do that. She felt chilled, but mamma always kept

the house warm. She looked down at her arms...goose bumps. She was falling in love with Michael Deshay.

Michael lay in his bed staring at the ceiling. He looked over at the neon digitals of the clock declaring it to be two in the morning. He could feel the sting in his eyes as he finally began to get tired, but still could only think about Lisa. He should be thinking about the information he received today, but every time he tried his thoughts went back to Lisa. Slowly but surely he could feel sleep finally taking him.

“Well,” he thought dreamily, “at least I’ll have good dreams tonight.”

Michael fell asleep and dreamed, but not about Lisa.

CHAPTER 6

Derrick was caught between dream and reality. In his dream he could see himself from above. No, it wasn't him, it was someone else. The man was sitting in his car and a girl was running from the car. He watched her run into a house, her house. Somehow, he knew it was her house, and she shared it with her mother and two brothers. No, one brother. Her other brother had been murdered. Derrick had been having weird dreams lately, but had been unable to remember specifics. He would remember this one.

He began to get distracted by something on the edge of his mind, but he was curious about this dream, so he tried to concentrate. The man sitting in his car; Derrick wanted to know why this man was in his dreams again. It was the same man who had been in his dreams before, and even though he couldn't remember those dreams, he knew it to be true. Who was he, and what did he have to do with him? Something began to pull him away from his dream again. *Pleasure.*

He was losing The Dream because the pleasure he felt was taking over his senses and he saw no reason to be denied of this delectation. He gave up control of The Dream and began to concentrate on the pleasure, to enjoy it. What was it? The pleasure began to become more intense. He had completely forgotten about The Dream and no longer cared. Still caught in the moment between sleep and awakening, he wondered where he was and what was happening to him. Part of him didn't care and just wanted to enjoy the moment, but another part began to feel the panic of not knowing what was happening to him. He had to wake up. He had to get control.

"Damn," he blurted out as he startled awake with all his effort. The woman from the previous night jumped back from kissing him as he slept, shocked by his outburst, and then looked at him reassuringly.

"It's O.K., baby. It's just me. I wanted to wake you up with a nice surprise."

Derrick took a moment to take in his surroundings and realized what was happening. The rocker chic had been kissing him, trying to wake him, and his body had begun to respond while he slept, thus the feeling of pleasure. He looked at the naked girl beside

him and smiled.

“It’s a good surprise.”

“Do you want me to stop?” she asked.

“Hell, no. I want you to continue, except this time with me awake, so I can enjoy it in every way.”

They kissed, which led to more vigorous activity and Derrick couldn’t help thinking, *Not a bad way to wake up.*

Derrick spent the first week in his garage cleaning and painting. He thought about staying with the rocker chick, but she had wanted to spend the day together and kept talking about all the cool things they could do together and she almost continuously played heavy metal on her radio. He liked rock music, but continuous speed metal with a needy chick constantly by your side was more than he could bear. However, he wasn’t exactly in the most comfortable of situations, so he decided to spend a couple nights a week with her while he tried to find a job and then a better place to live.

So, Derrick worked on making the garage bearable, per his agreement. Fred made up a lease agreement with everyone he rented to, trying to maintain the appearance of legality with the renters, figuring the poor people he rented to would be too ignorant to know he was taking advantage of them.

For Derrick’s part, he didn’t care, as long as Fred kept their bargain. Derrick would stay in his own little world in the garage as much as possible and stay away from the craziness upstairs in the main apartment. He did go upstairs to use the kitchen and bathroom, but other than that, he was only up there occasionally to watch sports on T.V.

It was the first weekend Derrick had been staying there when Fred’s friends from the biker town on the hill, which was what they called the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, moved in. Apparently Randy, who actually didn’t like his nickname “Maddog,” and his girlfriend Jenny, had been sleeping in the park up there and it was beginning to get cold at night. Derrick had no trouble believing that. He wouldn’t soon forget the night he slept outside, not to mention he had no heat in the garage. Autumn was progressing in L.A. and the days were still mostly hot, but the nights were beginning to get a little more than chilly, and the early morning hours were downright cold. It was

likely much worse in the higher elevations of the foothills.

So, tonight would be the party celebrating the reunion of old friends. Derrick had already been watching the Laker game on television when they arrived in Tiny's van. Being from Cleveland, he was still a big Cleveland Cavaliers fan, but living in Los Angeles now meant he could only get the Lakers and Clippers on T.V. However, he was a big enough sports fan to watch any game, even if it was not his favorite team, and he could get updates on the Cavaliers, as well. He had not been told about the little get together with Fred and his friends, and he didn't plan on giving up his spot in front of the T.V. on their behalf.

Derrick didn't pay much attention as they arrived, despite their obnoxiously loud grand entrance. It sounded as if the little guy, Randy, had already had a few too many. It didn't take long for him to notice that Randy talked a big game for such a little man. It was a classic case of "short man's syndrome." He enjoyed a private joke, thinking Randy's large girlfriend probably kicked his ass now and then when he got out of line. His wild hair and beard made him look a little crazy, but Derrick pegged him for one of those people whose bark was bigger than their bite. And this was the guy they called Maddog?

Fred and his ex-wife, present roommate, Carrie, sat down at the dining room table with their friends and Randy and his girlfriend Teresa. Tiny and Randy had brought beer and liquor with them, but the liquor Randy carried had already been tapped into. Tiny and his girlfriend left soon afterward to visit other friends, which made Fred a little wary.

Derrick continued to watch television, but it was becoming evident that it would probably be too loud to enjoy watching anything with Randy around. The man didn't seem to have the ability to say two words without shouting. He decided he would give them ten to fifteen minutes to see if things settled at all. The party was in the dining area to his back, so he didn't know much of what was going on, except that they were playing cards. The noise level came and went until Derrick had finally had enough. He thought about a late night booty call to the rocker chick, when Randy yelled at Fred, "You calling me a liar?"

"No. Randy, I don't want any trouble."

Randy jumped to his feet, flipping the table on its side. Alcohol, cigarette butts and white powder went flying everywhere.

Derrick turned around in his chair just as Randy challenged Fred again.

“You calling me a fucking liar?”

Out of habit in a potentially bad situation, Derrick quickly sized up the situation. Carrie’s chair had flipped her backward onto the floor where she was having a difficult time maneuvering into a position to stand up. He couldn’t imagine being that fat and trying to live a normal life.

Randy was probably twenty-five years younger than Fred and Fred was not in good shape. He was an over-weight old man, so even with Randy’s small size he could easily hurt him.

“Get out of my house!” Fred challenged boldly.

“You calling me a fucking liar, Fred? ‘Cause I’ll kill ya’ if you are.”

Fred looked over to Derrick with sudden panic on his face. “Derrick, I have a heart condition, you gotta help m...” before he could finish his plea, Randy leapt at him, paying no attention to the small partition the flipped over dining table provided.

Derrick got out of his chair and walked toward the ruckus, just in case things got out of control. He just moved into the place and he didn’t want to lose it because Fred got his ass kicked by this very unstable little fellow, and he didn’t help him.

Fred managed to move quicker than Derrick thought possible for him and got around the table and into the living room safely. He maneuvered behind the chair Derrick had just vacated. Carrie was finally able to pick herself up from the floor, yelling for Randy to leave Fred alone, and Teresa quickly made it over to her boyfriend’s side, trying to get him to calm down. Randy was furious Fred had slipped by him.

Derrick stood in the middle of the room now, unsure what to do about this ridiculous situation. He didn’t know whether to laugh at these two imbeciles or knock their heads together. He knew the answer to that, though...he had to protect Fred. He looked at Randy to determine if he would be able to talk him down from his drug rage or if he would have to restrain him, or maybe just knock the bastard out and let him sleep it off.

Randy was oblivious to anything else but Fred. He slowly made his way toward Fred and despite walking right in front of Derrick, he didn’t even appear to notice him. Derrick could see the alleged Maddog in Randy’s eyes; it was a dangerous mixture of drugs and alcohol. He had seen this crazed look before, except with guys about twice Randy’s size. Part of the hazards of being a criminal was the fact that many of your fellow criminals were crazy drunks and druggies. He looked at the floor by the overturned dining table and saw all of the drug paraphernalia, which consisted mainly of

blow and pills. With the amount of drugs Randy had mixed with his alcohol, he wasn't likely to listen to reason, so Derrick considered the pleasant thought of knocking Randy out as the easiest and best choice, and normally he would welcome the chance to kick someone's ass, but then he remembered he had to stay out of trouble with the police. Maybe he should try to take on the unaccustomed roll of peace-maker.

"Hey, buddy," Derrick said as he started reaching for Randy. "Why don't we all calm down and see if we can work this out." The words didn't seem to belong to him, they were somehow wrong coming out of his mouth.

Randy jerked his arm from Derrick's hand and pursued Fred once again. Fred tried to use the chair as a shield, but Randy was much quicker than the old man and managed to get a hold of him this time and maneuvered Fred underneath him on the chair, choking him. *He's got balls, I'll give him that*, Derrick thought lightly. He couldn't help smiling at the absurdity of the situation and wondered how this would look to someone just entering the scene. Then he got a chill and couldn't help looking over his shoulder at the door. He got the strangest feeling of being watched.

"Help! Derrick, help me! He's going to kill me."

Derrick turned back around and saw Randy choking Fred.

"Oh, for crying out loud," Derrick grumbled, irritated as he went over to the chair and literally lifted Randy by the scruff of his neck, off of Fred. "Damn it Randy, I said calm down."

Randy stopped and acknowledged Derrick for the first time all night.

"Don't ever touch me again or I'll kill you."

He went after Fred again. Derrick had been threatened a few times in his life; once again, it came with the lifestyle. Both on the street and on the inside he had to earn his way on the "be very afraid of" list. Now this little man had just stood in his face and threatened him. The old Derrick took over for a moment as he tried to decide whether to break the little asshole in half or snap his head off like a daisy. He took a step, and then stopped. He felt a warning. He didn't know from where or whom, but somehow he knew he had to stay in control of his temper. He didn't have much money left, so there was no way he could run from the police or even try and find a new place to live. He had to get this asshole out of here before it got bad and a neighbor heard and called the police.

"My heart, help!" Randy was choking Fred again. Derrick could think of only one thing to do. He went over to the chair and grabbed Randy by the scruff of his neck again

and, after lifting him like a rag-doll off of Fred, he wrapped his arms around Randy and held him still. Randy couldn't move.

"Let me go. I'll kill you!"

"Randy, you're really starting to get on my nerves. I suggest you shut up."

"Fuck you! I'll kill you!"

Randy's girlfriend came over to Derrick. "He will, he'll kill you. If he says he will, he will."

Fred added, "Please don't let him go Derrick, my heart can't take it."

Derrick could see the situation getting out of control again, while the cause of the problem tried to wriggle free of his grip.

"All right, enough is enough. Fred, you go down to a neighbor's place and stay there till I tell you to come out," Derrick demanded. Just then Carrie came in from the other room and declared she had called the police. Derrick couldn't believe it.

"That's just great. Carrie, take Fred down to one of the neighbor's...now. Teresa, you are going to stay up here with this asshole until he calms down. If he's still here when the police get here they can deal with him." He grabbed Randy by the back of his hair and spun him around to face him. His other hand went to the trouble-makers' neck. Derrick squeezed hard and lifted up, putting a great deal of pressure on Randy's ability to breathe properly. Randy immediately went quiet and his eyes bulged to twice their normal size. Because of the mixture of drugs and alcohol in his system, he didn't know whether to be more angry or scared. Standing on his tippy toes and barely able to get oxygen to his lungs, Randy's brain finally decided on fear, and he gave Derrick his complete attention.

"Now, Randy, I'm going to give you a chance to stay up here and calm down. If you go after Fred, or if you trash the place, I'm going to hurt you real bad. I'm not playing around with you anymore, so you be a good little boy up here. Understood?"

Randy looked Derrick in the eyes, then they sort of glossed over and his attention strayed elsewhere. Derrick slapped him hard in the face.

"Randy, do you understand?" His voice was low and menacing, the way he used to use it back in Cleveland when he needed to intimidate someone into a deal. He had such a clean-cut, all-American boy look, that he had to find other ways to intimidate. He started to get into a lot of fights when he was fourteen and got his ass kicked a lot, but he learned the hard way to be a good fighter. Then he hit his growth spurt when he was

sixteen and those fighting skills that helped him survive as a little guy became those fighting skills that helped him kick everybody's ass as a big guy. He became downright mean and developed a reputation of being ruthless. Wanting to add to his reputation, he tried all kinds of looks, from long hair to completely bald. That's the way he was in prison, completely bald with goatee and tattoos. He was a very angry young man with a nasty attitude. When someone crossed him on the inside, they usually ended up beaten very badly, or sometimes dead. He didn't have to do it personally, but he usually did anyway because he thought it enhanced his reputation. His running mates inside told him the scariest thing about him was his voice, just before he beat someone senseless, and it was even worse just before he killed someone. It was known to chill a man to the bone.

Randy's eyes flicked back to Derrick immediately. Despite the drugs and alcohol, Derrick had his complete attention once again. Randy nodded his head.

"Yeah, man." His voice was scratchy from the strain on his neck, and he finally had the sense to sound scared. Derrick smiled. The voice had worked again.

"Good."

Derrick let him go and waited a moment to see if the little man would behave. He did, so Derrick surveyed the scene to make sure everyone else was out of the apartment, then he left. As he rounded the bottom of the stairs, he could hear Randy yelling, "Fuck him, I'll kill the asshole."

Derrick smiled. *They're always braver when I leave.*

He soon found out Fred was in a young couple's apartment who were surprisingly their friends. The husband was working late, so the girl was home alone with their newborn baby and young son that looked to be three or four years old. Most of the neighbors were outside speaking to Carrie when he got there. He began to get a little antsy because he didn't want to be there when the police arrived, whenever that may be in this neighborhood. Derrick decided to hang around a little longer, just in case Randy decided to get brave again. He still had a potent mixture of chemicals running through his veins, so he was likely to forget about Derrick's little talk with him in a matter of a few minutes. Besides, he could always conveniently split when the cops arrived.

Ten minutes later, sure enough, an emboldened Randy came outside. He postured himself for everyone to see as he casually and confidently walked over to the apartment everyone congregated around. Derrick was talking to a neighbor who gestured to him in Randy's direction as the bold little man walked up to the young wife who was harboring

Fred. The twenty year old girl, holding her new baby in her arms, stood defiantly just outside the door of her apartment. Her young son had moved behind her for protection at the sight of the crazy looking Maddog coming at them. The door to her apartment was open, so only the screen door offered any resistance. Derrick stayed on the edge of the crowd, not wanting to antagonize him. He watched closely to see if this was a mission of peace or not.

Randy took in his surroundings, didn't see Derrick, and decided Fred must be in the young woman's apartment, so he turned to face her and said, "You the bitch protecting old Fred," while poking his finger in her chest, "hand him over or I'll kill you."

As mean as Derrick could be, one thing he couldn't abide was a man hurting a woman or a kid. He never aspired to be a husband or father. He would just cheat on his wife anyway, so why get married and what the hell could he teach a kid? But for some reason he could not explain, he had always been over-protective of women and kids.

He snapped. He shot forward, snatch Randy by the neck and threw him up against the wall of the apartment building, with his feet literally dangling off the ground. Derrick leaned close and used "the voice" as menacingly as he ever had.

"Anything happens to this woman, or her children, and I'll kill you."

He threw Randy to the ground. Randy got up and took off running. One of the neighbors remarked, "You scared him half to death." Another neighbor said, "Hell, he scared me half to death."

Derrick turned to the young woman who was holding her baby defensively with one arm and shielding the other child, who had wrapped himself around one of her legs, with the other arm. He looked at the three of them with that unexplainable compassion and asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, we're fine, thanks."

He turned to see Randy running around the corner of the apartment building, toward the empty field out back, with his overweight girlfriend lumbering after him. He turned back to the young mother and her two young boys. Suddenly his heart hurt. It wasn't the type of pain that signaled a heart attack, or even heartburn, this was a pain that could only come from one thing...sorrow. Derrick was bewildered. He had no attachment to this woman or her kids, and they were not hurt in any way. As soon as the feeling had arrived, it was gone and he was only mildly curious over its departure, but he was glad it was gone. He didn't like feeling that way.

“You can tell Fred it’s safe now.”

Most of the rest of the night was uneventful. Tiny and his girlfriend returned to claim their sleeping spot on Fred’s living room floor. Tiny worried he would be kicked out because he had brought Maddog with him, but he was able to assure Fred he could protect him. Tiny helped Derrick look for Randy throughout the immediate area to further allay Fred’s fears of retaliation.

The police finally arrived an hour and a half later. Derrick slipped away and later explained he had gone to the store for some food. Fred decided not to press charges, convinced that if he did, Maddog would kill him, not to mention it would make him look like a snitch and he had a reputation to uphold. Derrick didn’t even touch the subject of how Fred could possibly have a reputation...for anything.

Once the cops left, Derrick stayed outside talking to neighbors and occasionally checked around the outside of the apartment complex to make sure Randy didn’t come back. In reality, he was avoiding Fred, who wouldn’t stop talking about how Derrick had saved his life. When everything finally calmed down, around three in the morning, he went to Fred’s apartment to check on him. Derrick was tired and wanted to go to bed.

He knocked on the door and heard, “Who is it?” He recognized Fred’s voice, but it was laced with fear, even with him trying to make it sound tough.

“It’s Derrick. Everything’s secure out here, so I’m going to bed now.”

Derrick heard, “Let him in.”

Tiny answered the door. The door opened to reveal Fred sitting on a kitchen chair, facing the door. All the lights were off and he had a large butcher knife in each hand, holding them up in front of him as if he were about to be attacked at any moment. If one of the knives had been a fork, he would have looked ready to dismantle a steak dinner. Derrick almost burst out laughing at the comical sight that was supposed to be threatening.

“You alright there, Fred?”

“I’m ready for him Derrick.”

“Well, Fred, I’ve searched the whole block three times. I’m sure he’s gone. I think we scared him away this time.”

Fred's eyes were glossed over. No doubt, he was still under the influence. Fred looked up at Derrick with a pleading look on his face, "Could you could sleep up here tonight? I'd feel safer."

He looked at Fred, still holding the butcher knives and couldn't help wondering who was more dangerous, an overconfident Randy or a paranoid Fred armed with two butcher knives.

"Tiny's here, Fred."

"I'd really feel safer if you were up here Derrick."

"I'll take the couch."

"Thanks, Derrick. I'll never forget you saving my life." Fred got up from the chair and went to his bedroom with Carrie in his wake. Derrick brushed off the statement about him saving Fred's life, again, and went to lie down on the couch.

Most of the many different roommates arrived throughout the night and now two of them were hanging out in the living room, trying to get Derrick to tell them what happened. He told them to go to bed, he was tired. The old man who had been sleeping on the couch wasn't there. Maybe his "loving" brother decided to let him stay the night at his house. *Good thing*, he thought, with his new nice guy/hero image here, he would hate to have to make an old guy sleep on the floor next to those degenerates. He looked at Tiny and his girlfriend as they made their bed on the floor. Teresa smiled at Derrick as she lay down, trying to look sexy. He ignored her and attempted to get comfortable on the couch.

He still couldn't figure out what prompted him to protect Fred, a man he had no allegiance to. Why had he been so nice? He was never that nice. And why didn't he beat the hell out of Randy? There were several times he lost his temper and could have killed the trouble maker, but he didn't. Oh yes, he wanted to stay out of trouble, but he had been in that situation before and always did the wrong thing. That was the biggest reason he had become the bad man that he was, he always made the wrong decision when it was time to fight or walk away.

Something was different this time. *Whatever*, he thought, immediately dismissing any notion of a guardian angel trying to straighten him out. If someone were watching over him he would not be in this mess in the first place. This or any of the other messes he had gotten into. He was just doing what he had to do to stay out of prison. He yawned and soon fell asleep...and dreamed.

CHAPTER 7

“Who are you?” Michael asked as he shot forward into a sitting up position. The beginning of the sentence began in his dream, but the question finished as he woke up. He looked around to establish his whereabouts. He felt silly waking while talking in his sleep, but he also had an eerie feeling as his dream lingered on the edge of his thoughts.

He lay back down. He could feel his adrenaline pumping. He tried to relax, but his heart was beating fast. *What is going on?* he thought. He had never felt so weird after a dream. Well, that’s not completely true, he had felt a little weird yesterday when he awoke. It was different than this, but still...weird. If he was to be honest, he had been feeling different the last few times he woke up, or...how long? It was nothing specific, just a feeling of...déjà vu? No, it wasn’t that, was it? He didn’t feel like he had been somewhere before, but, maybe he had...seen...someone before. *Is that right?* He wondered. He probably had a similar nightmare a couple of times was all. *That’s probably what it was*, he unsuccessfully tried to convince himself.

Michael turned to see what time it was, but as he did, the alarm blared forth its announcement that it was eight fifteen in the morning. He jumped a little.

“I really hate that thing,” he declared to noone. He put his feet over the side of the bed and turned the alarm off. Then something strange happened, a single bead of sweat trickled from his brow and landed with a splash on his bare thigh. Michael, sitting there in his boxers, looked at the splattered droplet with confusion in his eyes.

“What in the world?” he questioned aloud as he reached his hand up to his forehead. He was sweating lightly. Then he remembered saying something as he was waking, but he couldn’t remember what it was. He could also vaguely remember seeing something, or someone. *That’s it*, he thought, *I saw someone*, but that was as far as he could recall. He could have accepted a very real dream about Lisa except he was sure he would remember that, in great detail.

“Lisa, sweetheart, it’s time to wake up.”

Momma was being gentle, even though she knew she would have to be tough on her strong-willed child.

“Huh,” Lisa struggled awake. She felt exhausted. Would she ever get back to normal? Except, this time, she had difficulty getting to sleep because she couldn’t stop thinking about Michael. Trying to force her mind to think about the information they had learned at Import Goods that day didn’t help much, for her thoughts always ended up back where they originated, thinking about him, and their kiss. She had tried to concentrate and think how to find her brother’s killers, but this had also led her back to Michael. He had been so instrumental in everything they had found out, so far. Eventually, she gave in and let her thoughts dwell on him, but this brought about a lot of anxiety, as well. She just wasn’t confident things could work out between them. It was the age old scenario, two people from two very different worlds, and it wasn’t just the black and white thing, but the rich and poor thing, too. At first, she was convinced it would never work, but then she would persuade confidence into her self-debate that they could be together. Before she could come to a finale conclusion in the matter, sleep finally prevailed.

“Good morning, momma,” she said lovingly.

“Good morning, dear.”

Lisa could see, as always, her momma’s love reflected in her eyes, but there was something else in her voice... worry.

“What’s wrong, momma?” she asked.

Momma looked a little surprised at the question. Did her daughter really believe she didn’t know what was going on with her? Well, she didn’t know everything, but she knew the basics. She knew Lisa was messing around in something that could leave her just like her brother. Only, he got mixed up accidentally. She was, by her own bull-headedness, getting involved in something way over her head. Momma felt that applied to the snooping around and to Michael Deshay. She had heard the car pull up the driveway last night and knew it wasn’t the car she and Lisa shared, because she had used it to get groceries. Lisa sometimes would take the bus if her and her momma couldn’t work out a driving schedule to share the car, but Lisa didn’t call her to tell her where she was going. Momma had been very worried about her strong-willed daughter all day. So,

when the car pulled into the driveway, she looked through the curtains of the front window of the house and was extremely surprised to see a Mercedes Benz sitting in her driveway, and was even more surprised to see the man from the Fortune 500 magazine was the driver, and Lisa the passenger. Momma also saw the kiss, and she saw Lisa get out of the car and run to the house.

“Lisa, you haven’t been to work in three days, you didn’t even call them. This lack of responsibility isn’t like you and the people at your work are worried about you. Your boss, Mr. Barlow, called to make sure you were all right. I covered for you and told him you were sick and I had forgotten to call in for you. He was very nice and understanding, but...”

Lisa had completely forgotten about work. She did feel bad about not calling. She liked where she worked and liked the people she worked with and Mr. Barlow was a good boss. Her world had been turned upside down these last few days and now she couldn’t think straight.

“I’m sorry, momma. I guess I’ve been in a bit of a daze these last few days.”

“Child, you’re beginning to worry me.” Momma felt her emotions twisting her yet again. She wanted to be strong for Lisa, but she couldn’t bear the thought of losing another of her precious children.

“Momma, I’m all right, I’ve just had a lot to think about.”

“Don’t tell me you’re all right. You’re snooping around in places that you don’t belong and you’re going to get yourself killed. Just leave it to the police.”

“Momma, it’s not like that. I am leaving most of it to the police. I just wanted to check out a few simple things, like where Kenny was supposed to work, that’s all.”

“Lisa, Kenny is dead. I can’t lose you, too. Please, baby, leave this alone.”

She began to cry. She had a right, and she was sure to be emotionally drained, as well, always worried about everyone else. This was the cry momma had needed to finally let out. She had spent all of her time being strong for everyone else, and had not allowed herself to grieve properly. Lisa lent her shoulder to her momma.

“It’s okay momma. It’s okay. I promise momma, it’s gonna be okay.”

After momma had her cry, she insisted Lisa forget about her foolishness and go back to work. Lisa agreed. She had not lied to her momma in a long time, but this would be the second time in three days, because she would not be going to work today either. Under the circumstances, there was no other choice. She and Michael had come too far

to stop now...in more ways than one.

Michael. The thought of him brought new confidence to her. She hadn't come to a conclusion last night of what to do about him and she wasn't sure she knew now, but she was sure she couldn't wait to see him. She didn't even know how he felt about her, so she decided to just wait and see what happened. Lisa wasn't very good at that. She wanted everything to be planned out so she knew exactly what to expect. She liked to be in control of her life, but with Michael that just wasn't possible right now. *The most important thing is to find Kenny's killers*, she reminded herself. At least, the thought of Kenny's death no longer initiated tears, a small victory. Instead, she was now able to use her memory of him to strengthen her resolve.

So, with her momma off to work and her empty promise still hanging in the air, Lisa was on her way to see Michael, with no clue on how to act when she got there.

"Dammit, I'm not a delivery boy," Jeffrey muttered.

Last night he had asked Joseph if he should get up early and tail Lisa, trying to show initiative. Joseph had responded, "Why? We already know where she's going to be."

He realized he asked a stupid question too late. Even though Joseph didn't say it, he knew his current errand was his punishment. It was 9:30 in the morning and he was on his way to Mr. Carmen's office. Joseph wanted Jeffrey to retrieve an important package for him. He pulled into the office building parking lot wondering if Mr. Carmen would be cool or if he would have to swallow his pride once again.

"Hey there, Mr. C.," Jeffrey said pleasantly.

"Jeffrey, don't call me Mr. C., it's not professional."

"Yes, sir, Mr. C...I mean Mr. Carmen."

Mr. Carmen shook his head.

"Jeffrey, are you learning anything from Joseph?"

"Yes sir, Mr. Carmen."

He looked at Jeffrey thoughtfully, making him feel very uncomfortable.

“Joseph is the best.”

Jeffrey looked up. He could see Mr. Carmen was very serious.

“And I mean the best, in any organization, on either side of the law. Joseph has done hits that would make your head spin trying to figure out how he did it. You would be wise to watch everything he does. This is the first time he has ever agreed to teach someone any of his skills.”

For the first time since he entered the office Jeffrey became very interested in what Mr. Carmen was saying.

“That’s right Jeffrey. In the last few days, I have had ten different business associates from around the world call me. They don’t want to talk business, they want to know how I got Joseph to agree to train you.”

He was amazed by what he was hearing, as Mr. Carmen continued.

“You are the first person to ever see how he operates on any level. Even the smallest, most simple thing he does is important, he has been doing this for a long time and has never failed.”

“Never?” Jeffrey asked suspiciously.

“Never.”

Jeffrey didn’t know what to think. Joseph had told him he had never been to prison, which was impressive enough in his line of work, but to be an assassin and never have failed, never have missed his target, was that even possible? To this point he had thought of Joseph as a very intimidating, boring, asshole control-freak. If he was really that good and he was going to train him...

Michael sat at his desk finishing up some paper work. He thought about calling Lisa, but it was 9:15 in the morning and it might be too early to call. Besides, he knew he would be pushing things if he did.

“Mr. Deshay, Miss Johnson is here to see you.”

He looked at the intercom and smiled. He was pleasantly surprised. He wasn’t sure he would hear from her at all, what with the way she reacted to their kiss. Trying not to sound too excited about her arrival, he answered, “Thank you Judy, please send her in.”

“Yes, sir,” Judy answered pleasantly. A little too pleasantly. He could never fool

Judy, she had known him too long. He could imagine the knowing smile on her face at that moment. Michael stood up and walked over to the door to greet Lisa.

“Good morning Lisa, please, come in,” he said cordially, motioning to his lounge.

“Thank you,” she answered. She gave him a shy smile and brief look that told Michael she was embarrassed about the way she acted the night before. He had been trying to ignore Judy, but he could feel her smile at his side.

Judy asked, “Would you like a cup of coffee, Miss Johnson?”

Lisa sat down and said, “No thank you Judy, I’m fine.”

She asked Michael, “How about you Mr. Deshay?”

He leaned close to Judy and said lightly, “You’re enjoying yourself way too much.” She took on a look of feigned confusion, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, right.”

Michael walked over to sit in his favorite chair. Judy smiled and left, knowing he didn’t like coffee.

He wasn’t exactly sure how to start the conversation, so he looked over to gauge her demeanor as she looked up briefly and then back down to her hands.

“Lisa,” he said.

“Yes,” she answered, but didn’t look up at him. Michael waited a moment.

“Lisa.”

She didn’t answer this time. She knew he wanted her to look at him and she wanted to look at him, she wanted to look in his eyes and see if he felt the same toward her as she did toward him, but she was too afraid to see the truth, whether it was good or bad. She didn’t even know which would be good and which would be bad. She braved herself and looked up at him. His face was kind and understanding. In her mind she knew it would be, he was always kind to her. She looked into his eyes and everything she saw on his face was amplified in his eyes.

“I’m happy to see you,” he said. A bit of a simplified expression for what he felt, but he was nervous and that was the best he could do right then.

Lisa smiled. “Me, too.” She was relieved and appreciative of how he managed to keep things light and simple. It kept the situation from getting over-complicated.

He got out of his chair and walked over to her, knelt down and looked into her eyes. He kissed her gently and pulled back slowly, engaging her with his eyes again. She leaned forward and offered her own kiss. They continued to hold each others gaze, and

then shared a mutual smile. Everything was just fine.

“Now that we have established we like each other, are you ready to get to work?”

This surprised her a little. They had just had this wonderful, romantic moment and he wanted to get to work? Were they not going to talk about their relationship at all? It would seem they had a lot to discuss. Where did they stand? Did this mean they were a couple now or does he just expect to fool around whenever he wanted? She had to know, she needed to know what to expect.

Michael was still looking her in the eyes, but she suddenly felt a little apprehensive. He kept looking into her eyes and wouldn't let her go. She would not, could not look away. His kindness was still in those eyes, his goodness was still there. He still looked at her in that special way that let her know she meant something to him. She thought for a moment and then made a momentous decision. She didn't have to know. Wasn't this what it was all about anyway? Not knowing and finding out over time. It was completely out of character for her, but she was going to just live and see what happens. She trusted him.

“Yeah, Yeah, I'm ready to get to work, where do we start?”

Michael smiled and put his hand on hers. He understood how difficult everything was for her, as this all was happening very fast, not to mention this whole investigation...thing they were getting themselves involved in.

Reassuringly, he said, “From the beginning.”

Understanding the double meaning, she agreed, “From the beginning.”

He stood up and went to his desk. He picked up a paper and walking toward Lisa said, “I wrote down a few things that we don't know at the moment. A few things that I think would be helpful if we did know.

Lisa accepted the paper and read out loud.

“Number one, who owns Import Goods, Inc.? Number two, a complete background check on the owner. Number three, is he a legitimate businessman? Lisa looked up, “It seems you're banking everything on the owner.”

Michael answered, “Not everything, but I do believe he could turn out to be an important piece to the puzzle, so I'm using that as a starting point. I mean, I really don't know what I'm doing here. Everyone likes to play detective at one point or another in their life, but this is very serious. We don't want to go rushing into something and realize too late we are in danger. I think we should push forward, but carefully. We take one

thing at a time, eliminating them as we go. We can start with this, and in the mean time, we can make a list together of other things we would like to know. Then we can tackle them one at a time.”

“Makes sense,” she answered. She was as clueless as he on what to do.

“So, how do we go about finding this secret owner?”

“Well, fortunately I have quite a few more resources than most people.” Just then the fax rang. They both looked over and Michael went to retrieve the information. He skimmed over it quickly knowing exactly what he was looking for, and then handed it to Lisa. “Very interesting,” he said aloud.

“What is?” she inquired as she sifted through the confusing report.

“I had already put someone to work on the Import Goods questions and now we know the answer to all three questions. We know the owner of Import Goods is Angelino Carmen and that alone answers the other two.”

Lisa looked up, trying to remember where she had heard that name. Michael explained.

“This is the man supposedly responsible for eighty-five percent of the drug traffic in Cleveland, among his other criminal activity. In fact, some people believe he is a somewhat highly placed mafia boss. However, he is very careful and a legitimate business owner, as well. Charges have been filed several times, but nothing ever sticks.”

Lisa added, “I knew I recognized that name. I don’t watch much television, but I remember seeing him on the news, he had a big tax evasion trial last year.”

“That’s right. That’s how authorities go after mobsters who they can’t place at the scene of the crimes they have their goons commit. It is very difficult to get a conviction because they can buy the best accountants to cover their tracks. That’s why they own legitimate businesses like Import Goods.”

Lisa thought back to the trial on television. “He did get off, didn’t he?”

Michael’s mind was already somewhere else. He was standing over by one of the huge windows in his office, looking out over the city of Cleveland. It was an amazing view from his vantage point. He could see the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and he could see the Cleveland Browns football stadium and the Cleveland Indians baseball stadium. If he went to the large window on the adjacent wall he could see the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball arena, as well. He was a bit of a sports fanatic and had a private suite at all three sport facilities. He didn’t get to go to all of the games, so he would donate his

suites to the Boys and Girls club when not in use. From the penthouse of the tallest building in Cleveland he had a remarkable three hundred and sixty degree view. Lisa looked over at him and could tell something was bothering him.

“Michael?”

He didn’t look back.

“I had finally convinced the leaders of the east-side community to adopt my program, and then we had to work even harder to get city hall to agree with all the drastic changes we wanted to make in their neighborhood. They thought we should go slowly. We explained to them that slowly wouldn’t do it, because the drug dealers and gangs had too strong of a hold on the community. If we went slowly, it wouldn’t change the attitudes of helplessness, or the belief that things would never change.

“The mayor, Gerald James, was a friend of mine and a very brave man. I met him at a Cavs game. Over a period of time we learned that we had the same desire to develop a way to lower the poverty rate in Cleveland by creating jobs and improving education. I immediately set up a special projects department here at Deshay Enterprises and devoted myself almost solely to the project. I stayed in close contact with Gerald to get his opinion of what would work or wouldn’t work.

He had a great deal to lose if we were wrong and my program didn’t work, because failure in such a risky venture could mean the end to a promising political career. I could always go back to my successful business, but not him. That was where he grew up and now he was their Mayor, and he was determined to make a difference.

They needed new housing, new stores, new schools, everything. The key was, through all the construction, to keep the jobs in town and eventually, as many business ownerships as possible, rather than let corporations own everything.

We picked several key people of the community to be the leaders and arranged for them to own specific businesses, such as a construction company and all of the sub-contractors. Some of them had to have emergency training to get all of the proper licenses quickly and we had to get very creative with most of the business loans, but it was worth it because this allowed all of the construction to be done by the people of that community. Not only did that give them a stake in the rebuilding, but it created jobs within the neighborhood. By doing this with several of the new stores and apartment complexes, as well, there was an immediate influx of good money into the community. We built new schools and made sure they had everything they needed to provide the best

education. In construction time, a new town was created almost overnight. If you provide a neighborhood with a good educational system and jobs, there will be less crime and drugs. That's a fact in any community." Michael hesitated a moment, reveling in the rush of his memory and the historical proportions of the task.

Lisa smiled. She had read the article in her brother's magazine a second and third time. It was a brilliant and very risky undertaking, but it had worked and it had saved a community. She was proud of Michael, even barely knowing him and not even having been around when he had accomplished all of it, she was very proud of him.

"It was a wonderful thing you did, Michael. You are a hero to that community."

He looked back toward her, coming out of his memories. He walked over to the lounge area and sat in his favorite chair and smiled.

"Thank you, but the people who live there are the real heroes. We had so many problems and setbacks because the gangs weren't about to give up their territory easily, but the people would not give up either. They finally had an opportunity to provide a nice neighborhood and good schools for their kids. The mayor and the police were very instrumental in helping us, but several people still lost their lives to the gangs, in the hopes of providing a better future for their children. It was a sad, yet amazing thing. Most of their problems were related to drugs in one way or another. Drugs are big business in poor communities. They feast on hard times and misery, compounding their hopelessness, trapping the people in an endless cycle of violence and escapism they cannot overcome. I couldn't believe some of the horrors I saw when we first toured that little town."

"But it was a success, Michael."

"Your right, it was, and more importantly, still is. We started that project three years ago and now they continue almost completely on their own. I only help when they need it, which isn't very often. However, even with the success, we can never forget those who gave their lives in the fight, and hope it will be an example for other cities to do the same. I guess I've been rambling on to make this point; Angelino Carmen is the one who supplies the gangs with their drugs. As far as money is concerned, he was the one hurt most by that town rebuilding and others wanting to do the same."

Lisa said, "He must really hate you."

"With both of us being prominent businessmen in this city, I run into him from time to time. I refuse to make any deals with him, so he is always very cold to me. I would

love to provide the police with the information that puts him away for a long time, but if he finds out we are after him...”

“He will not want to lose to you again.”

“Yes, well, if this information pans out it may not even matter. It may just be a case of handing over what we have to the police and let them bring him in.”

“I hope you’re right Michael, but I wouldn’t count on that. I’m sorry, but in my neighborhood we tend to be a little skeptical about the effectiveness of the police in helping any of us. Not to mention, do you really think they will care about our research? You think you’re going to march into the police station and announce that you have been doing their job for them and hand over the file. Being who you are, I’m sure they’ll thank you kindly for doing what they couldn’t and immediately open your file and start studying. They’ll read every word twice to make sure they don’t miss anything.”

Michael couldn’t help wondering when the police department had become the enemy. There should be a better relationship between community and police, working together to keep the criminals out. You know things are bad when the victims protect the criminals. It just didn’t make sense.

That was a discussion for another time, though, right now he was looking at Lisa and realized how cute she was when she was being difficult, so he tried to lighten the mood. “Wait a minute, are you being sarcastic?”

Lisa started to say something, and then stopped. She looked at Michael, who had a wicked little smile on his face.

“A little, maybe,” she said, but she wasn’t going to let him dismiss her point.

“I guess I got a little carried away, but you must understand, if we go to the police with this information, they will just say, ‘Thank you for your concern, we’ll look over your information.’ As soon as we walk out the door, they’ll toss it in the trash and say something about how civilians always think they can do their jobs better than them.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Actually, yes, I do, I’ve already been through it. Before I came to see you that first time, I went to the police station. They asked me if I had remembered anything new about the night my brother was killed. I told them I hadn’t, but I had been going through Kenny’s things and thought maybe there were a few things they could check out, like his new job with you. They told me they had already gone through his personal items. I asked if they were going to investigate what I had found and they said they couldn’t talk

about the investigation, but assured me they had it under control. Then they thanked me for coming by and basically kicked me out the door.”

Michael sat there for a moment, thinking. He glanced up at Lisa.

“I’m sorry, Lisa, I didn’t know.”

“I know you didn’t, but that’s why I’m telling you now. It won’t do any good. The only way the police will listen is if we present them with real, undeniable evidence.”

She was probably right. Even with his friends in the police station, they didn’t exactly have concrete evidence in the folder. It was mostly just information and maybe information the police already had.

“Then we need to get undeniable evidence.”

“I like your confidence. I wish I felt the same.”

“We have a lot of work ahead of us, but I believe it can be done.”

Lisa was thinking how lucky she was to have Michael on her side when a very frightening thought struck her.

“Michael, if they, Angelino Carmen or whoever it may be, find out we’re collecting information about them, my family would be in danger again and this time they will probably finish the job.”

“Your right, I should have thought of that. I don’t know how resourceful these people are, but if this does have anything to do with Carmen, then those resources are vast and we shouldn’t take any chances. Let me make a call real quick. I’m thinking we should be able to put together some kind of safe house for your family.” Michael picked up the phone and began scrolling through phone numbers.

“So, does this mean we will continue to investigate?”

He had found the number he wanted and pushed the call button, but then hung up and thought for moment.

“It means we will make sure your family is safe while we analyze the situation a little more closely and figure out the best course of action. This isn’t fun and games Lisa. They are professional killers and we are not. They tend to win in these scenarios. Whether you like it or not, eventually we are going to have to rely on the police to finish this for us.” He pushed the call button once again and proceeded to make arrangements for Lisa’s family.

Lisa brooded. She didn’t want to admit it, but he was right. She was just a computer programmer, not a detective. And what about Michael? He was just a businessman. A

big, strong businessman, but still a businessman. How could she put him in the way of danger when there was no way he would be able to stand up to these people? She felt guilty. Her selfish need for revenge was keeping her from sound judgment. She would let the police handle it once they got a more complete folder put together. Once they got some solid evidence, they would hand it over to the police and they wouldn't be able to ignore it. Or they could give it to the media. That thought made her feel better.

Angelino Carmen was a public figure of questionable stature, so if they gave the media some great evidence against him, then the police couldn't ignore it.

"Your turn," Michael said as he offered her the phone.

Lisa got up and walked over to Michael.

"Momma's not going to like this at all."

"I can't blame her, but this needs to be done. People like Angelino Carmen must be dealt with."

It sounded like he decided to continue, after all. Lisa could see his distaste for Carmen like a fire in his eyes, and she couldn't help but be glad for it. If Carmen was responsible for her brother's death, then she wanted him to pay. And with that thought her need for revenge was back.

It was not easy, but she finished the call with her momma successfully, eventually. Her momma had been close to hysterics, begging Lisa to leave it alone. She had finally been able to calm momma down and explained that they were merely putting together some information for the police to help expedite the investigation. She promised she would be careful. She made her momma promise she would go with the men Michael hired to hide her and Terry, her youngest brother. *The only brother I have left.* After the call was over Lisa took a moment to collect her thoughts.

"You O.K.?" Michael asked, putting his hand on her shoulder.

She put her hand on his and answered, "I'm fine, thank you." She started to read the file about Angelino Carmen, again. Michael sat in his favorite chair and began reading over some other paper work. She looked up.

"Carmen has a personal bodyguard, which could be a problem."

"That doesn't surprise me, he is a mob boss, after all."

"Jeffrey Smith," Lisa continued. "Six three, two hundred and twenty-five pounds, and I thought you were big."

"He's a big boy alright." Michael continued to read over his copy of the file.

“He has long blonde hair and talks like a surfer.”

Lisa came across the photo of the man the information described. “He was there that night,” she said, looking at Michael with a horrified look.

“You’re sure.”

“The face of those two men will be buried in my mind for the rest of my life.”

“I’m sorry to put you through this Lisa.”

“It’s O.K., I’m O.K.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She smiled to reassure him.

He looked back down to the file.

“Well then, you should look at the next page. According to the descriptions you gave me of the men who tied you up that night, they seem to match Carmen’s bodyguard, and one of the pictures of this man.” He held up a photo.

“That’s him,” she said emphatically. Michael stared soberly at the photo. She looked up from her own copy of the photo she had quickly located from the file. “That is definitely him. He was the one in charge and had the other one do all of the dirty work, like tying up me and Terry.”

“They are the same men I saw at the docks that day, and there’s a bigger problem.”

“What?”

He looked back down to the page, and she looked down at her file, as well.

“Well, the description of the second guy is attributed to a very dangerous man.”

She noticed all the known aliases listed. “How many names does this guy have?”

“Apparently, we’re talking about an international assassin, here. Nobody knows his real name or real identity. He is a master of disguise, so we may not even be looking at his true identity in any of these pictures. In fact, it appears about every government in the world has a very large reward out on this guy.”

“He has never been caught,” she read from the report. She looked up at Michael. “For anything.”

“He is very good. Apparently he works for who he wants, when he wants and for the price he wants,” he continued.

Lisa added, “He’s a master of disguise? He looked very normal that night. I doubt he was wearing one.”

“According to this it would be impossible to know. This guy’s a ghost. There are no

accurate files, even from when he was young.”

“He must be a computer specialist, then,” she concluded. “Or he knows someone who could erase all pertinent records of his identity.”

“That’s right, but it’s not as easy as it sounds. Yes, he could probably erase all public records easy enough, but it is much harder to get into government records. He doesn’t just know someone, he is likely to be very well connected.”

“And with his record of success, I wouldn’t doubt any abilities attributed to him, as remarkable as some of them may seem.”

Michael looked at the file again and quickly discovered what he had been looking for. “Well, this confirms it. A man fitting this description has been seen going into Angelino Carmen’s office building several times over the last couple of days.”

“What have we stumbled onto?”

“I’m guessing something we should leave alone.”

They sat in silence at his desk for a moment, and then Lisa said, “Maybe this is over our heads.”

“It is,” was Michael’s response, still deep in thought.

“What should we do?”

“We should get out while we can, but will we? I don’t know. I do want Angelino Carmen to be stopped, more than ever.” He continued to search through the file, hoping to find a way to get Carmen.

“I don’t think I can back down,” Lisa finally answered. She realized she was wavering a little because of the information about the assassin. Michael looked at her.

“Lisa, I know what you said about the police, but maybe we should give them this information and let them do their job. Maybe this folder will be enough to help them nail Carmen.”

“Michael, everything in this folder is just information. There is no evidence. The only thing the police could do with this folder is use the information to help in their investigation, if there is an investigation.

“This folder would give them a reason for an investigation.”

“If they looked at it.”

“Maybe they will.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“Maybe I can make them take it serious. I know they want Carmen bad, they’ve tried

to get him a few times, and I have friends at the police department. I know the police chief personally, and like I said before, I even know the mayor personally.”

“That’s right, he helped you start your program, right?”

“Yeah. Maybe I could ask him for a personal favor.”

It was hard to get used to being involved with such an influential person. She didn’t know what to think. Carmen had never been to jail for anything, because they could never tie him to any of the crimes they knew he was responsible. This folder would not change that scenario, not yet, and she couldn’t take the chance of him getting away with her brother’s murder.

“Carmen has never been to prison?”

“No. He was arrested three times, but his lawyers got him off all three times.”

“Do you really think we have enough to get him this time?”

Michael thought a minute. “Probably not, but they may be able to get his bodyguards with this information and your family’s testimony.”

“Yes, and we all end up dead before the trial and Angelino Carmen continues to be free. Free to destroy the lives of anyone he wants.”

“I truly hate that man,” Michael said with venom in his voice.

Lisa felt an immense amount of pain for the loss of her brother, but now she took on the pain of seeing Michael’s tortured memories. She went over to him and knelt in front of him. She took his hands in hers and looked up into his eyes. There was so much more there than just a hatred for Angelino Carmen. There was something deeper, something had hurt him to his core and he couldn’t let it go. She wanted to help him, but she didn’t think he was ready to share that pain with her yet. She needed to be patient with him. She was learning the hard way the true meaning of the word patience. Between her brother’s death and her relationship with Michael, her whole life revolved around learning to be patient.

“I hate him, too, but I couldn’t live with myself if something happened to you trying to help me. You have done so much, already. Maybe we should stop now and you can use your contacts to try and get the police to take the information serious.”

Michael thought for a few seconds as he studied Lisa.

“And what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“You can’t pursue this on your own, Lisa. I have professionals working on this,

that's the only way we can be kept separate from this thing. If you snoop around on your own, you will get yourself killed. If we stop, that must mean you stop."

"I don't think I can. I know I should, but I can't. Maybe I can stay under the radar."

"No, you can't. This guy..." he looked quickly at the folder, "Joseph Trumaine, if he can assassinate important dignitaries and other crime bosses who have become enemies of the wrong people, all kinds of important and dangerous people from around the world...men with security guarding them constantly...I think we would be signing our own death warrants if we continue with this."

"Not we, me."

"I thought we were partners, I thought we had something special started here?"

"We do, but the situation is preventing us from taking it further."

He sat silent for a few moments. "Maybe it's not," he finally said.

"What do you mean?" Lisa inquired.

"After all, we're just going to put together some information. They won't even know. We will be careful not to get too close."

She smiled at the implications. He must really want to be with her. That was good, because she felt the same way toward him, but there was still much to consider.

"How do we keep from getting too close?"

"Well, we're not actually the people doing the investigating. I'll talk to the professional investigators I've hired and tell them to be especially wary of anyone becoming suspicious of their inquiries. If it would appear in any way that someone, anyone, has become aware of them, they are to immediately back off and report it to me. That will be our signal to cease our investigation."

She tried to find a loop-hole, but the strategy was sound to her.

"I think that's a good idea."

"There must be a way to stop him. We must find a way to come up with such overwhelming evidence that they can lock him up and throw away the key."

Lisa was glad to see Michael's hatred for the man, but she had no intentions for Carmen to live.

Jeffrey sat across the room from Joseph, listening to Metallica through his iPod. He

had already turned the volume down twice after a brief, but penetrating gaze from Joseph. Joseph was studying the file Jeffrey had retrieved from Mr. Carmen. He decided to play it safe and turned his music off. Besides, what good was it to listen to hard rock if you couldn't listen full blast?

One thing he had learned in his brief apprenticeship with Joseph was to never bother the man while he studies the holy files. Perhaps holy wasn't the right word since they were professional hit men. Even though he was quickly building a healthy respect for Joseph, he couldn't help but be a little skeptical about just how good this man was supposed to be. All he ever did, it seems, was study files. Granted he took out the warehouse scum and the kid, but those were both easy targets that he could have handled himself. At this point, Jeffrey couldn't understand why this man was in town at all. Oh yeah, he was supposed to be training him, except there wasn't much of that going on.

He was bored out-of-his-mind. He remembered Mr. Carmen's advice to watch every little thing that Joseph did, but there just wasn't anything to watch. He began to wonder if he even liked being a bodyguard anymore. When he was a kid, about all he ever did was surf. He was originally from Huntington Beach, in Southern California. Most of his time in school was spent getting in trouble. He spent some time in juvenile hall and then later it was prison, and then he discovered weights while on the inside. He was always a big kid naturally, but weights helped him get even bigger. He liked that people didn't mess with him. When he was twenty-five he got a job as a bouncer at a popular nightclub. They liked that he had a criminal record and conveniently made it known, and encouraged it to be spread among the club social life. It kept trouble to a minimum, usually. The club was a real hotspot in Los Angeles.

One night, two guys got into a fight. Jeffrey was real good at spotting trouble early, he had started it enough in his life to know how to anticipate it. A metal detector kept guns and knives out of the club, but that didn't stop the real punks from using anything they could get their hands on as weapons. One guy smashed his beer bottle over another guys' head. It stunned the guy enough to knock him down, then the first man took his now broken bottle and advanced on the downed man. Just as he was about to cut the other guys' throat, Jeffrey grabbed his hand and bent it backward until it snapped. The guy was writhing in pain on the floor. The first guy who had been hit over the head with the bottle had recovered just as Jeffrey stepped in and he saw everything that Jeffrey had done to save his life. He told Jeffrey he was in town on business and gave him his card.

He told Jeffrey that if he wanted to make a lot of money, he should give him a call.

Jeffrey figured the guy was talking big because he was drunk and there was a large crowd gathered around them, but two days later he gave him a call anyway. One week after that call, he was working security for some guy named Angelino Carmen, in Cleveland. Apparently the guy at the club was an accountant or something for Mr. Carmen, who was a big businessman. Over the last three years Jeffrey had learned that Mr. Carmen was much more than that, but he was getting paid very nicely, so he didn't care what the guy did for a living.

Then, just three months ago he was promoted to Mr. Carmen's personal bodyguard. He didn't know what happened to the other guy, but rumor among the other building security was that the guy had disappeared mysteriously. Not so mysterious if everybody knew. The guy who ran the surveillance system told Jeffrey that one day Mr. Carmen had come for the surveillance tapes, and the guard later heard that an expensive piece of art had disappeared from Carmen's office. Jeffrey pegged the former bodyguard to Mr. Carmen as not being too bright.

So, Jeffrey had been put through several top-secret meetings to determine if he was loyal, and would stay loyal. They had researched his background thoroughly, so it wasn't hard to believe that he didn't care that Mr. Carmen wasn't always legal in his business dealings. He provided a nice life for Jeffrey and therefore he had Jeffrey's loyalty. He couldn't think of anything else he could do and make six figures. Not to mention, he had received a nice pay raise at his promotion. It was definitely more demanding and he had less time to party than when he was just one of the security guards for the building, especially since Joseph arrived. Once his training was over, though, it sounded like he was going to be even richer and even more of a badass. *Maybe then the student will kick the teacher's ass*, he speculated, doubting it even as he smiled at the thought.

He was still very bored waiting for Joseph to do something other than study the folder. He wanted to go over there, yank the folder out of his hands and rip it to shreds right in front of his eyes. He chuckled, enjoying that thought, as well. Then he was bored again.

This sucks, he thought. He stood and walked over to the window, the sight before him was breathtaking. Joseph had the penthouse suite at the best hotel in Cleveland and it overlooked the dockyard on Lake Erie. Jeffrey spoke without thinking, then immediately regretted it.

“Did you ever notice that something normally considered ugly, in the right circumstances, can be beautiful?”

He froze, still looking out the window, hoping that maybe Joseph didn’t hear him. He didn’t dare turn around. He just stood there wondering what Joseph was doing behind him. He reminded himself, *Don’t ever bother Joseph when he is studying a file.*

Joseph was staring at Jeffrey’s back. He knew he had Jeffrey intimidated and he liked that. This big tough guy who regularly brings fear to everyone else he meets, and he was intimidated by him. Size doesn’t always determine the winner in a fight, but it certainly gives an advantage. He was fairly large, but not nearly as big as Jeffrey. He had been trained in the Special Forces, though, and continuously trained in the martial arts. Jeffrey had every right to fear him, even if he didn’t exactly know why. This, of course, was Jeffrey’s first lesson. You intimidate through presence, not just size. Even though, to this point, Jeffrey had no idea it was his first lesson. Joseph almost smiled.

“Yes, Jeffrey, I have.”

Jeffrey turned around slowly and looked at him. He wasn’t sure, but it didn’t sound like Joseph was angry. In fact, if he didn’t know better, he almost sounded civil.

Joseph looked Jeffrey in the eyes.

“Jeffrey, that is probably the first intelligent thought you have shared since I arrived.”

Jeffrey was instantly embarrassed. *So much for him being civil.*

“Perhaps there is hope for you after all.”

Jeffrey felt his embarrassment turning to anger. He knew he wasn’t smart, but this asshole didn’t have to make him feel stupid. He didn’t know what to do. He had never feared anyone before and he couldn’t explain why, but he feared Joseph. He was bigger than him and he was pretty sure he could kick his ass. Maybe it was the reputation thing that worried him, he didn’t know. What he did know was, if anyone other than Joseph or Mr. Carmen talked to him like that, he would kick their ass. He could feel Joseph’s gaze on him, so he glanced that way. Of course, Joseph was looking at him, and with that penetrating look that says he knows every weakness you have and will use it to defeat you.

“Are you angry?” Joseph asked him.

Jeffrey looked up. He became very nervous. It was obvious he was angry. Was Joseph provoking him? Now he was actually a little scared. He had a bad feeling he may find out just how good Joseph was very soon. All of a sudden he no longer wanted to

know, so he better answer the question.

“A little.”

“Just a little? I was trying for more, do you mean to tell me I failed? I despise failure.”

Jeffrey was looking down at the floor again. He had no idea what was going on.

What game was this dude playing?

“I guess I’m a little more than a little.”

“Good. Now, what are you going to do about it?”

“What?”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“I...I don’t know?”

“No, you don’t, do you,” Joseph said matter-of-factly and with a little disappointment.

Jeffrey looked confused.

“Are you afraid, Jeffrey?”

This was humiliating. He didn’t know how much more he could take before he exploded on Joseph, regardless of the consequences.

“Jeffrey?”

Jeffrey hated how he made him feel like an unruly child, but answered anyway.

“Yes, a little.”

“Do you like being scared?”

“No.”

“Good, then don’t be.”

Jeffrey looked up again. Now he was really confused. He reluctantly looked into Joseph’s eyes. At first he was afraid or even more so, ashamed to look him in the eyes, but then he was surprised at what he saw, or didn’t see. He saw no anger or malice. Joseph wasn’t picking a fight or making fun of him, he was teaching him a lesson. He finally understood what this whole charade had been about. He was teaching him how to intimidate. The problem was Jeffrey still didn’t know how he did it. Without thinking as to the consequence, he asked, “How do you not be afraid? Either you are or you aren’t?”

Joseph stared at him a few moments until he became intimidated again and looked down.

“If you really think about it, I think you just answered your own question.”

Jeffrey looked back up, confused, but then started thinking about what Joseph said.

He had never been studious before, but suddenly he wanted to understand this lesson.

“Two things. One, you are intimidated by me. You’re not even sure why, but you are. Even though you are much bigger than I am, you are afraid of me. You know Mr. Carmen has hired me to train you, so I am not going to kill you, and yet you remain afraid.

You will learn to be the intimidator, not the intimidated. Being the biggest guy is not enough, Jeffrey. There are many skilled fighters out there, with weapons and hand combat, who will not be intimidated by your size. You must let them know there is more about you to worry about.

Two, you have little education and that is a delicate subject for you. There isn’t much that bothers you and that is good, but you must know your weak spots and you must know how to cover them up while you are strengthening them, so your enemies can’t find them. You must learn to not be sensitive about your education. It may be too late for you to become an intelligent person in the academia sense, but you can educate yourself in other ways. Observation and accumulation of facts are the best sources of education. You must learn as much as you can about each target and you do that by accumulating facts. You closely observe the developing situation, therefore making the consequential action that much easier to plan. These two things make up your first lesson. Remember them and make them habit.”

Jeffrey stood there a moment, trying to take it all in. His head was spinning. He kind of understood, but probably not really. He finally got the courage to tell Joseph the truth.

“Dude, I don’t think I understand.”

“You will,” Joseph said. “And never say ‘dude’ again, it is not professional. Always be professional, it is what keeps you alive.”

Jeffrey was embarrassed yet again. However, this time, something inside told him he could do it. He looked at Joseph. There was nothing sinister about the way he had spoken to him, he was teaching him. Jeffrey thought about everything for a moment and decided maybe it wasn’t that bad. After all, he was being taught to be an assassin by the top dude in the world. He just realized how happy he was he hadn’t said that out loud. At least he understood why Joseph acted the way he did. His was in a very dangerous profession and yet he was still alive. If he was going to do this and it appears the decision had already been made for him, then he definitely wanted to stay alive. If he had to be what Joseph called professional to stay alive, then so be it. Joseph now had his

complete attention.

“I will do my best,” he said.

“Good, Mr. Carmen expects a lot from you. Otherwise, I wouldn’t waste my time.”

Once again, Jeffrey was surprised. He knew Mr. Carmen was big time in Cleveland, but he didn’t realize he was such an influential man outside the city. It made him feel important, and he thought of Mr. Carmen in a whole new way. Now, he didn’t want to let him down.

The hands free phone in Michael’s new Ferrari rang. He touched the button on his Bluetooth earpiece to answer.

“Hello.” He listened for a moment, then said, “Thank you.”

He glanced briefly at Lisa.

“Your family is in the safe-house.”

“Thank God.”

Lisa’s relief seemed to lift a big weight from her shoulders, for she had been extremely uptight over the last few hours. This helped Michael to relax, as well.

They both had been experiencing a bout of cabin fever, so they left his office and went for a late dinner. Now that dinner was over he didn’t feel like going back to the office. However, there was still much to be done.

“I’m supposed to receive some important information through email,” he said.

“Back to the office again?” Lisa asked, a little disappointed. They had been in the office all day, working the phone, faxes, and emails, doing nothing but compiling information. It was much more work being the investigative reporter, which Lisa liked to think of herself as rather than a private detective, than Lisa had realized.

“No, I’m too tired,” he stated warily, “I can check it at my house.”

Michael didn’t even realize the impact of the statement until Lisa’s suspicious and nervous comment.

“Your home? We’re going to your home?” She didn’t even mind going to his house, so she wasn’t sure why she was so confrontational. In fact, it would be exciting to see where he lived and she knew she could trust him. Besides, if anything did happen between them, she was all right with it now. In fact, she was looking forward to their

first time together. She always knew she had somewhat of an edge to her, because you had to be tough to survive in the neighborhood she grew up in, but did she always have to be so defensive that she would raise an argument against something she wanted?

Embarrassed, he immediately tried to explain his true intentions.

“I’m sorry, Lisa, I wasn’t even thinking about that. Of course, I can take you to your family, if you like. I mistakenly took it for granted you would want to see the information right away.”

“I do. I don’t know why I acted like that, I’m sorry. I guess I am still a little uptight from all the work we did today.”

“No apology needed, I’m rather spent myself. I just wanted you to know I didn’t mean to, I wasn’t expecting anything. I mean, of course you don’t have stay if you don’t want to.”

“I know.”

Good thing, he thought, because he had already been driving home out of habit. Ten minutes later, he pulled into the driveway of his house.

“Besides, I have plenty of room in my house. I can put you in the furthest guest room from my room, if you like.”

Lisa looked over to him. “What?” He was joking, but he had a bad feeling about this one. By the tone of her voice, he wished he could have that last stupid statement back, but it was too late, so he opened his car door and started to get out, hoping she would let it pass.

“Nothing.”

As he got out, he could hear Lisa say, “I’m not afraid of you.”

He was outside the car now, but he heard what she said. He wondered what that was supposed to mean. He pretended he didn’t hear her and continued around the car to open her door, but she had already exited the car and now stood in front of him.

She wasn’t going to let him off that easy. Other women may bow down to the great Michael Deshay, but he would soon find out that she was his equal and he needed to treat her that way. Michael gave a quick glance at the bodyguards he had arranged for his home. He didn’t want to make a scene.

“I’m not afraid of you, Michael.”

“Afraid? Why would I want you to be afraid of me?”

“I don’t mean like that, I mean romantically.”

“I know what you mean, Lisa.”

He glanced toward the bodyguards again.

“Let’s continue this inside, please.”

He motioned his head to indicate the bodyguards were there, and then made for the front door of his very large estate. She looked around and noticed the bodyguards for the first time. She didn’t want to make a scene either. Then, the enormity of his house hit her. They had come in through a private gate and driven up a long private driveway, but she had been talking intently with him the whole time, so she didn’t even get a chance to appreciate the beauty of the place. Unfortunately, she didn’t have time to enjoy the sight now, either, because Michael was getting away and she didn’t feel like she had made her point clear enough, yet. She hurried after him, quietly. She would be able to see the place better in the daylight, anyway. He unlocked the door and began to enter when Lisa had caught up to him. She whispered forcefully, “I’m not afraid of you.”

Michael entered the house with Lisa right behind him, as he closed the door and locked it, he stated just as forcefully, “I don’t want you to be afraid of me.” He wasn’t sure how everything had gotten out of control and he was clueless how to stop it. Everything was fine one minute, now it was all falling apart.

“You think that any woman you kiss is going to fall under your spell and do anything you want. You think you have to look out for the poor gal so she doesn’t lose her mind from your beguiling seductions. Well, I’m not like those spoiled little rich girls you’re used to dating, I can take care of myself. I don’t need you protecting my virtue, because I can’t do it myself when I’m in your presence.”

Lisa was fuming and Michael didn’t understand why, when all he did was make a joke. She looked at him, daring him to say something. He wanted to, but he was too shocked at what she was saying and he couldn’t figure out why she was saying it. He wondered if he really acted that way. He didn’t think so, but maybe. His feelings were hurt and it was obvious by the way he looked at her.

She knew she had maliciously attacked his character for no reason. She was still angry, but mostly at herself. Why was she being so cruel to him? And now he just looks at her, not saying anything. He was purposely trying to make her feel guiltier.

“Say something, dammit!” She yelled.

He remained calm. He had a feeling something else was going on. He tried to speak in a caring voice, but he doubted he hid his anger and disappointment.

“Regardless of how you believe I treat women, this isn’t about them, it’s about you and me. I do not believe I have wronged you in any way. I believe there is something special trying to happen between us and you keep trying to sabotage it, so maybe you are afraid. I can think of nothing worse in a relationship than fear of intimacy, because it causes dishonesty and mistrust. Worst of all, it can prevent two people who should be together from being together. I would not wish that on anyone. I don’t want you to be afraid of what could happen between us, but you are and you continue to take it out on me.”

Lisa looked away. She knew it was true. She wanted it to happen, but she was scared. He took a step closer to her, she wanted to scream for him to get away...no she didn’t. She wanted him close to her. She struggled for something to say, but he took care of the words for her.

“Lisa, I know you’re not afraid of me, you’re afraid of us. Well, so am I.”

Lisa looked up quickly. Had she gone too far? Was he going to end it before it started? She knew everything would be fine once she accepted the fact it was all right to fall in love with him, even though her brother had just been murdered.

Michael reached up and gently touched the side of her face. She looked into his eyes. He smiled as he looked into hers.

“What do you say we be afraid, together.”

Lisa smiled, but couldn’t find any words to describe how good he had just made her feel inside. She nodded her head happily. He smiled back, then leaned down and kissed her softly on the lips.

“It appears I have underestimated our esteemed Michael Deshay.”

Joseph was angry, but always in control.

“Whadaya mean, dude?” Jeffrey asked, but was immediately frustrated, catching his recurring mistake. Ever since Joseph’s first lesson, he was making a concerted effort to become a professional, but it was hard to break old habits.

“I mean, uh...what about him have you underestimated?”

Joseph’s right eye-brow rose curiously and he peeked up from the file on Michael Deshay. At first Jeffrey thought he was in big trouble for using the dreaded word that

Joseph hated with a passion, but he didn't look angry. It was weird. It was almost as if he was looking into the eyes of a proud father, who just saw his son take his first step.

Joseph gave a half smile, which in itself was the equivalent to a UFO sighting.

"Don't worry Jeffrey, it will take time. The important thing is you noticed and corrected. Without realizing, you are already developing your observation skills."

Jeffrey smiled and said, "Thanks," a little embarrassed, a little proud.

In some ways he did feel like a little kid who had to be taught the simplest of things. Was he being potty trained or being trained to be a world class assassin? He knew he had never been the smart-type, but it was degrading to be spoken to on such an elementary level. On the other hand, it kind of felt good to have someone around to teach him. He had never had a father figure before. His father had always been drunk, so he didn't really know much about it. He had friends in high school that had cool dads and he was always so jealous of their relationships that sometimes he would beat them up, and then make some excuse that they were being obnoxious. Oddly enough, he felt something like that father figure thing developing here with Joseph. There was no way Joseph was old enough to be his father, not to mention what was being taught here wasn't exactly fatherly stuff. It wasn't as if he was being taught how to ride a bike. Jeffrey didn't care, he would take what he could get. Joseph brought him out of his reverie.

"Jeffrey, there is a very important lesson I must teach you here, at the expense of my own pride."

He could see Joseph was very serious.

"I made a mistake underestimating Michael Deshay."

Jeffrey gulped and stood completely still. Despite their moment of bonding a minute ago, he suddenly felt frightened again. For Joseph to admit a mistake...

"I mistook him for a high class wimp, with no brains for dealing outside of the business world. I disobeyed one of my own rules, never underestimate anyone. Apparently he is a self-made man. Self-made men always have some street smarts and toughness that helped them survive while they struggled to make it to the top of their profession. This information was not made available to me early on and I filled in the blanks without proper information. I'll need to have a talk with my sources, they have disappointed me."

Jeffrey almost felt sorry for his sources and he never felt sorry for anyone.

"Even so, I cannot place the full blame elsewhere. However, I am human and I will

make mistakes. What separates me from everyone else is my ability to deal with my mistakes. My ability to compensate and adjust when things do not go as planned. Most people panic when they make a mistake or when things go wrong. In our line of work panic will cause failure. Panic will get you killed. You must adapt under adversity and that is why I always win.”

He stared hard at Jeffrey as he made that last statement. It was all Jeffrey could do to stay standing.

“Jeffrey, you are still allowing me to intimidate you to the point of not thinking clearly. I am glad you respect and fear me, but you must learn to control it. I have used my powers of intimidation to help me shake up much more experienced men than you, so don’t feel bad about it. However, if you can learn to control your fear of me, you will be able to handle yourself against anyone.”

He smiled at the thought of that. “I will do better.”

“Good. Now back to the problem at hand. The lesson here would be to never make the same mistake twice. Fortunately this mistake of mine does not press us in any way. It is still early and I doubt our, almost lovers, have any idea we are onto them. I think it is time for you to learn to use information.”

Jeffrey was taken by surprise, for it sounded like Joseph was going to share the information from his precious folder with him. He didn’t really care about the information itself, but the fact he was going to share it with him was very exciting.

“Now, we know they are gathering a lot of information on their side, just as we are on our side, but they’re not sharing it with the police. If they’re not going to the police, they either feel they don’t have enough yet, or they are going to use it to do something stupid. So, what are they going to do?”

Jeffrey was deep in thought and spoke without considering whether the question was actually directed to him.

“Maybe they will hire someone to kill us.” He looked up to see if it was O.K. that he spoke.

“Maybe,” Joseph said, thinking intently.

“Mr. Deshay has a great deal of money. He could hire the best, but then again, I am the best and I am already taken.”

Jeffrey limited himself to a half-smile, not knowing if that was an attempt at humor. He thought it was pretty funny.

“Besides, he has an impeccable reputation for being an honest man, so I don’t think he would take that route. He would be taking great risk to his future if there was someone out there who knew what he had done. Not to mention, I don’t think he would be willing to kill, which is useful information for us. I do, however, believe that the girl would want revenge and she grew up in a very dangerous neighborhood. That doesn’t guarantee she is a violent person, but she is certainly more used to being around violence. Perhaps she has kept him from going to the police. Perhaps she is more ambitious than Mr. Deshay is aware.”

“But she is just a girl. Surely, she isn’t going to try and come after us by herself.”

“Good point Jeffrey, she will likely need help, but we must remember to not underestimate anyone. We will say that it is probable that she will require help if she decides on revenge, whether she plans to hire a thug off the street when the time comes, or if she plans to lure Mr. Deshay into her private agenda is yet to be determined. The problem is, if she is planning on coming after us, it is taking too long. We need to inspire her to come after us faster.”

“I like that, but I don’t understand why it matters.”

“The more time they take, the more time they have to develop a better plan. Haste makes mistakes. Not to mention, the more time they have, the more information Mr. Deshay puts together. They already know a little too much to make me comfortable, and we don’t want the police to start knowing too much, as well. I think that if she had the opportunity to pursue her revenge in the near future, she would be more likely to come after us with reckless abandon, still running off the fresh emotions of her brother’s death. That not only makes it easy for us to eliminate her, but it would allow us the perfect opportunity to enact Mr. Carmen’s little plan for Michael Deshay. It would all happen before he even realizes they are in over their heads.”

Jeffrey marveled at the plan. He looked at Joseph as if he were a genius and tried to think of something that would help their plan. He wanted to impress him.

“I know we didn’t do it before and I admit I don’t understand why, but would it make sense to take out the rest of the girls’ family now?”

“That’s a good question Jeffrey.”

He was excited. Although Joseph was still teaching him, he was treating him with much more respect than before.

“The answer is no. We didn’t kill them before because they were never a target. We

had to kill the boy, but once we had determined he didn't tell anyone else, there was no reason to kill them. His family means nothing. Everything now centers on Michael Deshay.

However, normally a family would be too afraid too get involved, but Miss Johnson has been a bit of a surprise. In our particular case she is actually a nice surprise. Mr. Deshay and Mr. Carmen share some history. Mr. Deshay embarrassed Mr. Carmen in one of his territories and now he wants a little revenge of his own. He has been looking for an opportunity to hit Mr. Deshay where it would hurt him the most. Killing him would be too easy, so Mr. Carmen wants to disgrace him in the business world. He wants to ruin his life. After he has been humiliated, then he will kill him. Actually, I will more than likely be called upon to do it, or perhaps that can be your first job."

Jeffrey looked up quickly at that. Maybe his training was progressing faster than he originally thought.

"At any rate, Mr. Carmen had been looking for an opening, but Mr. Deshay is well-beloved in this city. Then Kenneth Johnson showed up at the wrong place, at the wrong time and inadvertently involved Mr. Deshay in this whole sordid affair. Even better, Miss Johnson came into his life. We couldn't have paid her to do a better job providing an opportunity to get at the squeaky clean businessman. She is effectively affording Mr. Carmen the opportunity to finally seek his revenge. It is now up to you and me to make that happen."

Jeffrey nearly fell out of the chair in which he was seated. It was surprising enough to finally be let in on the information and amazingly, even the planning side of things, but to be included on the action part of the process was the icing on the cake. He had come very far these last few days...very far indeed.

Michael lay in his bed asleep, with Lisa comfortably snuggled up next to him. She glanced up at his face, he looked so peaceful lying there. She couldn't believe she was actually there with him. She smiled and snuggled in closer, amazed love could happen so quickly. It was just a few days ago they had met and their worlds had seemed to be light-years apart. Now, in such a short period of time...there was too much to take in. She needed to remain calm, she needed to stay in control, but in a reasonable way, not like the

fiasco she had caused earlier. She smiled. At least it ended well.

She felt so safe in his arms, safe from the evil that killed her brother. But were they safe? She could stop pursuing the bastards that killed her brother and live happily-ever-after with Michael. Could she live with herself if she let them get away with it? Maybe she could live with them going to jail. The murderers didn't deserve to live, but it didn't do any good to get her and Michael killed, and she needed to trust him.

She owed it to Michael to trust him. She would work with him to get all the information they needed to take to the police and with him by her side, with all of his influence, the police would have to take them serious. This could work. Maybe they could get Carmen, maybe he would be convicted this time. She refused to be naïve, though. It was a long shot, plain and simple. She would do things Michael's way and remain vigilant, just in case.

Michael moved a little in his sleep, and she looked up at him again. *Enough about business*, she thought, she wanted to enjoy the moment. First it was the wonderful love-making they had shared. Now, she wanted to enjoy sharing his bed in repose. She relaxed and fell asleep in Michael's arms and they both slept...and Michael dreamed.

CHAPTER 8

Derrick woke up in a sweat, slightly embarrassed by what he had just been through. He felt like he was invading someone else's privacy, but it wasn't his fault, he had seen it in his dream. It was a dream of extreme intimacy between Micheal and Lisa. The Dream had continued to dominate his sleep, but this time it was too personal.

He looked around to establish his whereabouts; reality showed him the rat hole he lived in and brought back last night's events. Well, he didn't want to think about that ridiculous situation with Fred and Maddog anymore, either, so he thought about The Dream again, not the specifics of what was happening, but why it was happening.

Unfortunately, he had no idea as to the why, as his thoughts drifted more specifically to Lisa. Of course, she was beautiful, but he had felt an incredible connection to her. He may love her. It took a moment for Derrick to realize he had confused Michael's thoughts with his own.

Derrick shook his head. This whole dream thing was becoming a little too crazy. How could he possibly know this guy's thoughts? Then something else occurred to him. For the first time since The Dream started, and reflecting back he could not determine exactly when that was, he thought of Michael Deshay as a real person and not just part of his dreamworld. *That isn't possible.*

Derrick got out of bed and felt a note of embarrassment once again as he noticed his body had responded quite emphatically to the lovemaking he had witnessed in his dream. He adjusted his clothes to try and cover up the front of his pants the best he could, just in case any of the slumbering losers happened to wake up early this particular morning. He looked at Fred's friends sleeping on the floor and thought about the others spread throughout the house, and his little spot in the garage. *I have got to get out of here*, he thought, considering the needy rocker chick, once again.

He walked toward the kitchen to get breakfast just as Fred's ex-wife was entering the kitchen through the back entrance. Carrie had a deep, raspy voice, but not in a sexy, Demi Moore sort of way, and she talked slow. From the moment Derrick met her he

thought maybe she was a little slow, but she insisted that she had a degree in education and used to be a teacher. *No wonder our schools suck.* Too many drugs had caught up with Carrie.

“Good morning, Derrick.” Carrie was overly nice, as always, even at 8:00 in the morning. She acted as though nothing had happened the previous night.

“Morning Carrie.”

Carrie had a wicked little smile on her face.

“You sure do roll around a lot in your sleep,” she stated.

Derrick looked up curiously, “Oh?”

“Yeah, I was up early and came out to put on some coffee. I could hear you moving around a lot.”

“Well, the couch isn’t the most comfortable place to sleep, you know.”

“Yeah.” Carrie giggled. “You talk a lot in your sleep, too.”

He looked up from preparing a bowl of cereal for breakfast, he didn’t like where this was headed.

“I did?”

“Oh, yeah, a lot,” she said matter-of-factly, nodding her head.

“Great.” Carrie giggled again. “Alright, Carrie, what did I say?”

She wrinkled her brow as she thought back to what she had heard. “Well, I was in here making coffee and I thought I heard you saying something, so I went out to the living room, and you looked real serious. At first I couldn’t understand much, I think you said ‘the docks,’ or somethin’ like that.”

“The docks? I don’t know of any docks. What else?”

“Well, then, a little bit later, you said ‘Lisa’ in a real nice way.”

“Lisa?”

“Yeah. It was very easy to hear that time, you said it very passionately.” She smiled knowingly as she glanced down to Derrick’s slowly decreasing bulge.

Well, that certainly confirmed the dream girl’s name, at least, he considered as he turned sideways a little to take the front of his pants out of Carrie’s eye line, since she made no attempt to hide her staring. He knew a Lisa back in Cleveland, but she didn’t mean anything to him. It must be some made up hot girl in his dream. But then, why did he think of Michael and the girl as real people when he had first awakened?

“Thanks, Carrie.”

Derrick picked up his bowl of cereal and turned to leave so he could eat while he watched T.V. and not have to think about The Dream. Not to mention he needed an excuse to escape from Carrie until his excited member had a chance to return to normalcy. He carried his bowl of Lucky Charms toward the table in the dining area, which had been cleaned up completely already. He had taken off when the cops showed up the previous night, but he didn't remember anyone going upstairs to clean up the drugs before their arrival. Since nobody got arrested, they either managed to get it clean or the cops didn't bother checking the apartment. Either way, Carrie had certainly been industrious this morning.

"There's more."

He turned his head as he passed Carrie, leaving the kitchen. "Huh."

Carrie smiled mischievously; she was having way too much fun at his expense.

"I heard you say something else."

Derrick had a bad feeling about this one.

"And what was that?"

Carrie wrapped her arms around herself and made her face scrunch up in an odd way that almost looked painful. "I love you," she said very passionately, much too passionate for someone mimicking someone else's feelings.

"Shit," he said and turned toward the dining room table as Carrie began to laugh again. Embarrassed, and forgetting about his original destination, he set his bowl of cereal down too forcefully and spilled the milk on the table.

"Shit."

He ignored the spill and sat down. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, Carrie."

Carrie still had her enormous smile going, and Derrick thought it made her look even more retarded than she acted. He knew he was being mean, but he was a mean man and he was pissed. Besides, it wasn't like he said it to her face. *Why didn't he say it to her face?* He never held back what he thought about people, good or bad, he thought vaguely as Carrie started on him again.

"I didn't know you were in love, Derrick."

"Carrie, it was just a dream." *Why was he speaking someone else's feelings, as if they were his own?*

"I know, but still, your dreams reveal a lot about what you want in real life."

At first, Derrick was too shocked by the intelligence put into what Carrie had said to

say anything in retort, then the door bell rang. Carrie left to go answer the door and he was relieved at the chance to terminate the present conversation and finally eat his breakfast in peace. He couldn't hear the conversation at the door, so he had no idea who it could be at eight o'clock in the morning, but he heard the door close and two voices coming toward him. Derrick turned his head nonchalantly as Carrie arrived with her guest.

"This is Derrick, Derrick, this is P-Dawg." The name sounded absurd coming from Carrie's lips, like she had no business using a person's street name. Derrick had been around gang types most of his life in Cleveland. He had never joined one, even though he had been invited several times, but he did business with many of them. He knew this man was a gangster immediately.

So, this was a L.A. "gangsta." They had a bad reputation in Cleveland. He feared no man, but he did fear a gun, so he needed to be cautious, although he couldn't help but wonder what a gangster was doing here in the home of Fred and Carrie. Then it dawned on him that this dude must be their drug hook-up. *Getting an early start, even for druggies*, he thought.

"Yo, what up?"

"Hey, man." Derrick shook hands, street style, with P-Dawg as they sized each other up. In his experience, gangsters tended to have short fuses and he was determined to stay out of trouble, even though trouble appeared to be stalking him relentlessly, so he kept his normal tough guy posturing to a minimum. P-Dawg was giving him the usual gangster hard stare, since they tended to rely more on fear than brains, as their means to an end. Derrick was never education smart, but he learned the hard way how to be street smart.

"So, are you the whiteboy who saved Fred's life?"

Derrick didn't say it with anger, but he did want something understood up front; there would be mutual respect or there would be a problem.

"I gave up being a boy a long time ago." He paused a moment to allow their stare-down to linger. This was normal posturing among thugs, even though Derrick wasn't a thug, he knew the protocol to establishing their misguided view of respect for each other. Point made with no aggressive reaction from P-Dawg, Derrick continued his thought.

"Fred was no big deal."

P-Dawg's stare lingered a moment longer, as if he still debated whether he wanted to

do something about Derrick's original comment, or he was making an extra effort to intimidate him. Carrie had gone to get Fred, so it was just the two of them. Derrick sat back down in his chair, already planning what he would do if P-Dawg were to attack. He motioned to a seat across the table from him as a goodwill gesture. P-Dawg smiled.

"That's cool, but saving Old Man's ass was a big deal."

"P-Dawg!"

Fred came into the room with his arms already in position to give P-Dawg a hug.

"P-Dawg, how you doin'," Fred asked as he gave him a big bear hug. He acted as if P-Dawg was his long lost son. Derrick had never seen a drug dealer and client this friendly before, something else was going on here.

"Hey, Old Man. You all right, man."

"Thanks to Derrick I am," he said as they both turned to look at Derrick. P-Dawg sized him up again, but just for a moment this time, as if he needed to confirm Derrick was really a bad ass.

"Are you still pissed I called you a whiteboy?"

"I'm cool. I just like to get things established proper. I prefer to show people respect until they do something to take that respect away from themselves."

There was instant intensity in the room. Derrick was definitely back to his old self this morning and couldn't seem to get out of that troublesome mode. For trying to stay out of trouble, he was talking a lot of smack. Apparently, his brief nice guy stint from the previous night was over and replaced by his usual anger and tough guy routine that had a tendency to get him in trouble. Truth was, it had almost gotten him killed a few times. Taking chances was a way of life for him, but that was his old life, or was supposed to be his old life. *Keep your attitude in check*, he reminded himself. He had nothing to prove to this gangster or anyone else for that matter. Things were supposed to be different now, but here he stood, face to face with a L.A. gangsta and he had no intentions of backing down until he was given mutual respect. You can't change a lifetime of bad attitude overnight.

"That's cool, man. I like that, a whiteb...dude with attitude." Derrick didn't have time to be surprised at how reasonable this man was, because P-Dawg immediately changed the subject.

"Now, as far as helping Fred being no big deal, that isn't the way he made it sound."

Fred excitedly jumped in before Derrick could answer. He couldn't wait to tell P-

Dawg the story.

“You should have seen him P-Dawg, he kicked Maddog’s ass, but good!”

“Maddog? From the hill?” P-Dawg asked very seriously.

“Yep,” Fred answered. “Had him running like a dog with his tail between his legs.”

P-Dawg looked at Derrick with a new respect.

“Well, at least Fred won’t have to worry about him anymore.”

Fred asked worriedly, “Are you sure about that P?”

“Oh yeah, I’m sure.” He looked from Fred back to Derrick.

“You see, Madddog isn’t the brightest of cats. He can only handle one thought at a time and thanks to D here, his thought is no longer on killing you Old Man. Word on the street is he wants to kill some fresh faced white...dude who embarrassed him, real bad. Guess that must be D.”

Derrick wasn’t about to worry about a guy like Randy. He had been threatened by much worse in his time.

“I doubt he’ll even come back,” he said.

P-Dawg gave a crooked smile. “I know he ain’t much to look at, but the son-of-a-bitch is crazy. He may have been too drugged up to remember exactly why, but he does remember he wants you dead and that means he’ll come after you. I know this guy.”

Derrick didn’t say anything; he would deal with it when it happened.

P-Dawg walked up to him as Derrick had begun to eat his cereal again.

“My thanks bro’, about Old Man, we go way back.”

“No problem.”

P-Dawg looked around to Fred and Carrie.

“Hey, Old Man, Carrie, uh, I was thinking of offering some business to D here. You know, in thanks for helping you. So, would you mind giving us a minute?”

“Could I hear what it is? I mean, maybe I could help, it was my life he saved.”

Derrick focused his attention on P-Dawg at the mention of doing business together. He was frustrated that his first thought would be *finally, a break*, when he was supposed to be staying away from the criminal lifestyle. Besides, gangsters usually dealt in drugs and he didn’t, never had. It just didn’t interest him. Drugs were for less skilled street punks, and he was a professional criminal specializing in guns. Meanwhile, Fred was at it again with the saving his life story. Derrick just shook his head.

P-Dawg interrupted Fred’s story once he got the gist of it, which was pretty quickly,

and he knew Fred was stalling, trying to get in on the deal he was going to offer Derrick. “Sorry Old Man, you know the rules, you are not aloud in our business. The idea is to keep you alive, not put you in harms way. Now, please...” P-Dawg motioned for them to leave.

“All right, all right.” Fred followed Carrie out of the room, thoroughly disappointed.

P-Dawg sat down at the dining room table across from Derrick. “All right then D, whadaya do for cash?”

“Nada at the moment.”

“You don’t look like a banger or even a wanna be, but you certainly have the attitude...or should I say the balls of a thug. If you hadn’t saved Old Man’s life, we would have had a serious problem, you know, you talkin’ to me the way you did, but I’m willing to give some leeway for that. And, if you’re in need of some cash, I can provide you an opportunity.”

Derrick looked around the apartment.

“No disrespect to Fred and Carrie, but I would say I’m in need.”

P-Dawg looked around and laughed.

“True, true.”

“I don’t deal drugs, though...not my style.”

“It’s not drugs, its guns.”

Derrick brightened up. He was very good with guns and had dealt them many times before. He was definitely interested now and P-Dawg noticed the change.

“Good, perhaps we can work something out then.”

Derrick nodded hesitantly, “Perhaps.”

“Damn, P-Dawg! What the hell were you thinkin’?” the man named James blared.

Derrick felt foolish for trusting a guy he had just met. He was tired of all the problems since he had arrived in L.A., but he wanted money and he wanted it now. Like his anger, his impatience had gotten him in trouble again.

He quickly took in his surroundings, not liking his current situation at all. He stood in the living room of a small house, amongst five black guys. He didn’t think to ask P-Dawg where he lived until they had arrived. They were now in south-central L.A. and he

couldn't believe his own stupidity for going along, no questions asked, as James, the apparent leader of this small gang spoke again.

"P, could you explain to me what you were thinkin'?"

He presented his case. "C'mon James, you know me, man. You know I wouldn't bring a cracker in without a good reason."

P-Dawg glanced at Derrick just to make sure he wasn't losing his temper at the names being used to refer to him. Derrick wasn't stupid. It was one thing to stand up to P-Dawg at Fred's apartment, but to stand up to a small gang in their crib, in the heart of gang territory was suicide. He kept silent and stood without expression. Three of the guys stood with their hands on their guns staring him down. He ignored them as the leader spoke again.

"Well, that's exactly what I'm waiting to hear, a good reason. What is it?"

"D saved Old Man's life," P-Dawg said. Everyone turned their heads toward P-Dawg and then looked at Derrick, everybody except James. His attention remained devoted to P-Dawg and he refused to even acknowledge Derrick.

"What?" James said.

"Straight up James, I just came from Old Man's place. Old Man was attacked by Maddog and D here saved him."

"Maddog," James became furious. "The same one?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying, James. I told you I heard Maddog was after someone and then Old Man called me, telling me Derrick saved his life. I thought I should check it out." P-Dawg motioned to Derrick. "D saved him. I figured, the least I could do was offer him some action."

Reluctantly, James finally turned to Derrick.

"Did you take him out?"

"No."

James turned back to P-Dawg.

"Maddog is still alive, so this information does me no good."

"Derrick broke his probation in Cleveland to come here, so he couldn't take him out. He's trying to get set up before he takes any chances."

"That's a very sad story, but we're not a charity here P. If he had taken out the bastard that would be different."

Derrick couldn't believe what he was hearing. Everyone continued talking about this

Maddog like he's a legend. Derrick's curiosity got the better of him.

"What's the deal with this Maddog? I mean, it can't be the same guy. This guy was small and weak. Yeah, he talked a big game, but I thought that was the drugs talking. Why does everyone talk like this guy is so dangerous?"

"He's a piss ant all right." Derrick looked over to the massive figure that spoke. He was a pretty big guy, himself, but this guy made him look small. He wasn't much taller than Derrick, but his muscles were huge. He went by the name of T-Bone, apparently his favorite meal, which he no doubt ate very often.

A small guy beside him spoke up next, and Derrick thought they had called him Truth. He got a kick out of the nick-name game that gangsters loved to play. Some of the names were very creative, but most revealed their arrogance.

"Problem is, this piss ant is crazy. He just doesn't care...about anything. He'll take out anyone, anytime, anywhere. He just ain't all there, man."

The other small guy spoke up, but Derrick didn't remember his name.

"Looks like you got yourself into a big 'ol mess, whiteboy."

Derrick shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe, but I just don't see it. P-Dawg, what does this have to do with all of you? Why am I here?"

"It's like this D, Maddog killed three of ours one night in Hollywood. We were cruisin' down sunset in two different cars, next thing, he comes up beside us on his hog. He had five or six of his friends with him cruisin' on their bikes, but they passed right on by us and just kept going, no problem. Maddog goes by the first car, but as he's passing my car he unloads his nine mill. We never stood a chance, man. Then he took off through traffic on his bike so we couldn't catch him. Man, I was driving that car he shot-up and somehow I survived, only took a bullet in my wrist and leg. The other three weren't so lucky."

Finally, Derrick understood.

"I'm sorry, man," he said as he looked around the room.

The smallest guy there spoke again, and Derrick finally remembered his nickname. He looked like a little kid and without surprise they called him Pee Wee.

"We'll handle our own bi'nness anyway. We don't need this cracker doing us any favors."

"Yes, we will handle our business," James agreed.

Derrick felt trapped. P-Dawg may like him or just feel grateful to him, but he was the only one. He always figured he would die one day because of his impatience or anger. If he had just stayed at Fred's and been patient about finding a real job...*Oh, well*, he thought, *what's done is done*. But he did formulate a plan in his mind just in case anything went down. It was a long shot, but he may be able to escape the house alive, then he had to continue his escape through a neighborhood where he would stick out like a soar thumb. There probably wasn't another white person within fifteen or twenty miles.

"Hey, I'm down," said P-Dawg, "but the fact still remains that D here saved Old Man's life. He didn't take out Maddog, but he did save Old Man. I just figured we could provide an opportunity to him for that. Besides, an extra gun wouldn't hurt tonight."

James was still very angry over the situation, but this did make him think. Everyone looked at James. Derrick was impressed. P-Dawg had turned the momentum of the conversation in an instant. He started to think he actually had a chance to live now. At this point, even though he needed the money, he wouldn't be terribly upset if he wasn't included in their little gun deal, he just wanted to get back home alive. He knew he must be in a bad spot if he actually wanted to go back to that dump he called home.

James glanced at Derrick and then looked at each of his partners. He walked over to him until he was right in front of him, but Derrick didn't intimidate easily and locked eyes with James.

"I don't like whiteboys. Old Man is special, though. He's the only white man I ever liked and you did save him...so, you run with us tonight."

James turned and walked out the front door. The others followed, except P-Dawg, who would, no doubt, be responsible for Derrick tonight. Truth and T-Bone ignored him on their way out and Pee Wee gave him a nasty look as he passed, with his hand on his gun.

"Yo, that was close D, but you're in. I told you I would take care of you, man."

"Take care of me? You bring me to the front lines without telling me where we're going. You bring me into a gig where everyone who is supposed to be on my side wants me dead. I barely get through the "interview" for the job with my life, not to mention I have no idea what the job is that you're getting me into tonight, but you're taking care of me, right?"

P-Dawg smiled. "Yeah, man, now come on, we gotta roll. This took longer than I expected and we still gotta take care of a few details before the deal tonight."

“Are you going to at least tell me about the deal, so I know what the hell to expect?”

“Sorry, I can’t, you’re just an extra gun. All you have to do is stand there with the gun we give you and look intimidating. It’s money in the bank, baby.”

P-Dawg motioned for Derrick to follow him, so he left the house hoping the deal tonight at least took him out of this neighborhood as soon as possible. However, one thing he knew from experience, when someone he didn’t know told him it was money in the bank, there was always more to it. He made a mental note to be extra aware this night.

“James, man, I don’t like this.” Pee Wee was angry about Derrick coming along, but he also knew to temper his feelings when talking to James, who insisted on respecting each other, but Pee Wee wanted his feelings known. Several of the guys had known each other for a while, and James and P-Dawg grew up together, and James had always been the leader. It was a combination of respect and fear. Even big ‘ol T-Bone would back down when James lost his temper.

“What if he’s Five-O or something?”

“Five-O, Pee Wee?”

James, Pee Wee, Truth and T-Bone were sitting in James’ Mercedes Benz waiting for P-Dawg and Derrick to get in P-Dawg’s Benz so they could leave.

“Do you really think they would send a whiteboy into south-central to do undercover?”

“Yeah, that’s the beauty of it, you would never expect it.”

Truth said, “You would never expect it because it would never happen dumbass. Take my word for it, this guy is not Five-O. He is, however, someone to take serious.”

Truth considered himself a philosopher, thus he became the self-proclaimed Truth. In reality, he was a very intelligent young man. He was regularly at the top of his class in high school, carrying a four point average. He had already been accepted into USC and had acquired enough scholarship money to pay for half his schooling; he was saving for the other half working for James. He got the hook-up from his older brother, who was one of the three killed by Maddog. In this group he was the second youngest, which, of course made Pee Wee the youngest and that left him the only guy Truth could pick on.

Pee Wee was only sixteen and had already dropped out of school.

“Fuck you,” Pee Wee countered.

“You two need to chill,” James said.

A moment later he said, “I get how ya’ll feel about this cracker coming along, and I feel the same way. He did save Old Man, though. You don’t know Old Man like me and P-Dawg. I know I already told you that he was an old Army buddy of my pops, but I didn’t tell you that after my pops got hit in a bad drug deal, Old Man really helped me and P-Dawg. He was running ho’s through an escort service and let us run errands for him, and when we got older we did security for him. Hell, it was thanks to him that we got our first gun deal. This guy used to visit Old Man’s ho’s on a regular basis and Old Man got in good with him and introduced us to him. We were on our way after that; now look at us, this is our biggest deal yet. It won’t be long before we can afford to hook up a real business, just like we planned.”

“Just like you planned,” Pee Wee said.

“Point is, we’ve come a long way thanks to Old Man. I hate that this whiteboy saved his life, I hate that it puts me in his debt, but that’s the way it is. We let him stand there with a gun, we pay him, and then my debt is paid. Then he’s gone, end of story.”

P-Dawg and Derrick were just exiting the house.

“Here they come, time to start concentrating on the job now.

Nobody said anything, they didn’t need to, they would do as James said and would have without the surprising explanation of who the mysterious Old Man was that James and P-Dawg would visit from time to time. James saw P-Dawg and Derrick get into the Benz parked behind his, so he pulled away from the curb and into the night, with his best friend and a crazy white man following.

Truth dared to ask, “I thought your pops ran a legitimate business over by the mall with P-Dawg’s pops?”

“He does now. He said momma died of a broken heart because he wouldn’t quit the game for us. That hit him hard and he went legit right after her funeral. He said it changed him and he is a different man now.”

“Your pops is respected by everyone I know,” Truth said honestly.

“He is now. He said most white folks even show him respect now, but he still doesn’t trust them and neither do I.”

Truth let it end there, but he couldn’t help thinking there was a direct correlation

between the amount of respect James' pops got from everyone, black and white folks, from when he was a criminal and when he became a legitimate businessman, and that was pretty much true for everyone.

The two cars were now moving steadily along a not-so-well-known back road. Derrick looked out the window from the passenger seat to see if he could determine their approximate destination, but the only thing obvious was that they were headed to a remote location within a long stretch of old industrial warehouses that didn't appear to be used anymore. It was nearly midnight.

The drive had reached the thirty minute mark and Derrick and P-Dawg were getting along pretty well. Derrick told him about Cleveland and P-Dawg did the same about L.A. including warnings about being careful how he operates because of the gang situation throughout L.A. He explained to Derrick that they were not affiliated with the Bloods or Crips or any other gang for that matter, so they had to be extra careful themselves. That had been their biggest reason to get into guns instead of drugs. Apparently they had a few close calls with drugs and dropped that line of business completely.

Derrick explained to P-Dawg his plan for laying low, getting a job, and staying out of trouble, but P-Dawg had only laughed and continued on with instructions to help him get some real business going, especially if he wanted to deal in guns. He did.

Dealing guns had been his favorite business back in Cleveland and he would gladly do the same here with the right connections. However, although P-Dawg showed some knowledge of the small time market, Derrick quickly realized he knew much more about guns and gun deals than P-Dawg. Heading into this deal, he hoped James knew more than P-Dawg or the situation could get shaky real quick.

He looked out the window again and his curiosity got the better of him.

"Where we goin'?"

"To take care of biz'ness."

P-Dawg turned the car onto an even smaller road with very badly cracked pavement. Wherever they were going the road wasn't taken care of and neither were the smaller warehouses lined along this apparently abandoned alley. He gave P-Dawg a quick look

to ascertain his demeanor, because he hadn't given Derrick a short answer all night, until now. He could see P-Dawg was very intent on driving right behind James and his concentration level had instantly risen to the nth degree. They must be getting close.

They arrived about ten minutes later at an old abandoned shipyard. The place must have been a ghost town for a long time, because it was a mess. There were old, rusted boat spare parts here and there, such as a couple of large broken propellers and what looked like might have been a piece of the hull to a boat, though he didn't know much about boats so that was speculation. All of the doors to the line of warehouses had broken windows and badly chipped paint and rust.

Without looking away from his driving responsibility P-Dawg said, "L.A. ain't all beaches, know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah," he answered with a slight sarcastic edge, having figured that out the moment he got off the bus. In fact, he hadn't seen a beach since he arrived.

They drove along an extensive line of smaller warehouses until James finally slowed down, as did P-Dawg. P-Dawg completely stopped his car, while James moved on slowly, and then he made a U-turn close to a van parked by one of the warehouses, and stopped his car. Derrick watched James' car to see what would happen next. It sat there for a few seconds, then James flashed his headlights and with that Derrick and P-Dawg were slowly advancing until they were about twenty yards from James' car and then they stopped.

He was not encouraged about James' knowledge of gun deals already, unable to believe they would separate the two cars by such a distance when first arriving. Whoever they were dealing with could have easily split them up and then probably chopped them down. Hopefully that meant the gun dealers didn't know what they were doing either. At least the two cars were now set-up in an acceptable formation, but he would need to be on full alert to everything tonight. The cell phone rang and P-Dawg answered.

"Yeah."

He listened intently, careful not to miss a single detail.

"Right."

He hung up the phone, then turned to Derrick and said, "It's on."

Derrick didn't reply, but began sizing up the situation even as he got out of the car. He immediately noticed that the position of the two Benz's allowed them to cover the front and back of the van the dealers arrived in, so he felt a little better. Not *a bad start*,

after all, he thought. The first mistake of never separating the cars had not cost them and now they were in good position to cover the deal from all areas.

P-Dawg was standing by his driver's side door, looking toward James, who was now out of his car and standing by his door.

"All right D, you're main job is security, so keep an eye out for anything that looks bad. That's it, man. This should be nice and smooth, an easy payday. I told you I would take care of you, dog."

"So you keep telling me," he said.

P-Dawg moved toward the back of the car and Derrick mimicked his actions until they both reached the trunk. P-Dawg opened it up to reveal a nice little arsenal of smaller guns and two AK-47 semi-automatic weapons. He handed one of the AKs to Derrick and then retrieved the other for his personal use and they both did a quick survey of the area, Derrick out of habit, P-Dawg out of nervousness. The only people they could see were three men standing at the back of the van. Both of the back van doors were open and Derrick could see large crates inside. P-Dawg took a miniature flash light out of his pocket, held it up and flashed twice to James, all four of the remaining guys in their little gang stepped out of James' Benz. T-Bone, Pee Wee and Truth each had AK-47s in hand; James had no gun visible. He would obviously be the negotiator, but Derrick hoped he had a 9mm hidden in his belt or maybe a shoulder strap. Pee Wee and Truth stayed by the car and T-Bone walked with James to where P-Dawg and Derrick were standing.

"Are we ready?" James asked P-Dawg.

"Ready, bro'."

They stood for a moment facing each other, silent. There seemed to be an understanding between them, perhaps a shared nervousness about a deal that was much bigger than any they had yet experienced. They had grown up together and they had been best friends for as long as they both could remember. There were more than a few times when they knew what the other was thinking without it having to be said. This was one of those times. They gave each other their own memorized handshake and James said, "This could do it, man. This could be the last one." That statement surprised Derrick and he couldn't help but wonder what it meant.

James turned to face Derrick a moment. He didn't need to know James all his life to understand what he was communicating with that look. He still didn't trust Derrick and he definitely didn't want him to be there. He was telling him plain and simple to stay out

of the way, and that was fine by him as long as they took care of business and nothing went wrong. He could go for some easy money right now. If they insisted that he saved Old Man, or Fred, or whoever's life, so be it.

James and P-Dawg turned and walked toward the van. T-Bone, Pee Wee and Truth spread out, making a semi-circle of fire-power around the van. Derrick stayed where he was, realizing that with their line-up, even though they had the van covered, they were susceptible to an attack from behind. Didn't these guys know anything?

Well, he had an AK so he might as well make himself useful. P-Dawg's words about "easy money" came to mind and really began grating his nerves. He was reminded earlier that those words usually meant deception and trouble, from which side was the question. He looked around casually, paying much closer attention, like he would on one of his own deals back in Cleveland.

It appeared negotiations had started with the three men at the back of the van. All three men looked foreign, which was normal in the gun trade, but it surprised Derrick that these guys could get a deal with a foreign group, they usually didn't mess with small time. Now he really wanted to know what was being said, so he stepped a little closer to the van, still keeping an eye on their backs since no one else in their group would.

The gun dealer's accent definitely had a Middle Eastern sound to it; he was sure it was Iranian. Derrick had dealt with them before, and there were some who were good to work with, but there were others who were known to be pirates, which meant, above all else, that they could not be trusted. He began to feel a little anxious that they didn't tell him the deal was with foreigners. Hell, they didn't tell him anything. For some reason he had assumed James' little gang was such small time that this deal would be with some other thugs.

"Shit," he said under his breath as he began to study the negotiations much more closely. The three men were unloading one of the crates, which was one of the smaller crates, but from the strain in their faces it was reasonably weighty. He took a quick look around, again. He had never really dealt in large quantities before, but had served as muscle on a few. He had never dealt in high-tech either, but he knew the basics of these deals and something felt wrong. James said they only had fifty thousand in cash with them and that wasn't even close to enough money for the kind of weapons that fit into these large crates. He watched as the crate was opened and a mini-rocket launcher was pulled out. P-Dawg and James had smiles on their faces, like they were kids playing with

toys. Derrick now knew for sure they were in big trouble, for there was no way any Middle Eastern arms dealer would come to a deal like this with only three guys and high-tech weapons, and they would never give weapons to anyone with only a \$50,000 down payment? *Hell, no, it was all of the money up front with the Iranians. Why would the Iranians even waste their time on a \$50,000 deal? Damn, this was a set-up.*

“What the hell have they gotten us into,” he said aloud as he immediately began to scan the area much more closely than he had before. This time he was looking for something specific. Before he felt uneasy, now, he was scared. He knew there were armed men out there somewhere, there had to be, and they were likely waiting to ambush them. The Iranians may not do deals with small time, but apparently they were willing to take their money, and he was willing to bet it was for more than fifty grand. He walked around to the front of P-Dawg’s car thinking the extra men had to be out there somewhere. There were only a few reasonable places to hide and most were too far away to be effective.

There, he thought. There was a packing trailer sitting by itself in the middle of the docking area, about forty to fifty yards away. It was the closest significant structure to hide men in or behind. He looked at it closely. It was hard to see in the dark and he didn’t have much time, but it looked as if the door was about half-way open. That had to be it.

Derrick turned back to see James and P-Dawg still checking out the merchandise and they were having a good time doing it. James said something to P-Dawg who nodded his head and went to the trunk of the car. Derrick decided he had better warn P-Dawg of their impending doom, so he started to make his way around the car. P-Dawg was excited, though and moved too quickly. He had withdrawn a briefcase and was on his way back to the deal before Derrick could reach him. He didn’t want to run after him for fear of raising an alarm to the gunmen in hiding and thus provoking them to spring their trap early, thereby preventing him from putting together some kind of plan in defense. Derrick did a quick examination of the arms dealers by the van, who was watching P-Dawg carry the briefcase toward them. He couldn’t help thinking there wasn’t much difference between the looks on their faces now and the look on his own face anytime a fresh cooked steak came off the barbeque and was placed in front of him. There was either a hell-of-a lot more money in that briefcase than James had told him or something didn’t make sense about this deal.

One of the arms dealers turned his head to look to his left in a suspicious manner, so Derrick followed the man's gaze. From the way he was looking, he would have to be looking along the narrow corridor between the van and the warehouse. He looked past the front of the van, but from where he was standing he couldn't see anything. He walked toward Pee Wee, who was standing by James' Benz on the other side of the van. As he began to approach Pee Wee he looked to see if there was anything in front of the van that could be a problem.

He arrived beside Pee Wee, but there didn't appear to be any noticeable hiding place by the van, but he knew there had to be something. Pee Wee asked him what he wanted, but Derrick didn't answer and continued looking for something, then he spotted it. There was a warehouse door that was cracked open, about fifteen yards in front of the van. He was sure he could see shadows just inside the door. He had no idea how many men they were up against, but he was positive they would be ambushed from both sides...and soon.

He looked back to see what was happening at the deal, but the back corner of the van now covered his view. All the arms dealers would need to do would be make sure the money was there and then get out of the way; this was about to go down. He had been in tough situations before, but nothing this bad. Regardless, though, he must stay calm. He knew panic meant death. Derrick turned to Pee Wee.

"Don't ask any questions, just listen. They have men hidden on both sides and we're about to get ambushed, but don't make any sudden movements. When it goes down, you and Truth will be responsible for the rush on this side, they'll be coming from the warehouse door about fifteen yards in front of the van." Even as he said it, he realized that Truth and Pee Wee, the two youngest and least experienced had been placed on the same side of the deal, but there was nothing that could be done about it now.

Truth looked over at the door and squinted.

"Oh, shit."

Derrick could see the early tell-tale signs of panic in Pee Wee, which were big eyes and antsy feet, so he grabbed Pee Wee's arm and got his attention.

"Don't panic Pee Wee, you can do this. Now, walk quickly, but calmly over to Truth and tell him what's up. If you attack immediately, when I give you the signal, you two should be able to pin them in there, O.K.?"

Truth nodded weakly. Derrick had his doubts, as well.

"C'mon, Pee Wee, we need some of that crazy shit you're always talking about, huh."

Pee Wee was still scared, but he shook off his temporary fear-paralysis and gave Derrick his full attention.

"I got it, man," he said as he turned and went to tell Truth.

Derrick turned and walked toward T-Bone, who was stationed just past the back of P-Dawg's car, which also put him in view of the deal again, so he could see what was happening. The briefcase was open now and all the players were looking at it, no doubt confirming the amount. It was about to happen, so he accelerated his pace to T-Bone and explained the situation.

"I got your back baby, just protect James and P-Dawg." T-Bone answered.

"I got 'em," he responded.

He spun around and made his way toward the deal, one of the arms dealers was putting a stack of bills back into the briefcase. The briefcase was closed and handed to one of the other arms dealers. Derrick was about ten feet away, now, but time was up.

Sure enough, the arms dealer declared as loud as he could, "It's a deal," and backed up against the wall, looking both ways for the ambush to begin.

Derrick saw two gunmen pop up from behind the remaining crates in the back of the van. James and P-Dawg scrambled for their nine millimeters tucked in their back waistband, but they didn't have a chance. Fortunately for them Derrick was ready and he unleashed death on both men as he yelled, "Pee Wee, T-Bone, now."

Bullets started flying from all directions as James and P-Dawg spun to see Derrick standing there with his sub-machine gun now aimed at them.

"Get down," he yelled and they immediately obeyed, as he sent the three arms dealers to their graves before they could maneuver the guns they had hidden underneath their jackets.

Derrick ran over and retrieved the briefcase from the dead arms dealer's hands.

"Over here," he motioned as he knelt low to the ground in the crack between the van and the warehouse. He peered through the small alley between the warehouse and the van, and was relieved to see Pee Wee and Truth had effectively pinned the would be ambushers inside.

P-Dawg and James quickly followed his lead. He hurriedly barked orders to keep things moving, knowing that was the only chance they had to get out of there alive.

"They tried to ambush us from both sides. P-Dawg, go help T-Bone hold them off from this side, Truth and Pee Wee are taking care of the other side."

P-Dawg went immediately.

“James, help me get this crate in the van,” Derrick ordered. James hesitated. Even with their lives in danger his hatred of Derrick kept him from blindly obeying.

“Do you want this shit, or not?” he yelled.

James quickly reconsidered his attitude.

“Yeah, I want it,” he answered shortly.

They lifted the crate into the van and Derrick closed the door on his side, when a bullet shattered the glass. The bullet couldn’t have missed his head by more than a few inches, an unpleasant reminder to stay low. He ducked immediately, as did James.

Derrick peeked around the edge of the van to see how it was going at the front of the van and called out, “Pee Wee, what’s up?”

“Got ‘em pinned inside,” he yelled excitedly.

Derrick leaned back against the van to see how P-Dawg and T-Bone were faring.

“P-Dawg, what’s up?”

P-Dawg was behind his Benz with T-Bone, intermittently spreading gunfire at the ground some thirty yards ahead of them, in the direction of the large container Derrick originally designated as a hiding spot for an ambush. He looked back at Derrick.

“They’re advancing slowly. There must be ten or fifteen of the assholes out there.”

That was about what he had figured. Even with both sides seemingly pinned down, they needed to get out of there fast. Not only were they well out-numbered, but they would more than likely run out of ammo soon. They were ill-prepared for a sustained shootout. Not to mention, at some point, the men in the warehouse were going to realize they’re being held inside by only two gunmen and could just make a blind rush at them in the hopes of overwhelming them with their numbers, which they would. The same was true for the others being held down by P-Dawg and T-Bone. Derrick went for the three leaders first for a reason. Without the leaders there were more chances the gunmen would make mistakes and that was already evident. They should have already been overwhelmed, and he didn’t want to give the enemy a chance to realize their mistakes and make corrections, so he quickly decided on an exit plan.

“P-Dawg, when I yell “go,” you and T-Bone are going to jump in the car and get the hell out of here, we’ll meet back at the crib.”

P-Dawg answered, “James, you down with that?”

“Yeah, we’ll meet there, no arguing, just do it.”

“All right, man.”

Derrick turned his attention to Pee Wee.

“Pee Wee!” he yelled.

“Yeah!” was the reply.

“When I yell go, you two jump in the car and go back to the house!”

“Got it, is James O.K.?”

“James is fine, get ready.”

“Let me speak with James.”

James barked angrily, “We don’t have time for this Pee Wee, just do as he says!”

James was glad for the guy’s loyalty, but right now he just wanted to get the hell out of there.

“All right man,” Pee Wee replied.

Derrick turned to James.

“Thanks.”

James ignored him. It wasn’t like they were boys now. He hated following this man, but what he was doing was working.

“What do we do now?” James asked.

Derrick glanced up at the van.

“We get the hell out of here.” He picked up an AK-47 that was lying on the ground close to the van, which must have fallen from the hands of one of the men hiding in the van when he had shot him dead. He gave it to James since he needed to be better armed for what he had in mind.

“I’ll cover you while you jump in the van, then you cover me. This van is our ticket out of here, with a little bonus package for our troubles.”

James looked at the back of the van, realizing it would make him an easy target climbing over the crates. Derrick noticed the hesitation.

“You want me to go first?”

“No, I got it. Ready?”

He nodded his head and turned to face their opposition.

“Go!” James yelled. Derrick stood up and sprayed the ground with bullets, noticing there must have been at least fifteen men out there laying on the ground firing at P-Dawg and T-Bone. He worried he may have made it worse for him and James by firing at their opposition, thus drawing their attention, but James made it over quickly and took position

behind a crate.

“I’ve got you covered D, Go!”

Derrick tossed the briefcase of money ahead of him and quickly jumped up behind the crates. They dumped the two dead bodies out the back of the van and Derrick said, “This is all going to happen real quick. As soon as our guys get in their cars we’re all going to be rushed, so we have to make it all happen as simultaneous as possible.”

“I heard that,” James agreed.

Derrick said, “You’ll have to stay back here and help provide cover and I’ll coordinate the front and drive us out of here as I provide cover on the warehouse. Make sure we are covered until we are well clear of them.”

“Good idea.” James surprised himself and more than surprised Derrick with the compliment. He knew that all of their lives were on the line and if it meant listening to this cracker to get out alive, then so be it. Derrick went forward with the plan.

“You’ll have to give P-Dawg the cue to go from back here, I’ll tell you when I’m ready.”

“Got it,” he answered.

Derrick climbed to the front of the van and rolled down the front passenger side window so Pee Wee could hear his cue. Then he jumped into the driver’s seat and started the van. He kept his eyes on the door of the warehouse just in case they tried to make a rush at the van, but Pee and Truth were doing a good job keeping them pinned down.

He didn’t want to drive past that door when they left, so he turned the wheel as far to the right as it would go, giving them an abrupt angled exit away from the warehouse, then they would follow the others. The angle would take him right at James’ Mercedes and that would allow him to provide cover for Pee Wee and Truth as they got into the car. He positioned his machine gun in his left hand, because he would still be susceptible to gunfire from the warehouse doorway as he was turning, so he needed to be able to shoot out of the driver’s side window.

He was ready.

He looked toward Pee Wee and Truth positioned behind James’ car.

“Pee Wee!” He yelled.

“Yeah!”

“You ready?”

“Ready!”

He looked at James in the rear view mirror.

“Ready?”

“Just a second,” James said. He turned and yelled, “P-Dawg, you ready?”

“Ready!” P-Dawg returned. James looked back to Derrick. “Let’s do this thing.”

“Alright,” he said. He turned back to the front and yelled, “Pee Wee! Go!”

From the back, James yelled “P-Dawg! Go!”

As Derrick suspected the gunmen tried to rush out of the warehouse while Pee Wee and Truth were getting in the car, but as he pulled away from the warehouse his gunfire surprised the gunmen and he hit several as they came out. The others jumped back inside the warehouse for cover. He heard the tires of the Benz screech as it was pulling away, so he punched the accelerator to the floor as he continued to pepper the doorway of the warehouse. The van went wide, away from the door and he had to stop spraying his cover fire and use both hands to get control of the van. Now James was the only one left to provide cover, but the vehicles retreated so quickly that James could easily provide adequate cover from the back of the van. Once they were well away from the building Derrick took a hard left and then straightened the van, which put them on a fast track toward the exit. He could see both of the Benz’s already well out in front of them.

He floored it to try and catch up, but the van was no match for the twelve cylinders that powered each of the two high powered Mercedes Benz. He hadn’t been paying close attention to the driving directions on the way there, so he had no idea how to get out of there. He could hear James still firing out the back, so he couldn’t ask him. He turned left onto a road he had seen one of the cars up ahead take. Now those cars were nowhere to be seen. He was leaning forward trying to spot them up ahead in his high beams. He had definitely lost them and was about to turn and ask James if he knew how to get out of there, when James jumped into the front passenger seat.

“Turn right,” he said casually. Derrick hadn’t even noticed the gun-fire had stopped and the back door had been closed. He thankfully turned right.

Once the crates with the guns were unloaded and stored in the garage, T-Bone got in the van and parked it on the street around the corner. The rest of the guys did their best to secure and hide the merchandise from view in the garage. T-Bone was back before too

long and joined the very excited group inside the house. The rush of adrenaline had been at full throttle all night and would take some time to dissipate. Even with everything that went wrong, the whole affair didn't take more than half an hour to come to a conclusion, and then the ride home. It was just past 1:30 in the morning, still reasonably early considering what they had just been through.

"That was fucking sweet," Pee Wee declared.

"That was crazy, is what it was," Truth said anxiously.

Pee Wee went into the kitchen while the others sat down around the living room. He came back out of the kitchen with a six pack of beer and started tossing them around. When he had two left he walked up to Derrick and handed him the beer.

"You get yours hand delivered D. I take back everything I said about you, man. You a bad ass."

"Thanks."

Pee Wee went to get a seat of his own. "D knows his shit." Once seated, he asked Derrick, "You formal military or some shit?"

"No. I've headed up a few smaller deals before, though, back in Cleveland and provided muscle on a couple bigger deals. A buddy I worked with a few times was former military, Special Forces, and he taught me a few things. I respected him, he respected me. His deals almost always went smooth and when they didn't, he took care of the problems quickly and he started to build a reputation. Then the offers to protect some big players out of the country began coming in and he took one. He offered to take me with him, but I stayed to put together my own deals. I guess I learned a few things along the way."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" James asked angrily.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you much of anything, now did I?" Derrick reminded him with a little anger of his own. "Remember, I'm the white devil," he finished sarcastically.

The guys, except for James, started laughing. Derrick didn't mean it as a joke and regretted making it sound like a quote from a Jim Carrey movie. He kept his eyes on James, though, who in turn was watching him. James couldn't hold it in and he started to laugh, as well. Derrick finally shared their mirth at his accidental joke. The joke seemed to break the ice for this unlikely group of partners. There were a few follow up jokes and additional quotes from the "Ace Ventura" movies; "classics" according to the stoic T-

Bone, which itself brought more laughs.

At some point the joke ran its course and the reality of the situation began to settle in again. James' little gang had a white man standing in their south-central living room, a white man who probably had just saved all of their lives, and nobody knew what to do with him.

Derrick asked, "So, now what?"

Everyone looked at him a moment, then turned their attention to James. He was naturally back in his seat of power.

"I don't know, yet," James answered honestly. "We weren't supposed to come away with all of those weapons, we were just going to buy a few of them. Now, we have them all and the money."

Derrick couldn't pass up the chance.

"You mean the fifty grand?" he asked with obvious sarcasm.

"We didn't know you, man. This was our biggest deal yet, by far. We have only dealt with small weapons on the street up till now. We had to keep you in the dark as much as possible."

"Which almost got us all killed."

James looked around at all of the guys.

"I'm sorry about all that. I still don't know why it went bad."

"I do."

"How would you know? Oh yeah, you learned a few things."

"Yeah, I learned a few things and now, so have you. You learned the hard way that deals for big guns, with real gun dealers, is a completely different type of deal. I don't know how much money you have in that briefcase, but there wasn't a single gun at that deal worth less than six figures, at bargain prices. Not to mention, you can't get by with general security when dealing with Iranians, because they will turn on you the second they think they can take you. The only way to deal with the Iranians is to have a security detail they're not willing to battle. They never intended to sell you any weapons. You were an easy mark for them to pick up some easy money."

Derrick leaned forward in his chair and looked at James seriously.

"Did you even know they were Iranians?"

"Iranians? Serious?" Truth said.

"How do know they were Iranians?" James asked intently.

“I suspected it when I heard them talking and it was confirmed because that’s the way they deal. Most of the bigger groups will deal more respectfully, but a smaller Iranian group like that, they’ll screw you over without thinking twice about it, trying to pick up easy money and guns along the way to becoming a bigger group.”

“And you know all of this from working a few small deals?” James asked suspiciously.

“Not all of it. I told you that buddy of mine started getting offers to provide security for several big hitters. He had narrowed his choices down to two and told me he was close to choosing who he was going to work for and he was going to make me his second in command. He knew he could trust me, so he started to teach me some things I would need to know.”

“So, why didn’t you do it, man?” T-Bone asked.

Derrick smiled. “I almost did, T-Bone. It would have given me a chance to get out of the country and establish myself, then I could come back with a big rep and I could start some of my own deals.”

“Doesn’t explain the why,” James said.

“It would have taken a few years for all of that to pan out and I’m not known to be the most patient of fellows.”

“How long ago was that?” James asked, curious.

“Three years.”

“So you could have been established by now.”

“Yeah.” The irony was not lost on Derrick.

“Well, you’re out here now...having broken parole. So, what happened with that, how’d you get caught and for what?” James asked.

“Another buddy of mine was going to hook me up with some of his old contacts to help me get started with my own gun deals. Then, I made a mistake. I ran into a guy I had met in ‘juvie’ a while back. You know how guys talk smack back and forth in there. Well, he said he could get me in contact with some friends of his who knew this business warehouse that always has a large money stash. Not really my cup of tea working with partners on a burglary, but once again, I was impatient and thought the money could help me set up a crew. So, the dude tells me he knows these guys who were real good, they never get caught. That should have been a red flag to me right there, but I needed start-up money. So, I go with them to do this business, not having been part of the planning,

just back up, like tonight.”

None of the group missed the light sarcasm, P-Dawg and Truth smiled, but James found no humor in the comment. Derrick continued.

“Let me tell you, these guys were incompetent. I mean, I don’t know how they never got caught before, maybe they had pulled off a few smaller jobs and got lucky, I don’t know. Long story short, they either didn’t know how to properly sweep for security alarms, or someone screwed up, because the alarm tripped and the private armed security responded faster than I had ever seen and they got caught.”

“They got caught, you got away?” Truth asked.

“Initially, but they turned on me for less time served and I got ten years, out in three for good behavior.”

“Damn,” several of the guys said at the same time.

“It was a small town about twenty miles outside of Cleveland and the cops only showed with three cars to pick me up, but they surprised me so I couldn’t run. My first mistake was taking a job I knew nothing about, and my second mistake was thinking that the assholes would never turn on me.”

“You bust us out of some crazy shit like tonight, but you couldn’t get away from small town cops?” P-Dawg asked emphatically.

“I know every gangster thinks it’s cool to get in a shootout with the cops. Some will even go out in a blaze of glory. Not me. You get caught, do the time like a man and you’re out soon enough, alive. I have one motto, don’t mess with the police. You shoot a cop and you’re done, period, no second chances. You can’t beat the cops. They are always going to have ten times more fire power and even more men.

Even if by some miracle you escape them, where the hell are you going to go? I have no intention of living my life as a fugitive. You know the old saying, ‘If you can’t do the time, don’t do the crime.’ If you get caught, deal with it and regroup when you get out. Hell, if you pick the right crimes, you’re never in for very long anyway.”

“I hate to break it to ya, but you broke parole, you are a fugitive,” Truth declared.

“Yeah, but it’s not the same as when you’re a cop killer.”

“You’re like a career criminal and shit,” Pee Wee said laughing.

“I wasn’t supposed to be. I came out here to L.A. to try and get my act together. I’m tired of prison, man. I was a reformed man ready to get a job in construction, and then I met P-Dawg.”

“No one twisted your arm to come along,” James stated.

“Your right, they didn’t,” Derrick agreed, “but guns are my specialty. An offer to deal again is like offering a recovering crack head some crack.”

The guys found that funny, too, even though Derrick was being quite serious again.

“Anyway, this deal should hold me over for a minute while I establish myself.”

“Establish yourself?” James asked.

“Yeah, I mean, who am I kidding, this is what I do and I’m good at it.”

He could see the wheels turning in James’ head. James had no idea Derrick was setting him up, though. James had a small-sized shipment of guns that he didn’t expect to have and Derrick knew better than anyone there what needed to be done, or at least he knew someone he could call and ask, if needed. He just had to draw James in now.

“So, what is my pay for tonight, anyway?”

James was still thinking about everything he had learned about Derrick. He was trying to decipher how much of it was bullshit and how much of it was true. He looked at Derrick, thoughtfully.

Derrick didn’t really expect much in pay, even though he had saved all of their lives, and he could tell James had a lot of pride and wouldn’t want his leadership questioned. Besides, even if James no longer hated him, he still didn’t particularly like him, but just going from hate to dislike could mean a few thousand dollars more for him on the next deal.

“Well, that’s a difficult question, now isn’t it,” James said. He got up out of his seat and walked over to the briefcase.

“I was planning on paying you five K.”

Not bad, Derrick thought. If he was going to pay him that much before he saved their lives, he could end up walking out of there with ten. He could live decent on that till the next deal. In fact, if things were to go the way he was planning, he would be helping them deal their new found loot and be able to put away a nice little stash of his own.

James continued, “As much as I hate to admit it, you saved our lives out there tonight, and what kind of price tag do you put on your life?” He looked around at his friends.

“What kind of price tag do you put on the lives of your boys?” He picked up the briefcase, carried it over to Derrick, and handed it to him.

“What?” Even Derrick was surprised, and just stared at the case.

“Damn,” a couple of the guys said.

“D,” James said to get his attention. Derrick looked at him.

“You’re cool with us, man. You ever need anything, you let us know.”

Derrick about fell out of his chair. He was dying to know just how much was in the briefcase, but he knew he should take advantage of the chance to solidify a pact of some sort with his new allies. If he worked it right, they could become useful contacts. That is, if they didn’t end up dead from their screw up that night, because he wasn’t convinced they were completely in the clear from retribution. He had been speculating about the size of the Iranian group and everything depended on that, because the size of their group would determine their ability to bounce back and get revenge.

He stood up and offered his hand to James for a business handshake. Everybody shook hands and even a few manly street hugs were exchanged. There is no bonding experience like a near-death bonding experience.

When they were done exchanging pleasantries, Derrick knew it was time to make his final play. He would either be on his way with at least fifty large, or he would acquire his new business associates for his next score.

“Well, I guess I should be on my way. P-Dawg, can you take me home?”

“Now?” P-Dawg said as he looked at James.

“Yeah. I mean, the deal is done, I’ve been paid, what else is there?”

“It’s two in the morning. A brother driving around this time at night in a Benz will get pulled over, man,” P-Dawg said, as he looked to James again. Derrick noticed all the guys were looking at James, but he wasn’t looking at anyone, and he decided to make them wait while he contemplated asking Derrick to join them for the next deal. He wasn’t exactly sure what to do about all the guns they had acquired. He had a contact, but he was only expecting a couple high-tech weapons. What about the rest? Derrick could probably help them. He looked up and everyone was still looking at him. In hopes of adding to the drama, Derrick turned to the door as he declared, “Check ya’ll later.”

P-Dawg started to follow Derrick, but gave James a hard look.

“D,” James said. Derrick turned back to him, already knowing what was coming.

“Enough of the drama. If you’re interested, we could probably use some help dealing with those extra guns.”

Derrick feigned surprise, “Me? Really?”

The guys laughed.

“Yeah you, interested?”

“Yeah, I’m interested.”

Derrick slept on the couch that night and the next day they set him up in the room James was using as an office. Although all of the guys spent most of their time at the house, James and P-Dawg were the only ones who actually lived there. After they got him set up they went out to the garage and inspected all of the recently acquired high-tech weaponry. He showed them how to work everything. There was nothing there he hadn’t seen before, it was just the amount he wasn’t sure if he could deal with, even though he wasn’t about to tell them that. When they had secured everything again, they went into the house to discuss what to do next.

Early into the conversation he realized this was going to be difficult. These guys were small time, with only one contact and Derrick didn’t trust their contact anymore, considering what they had been through. He had to make them understand how serious this was.

“The bottom line is you weren’t supposed to get all those guns, and you got the money. I mean, yeah, someone is going to be pissed you killed some of their men, but, if anything, that will get you respect. It shows you can’t be taken advantage of in any kind of deal. The biggest problem is the weapons, or maybe I should say, the extra weapons.”

“What about the money?” Pee Wee asked.

“The money would only be a problem if it was for somebody big. If not, the big arms dealers would consider it your prize for surviving a set up by one of the little guys. These little bands of dealers are like mosquitoes to the bigger arms dealers. The amounts they deal with don’t affect them a great deal, so they don’t want to waste resources on tracking them down and eliminating them.”

“But if someone else squashes them, they’re appreciative, and will let you keep your booty,” James surmised.

“Exactly,” Derrick agreed.

“So, maybe we’re straight then,” T-Bone said.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think so. Only one of those crates were meant for you, so there were four crates of high-tech weaponry in that van that wasn’t meant for you. In other words, you probably have someone else’s guns. If its a few small-timers like you,

then it's no big deal, but if the rest of those went to one person, he may have some influence. With the four other full crates in that van, plus what was left in the crate your few weapons came out of; that's several million dollars worth of weapons."

"Oh, shit," Pee Wee said.

"Exactly," Derrick added. "Those Iranians not only are going to be embarrassed by what we did to them, but they owe somebody those weapons we took."

"Can we give the rest back?" James asked.

"I'm sure that's to be expected and if we can find out who they were meant for and give them directly, as a present, it will buy us some brownie points and we may even be able to get a finders fee."

"Finders fee? They have those?" P-Dawg asked.

"I don't know. It only seems fair, though, to make up for our troubles."

"We don't need the finder's fee, we just want our guns and get out clean, with nobody hunting..."

James quit his sentence as soon as he realized his mistake. He looked at Derrick.

Derrick smiled. "You were saying?" he smirked.

"I'm sorry D, but we need that money. I'll make it up to you."

"You'll make up a hundred grand?" Derrick was messing with him. He was amazed when he counted the money before he went to bed the previous night. He had no intention of wasting the money, but instead would use it to establish a team. He was even willing to teach the guys a little of what he knew to help them step up to the next level. There was plenty of business for them all. Or, even better, maybe he could hire them to be his security, and he could always teach them how to do it right. For now, he just wanted to harass James a little, because he was always too serious. He knew James was thinking he would probably need the money to buy the guns they had originally tried to purchase, again, from whoever they turned them over to, but Derrick didn't say anything. He didn't even really think the money would be needed, as he told the guys, it was their spoils for surviving. But they would still need to have it available, just in case. You never knew who you would be up against in this game.

"It's good you take this business serious, James, because it is a killer, but you really need to lighten up when you're home. If you take it too seriously all the time, it will drive you crazy. You need to relax, it keeps your head clear, so you can concentrate better on what needs to be done."

The room became completely silent and everyone stopped what they were doing. Everyone was just starting to get along with Derrick, and then he had to push it too far. P-Dawg didn't want to lose the momentum they had gained from the bad deal, though. Besides, he liked D and certainly didn't want to lose his expertise.

"That's just his way D. He's always been the one to look out for the rest of us. That can make you a serious person."

"I can speak for myself P." James' eyes never left Derrick as he spoke.

"So, I don't like you and you don't like me, I thought that was already established. I was willing to put aside our differences for business, can you?"

"Well, that's where you're wrong James, I do like you and I think you're a good leader, so I respect you, as well. But I also think you're trying to hide behind your hatred for white people to try and hate me, but you can't help it, you like me, too."

"The guys couldn't help but smile and laugh lightly, and even James couldn't help but crack a smile."

"Yeah, I don't know about all that."

The guys laughed easier knowing James was all right with Derrick's joking.

"I'm just saying, don't take everything so serious, especially from me, because when we're not working I like to have fun. Granted, sometimes too much, but look, man, all I'm saying is, you're going to drive everybody crazy if you don't lighten up a little. Up till last night, you've just had small deals with street punks. This shit you're trying to get into, man, you have no idea. You are going to have so much pressure and if you don't learn to relax in between deals..."

James thought a moment.

"Alright, man. I get what you're saying and you're probably right, but once we get rid of these weapons, we're done anyway."

Derrick couldn't believe his ears, but for a different reason than why the guys were astonished that James agreed with Derrick's remarks, since he wasn't the type of man to admit when he was wrong. Derrick didn't have time to ask what James was talking about when he said they were done dealing guns, because P-Dawg jumped on the opportunity.

"Holy shit, James admitted he was wrong. Truth, quick, get a pen and mark this day on the calendar and let's have a celebration."

"Hallelujah," Truth called mockingly.

"Preach it brother," Pee Wee added.

James smiled and looked at Derrick.

“See what you started?”

“You’ll be all right,” he said.

“Hey James, you know, a party wouldn’t be such a bad idea. We deserve it after what we pulled off last night,” P-Dawg said.

“I don’t know Dawg, we still have a lot to work out,” James answered as he looked to Derrick for support. At the mention of a party, Derrick truly got excited.

“Man, I haven’t been to a party since I got out of jail.”

“You’re killing me D. Alright, why not?”

This was a welcomed break for the guys since they hadn’t had any fun for a couple months, due to James working them so hard, always on them about doing more deals to get more money. He had big plans for his little posse, talking often about the business they would have and not having to work the gun deals anymore. The guys didn’t really mind working the deals, but they just went along with what James said because he was their leader.

However, they had survived a tough deal and they were ready to party, so they all got what they wanted, a big party.

Derrick lay in bed with the girl he had just had sex. He was extremely drunk and quickly on his way to passing out.

“Baby, that was so good,” the girl said.

“Yeah, that was fun,” he barely got out.

His head was swimming and he was thinking about how nice it had been to be with Lisa. In fact, he felt more love for her than he did the last time they were together.

“Hey, Lisa?”

The girl frowned. “My name’s not Lisa, baby, it’s Christina.”

Derrick looked at her and squinted his eyes trying to focus in on her and got an angry look on his face, then he managed to slur the words, “Stop messing with me, baby.”

Derrick drifted off at that point, with Christina just looking at him. From the moment she had seen him at the party she wanted him, so she didn’t get too upset at the mix-up of her name. After all, it was the first time they had met and he was drunk. She couldn’t

help but wonder who Lisa was, though. She was probably his ex-girlfriend, who he was still in love with or something, even though he didn't seem like the type to fall in love.

Competition, she thought. She lay down beside him and snuggled close. Derrick squirmed a little and muttered something incoherent. Christina caressed his chest to soothe him.

“It's all right, baby, sleep tight.”

Derrick slept...and dreamed.

CHAPTER 9

“Michael, wake up,” Lisa urged, as she gently shook him. “Michael, honey, its Lisa, wake up baby.”

Michael shot up into a sitting position. Lisa jumped back and almost fell off the bed. He looked at her with accusing eyes, sweat beaded on his face and chest.

“Your name is Lisa,” he accused threateningly. Lisa couldn’t believe the look in his eyes, he didn’t look like the same person. She backed slowly off the bed, fear creeping into the back of her mind.

“Michael, what’s wrong?” she asked gently.

His eyes had a glazed look.

“You tried to lie to me, but I knew it was you.”

It was his mouth speaking, but it wasn’t him talking, it couldn’t be him.

“Baby, I didn’t lie to you, I am Lisa. See, it’s me.” She had backed up against the wall without even realizing it, and startled upon contact. Michael stared at her for a moment, looking a little confused. Finally, he lay back down on the bed and was instantly asleep again. She knew he was talking in his sleep, but couldn’t get over how frightening the whole situation had been.

She stayed against the wall a few moments longer wanting to make sure he was fully asleep again. She certainly wouldn’t be able to get back to sleep, not with the threatening accusation of his eyes fresh on her mind. Perhaps she was overreacting, since he was just talking in his sleep...but that look. The alarm abruptly went off and she jerked with fear at the sound and cursed.

Michael reached over and turned the alarm off, just as he always did, then reached over to put his arm around Lisa and noticed she was not in the bed. He tiredly opened his eyes and tried to wipe the sleep from them. She was surprised at how casually he moved, like nothing happened. He lifted himself up on his elbow to see if he could hear where she was and spotted her up against the wall, still in her night shirt. She looked...scared.

He sat up quickly and looked around the room for any sign of trouble.

“What’s wrong Lisa, is someone in the house?”

He has no idea what happened, she thought. Lisa shook her head, no, seeing kindness back in his eyes, those were Michael’s eyes, the eyes that helped her fall in love with him, and those were the eyes that helped her trust him so much. She walked over to the bed and climbed onto it, not paying attention to the fact that she left space between them, but he did, and he reached over to put his hand on her leg and she involuntarily flinched. Michael’s hand stopped and he looked at her confused.

“What’s going on, Lisa?”

She forced the fear from mind, feeling ridiculous. *The man had a bad dream, nothing more*. She was just a little jumpy because of everything they were involved in, that’s all. She grabbed his hand and held it while looking into his eyes. Lisa admitted she was allowing herself to remain haunted by the eyes she saw when he was talking in his sleep; they were so angry. *Stop it*, she scolded herself, *this is the man I love*.

“It’s nothing, really. You were having a nightmare and you were talking in your sleep.”

“I was?”

“Yes, you were and it must have been very real to you because you kind of scared me.”

“I did? I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.”

“Of course you didn’t, you were talking in your sleep. It was just...so intense.”

Michael didn’t say anything, he suspected the recurring dream was the cause of the problem and he wanted to remember what he was dreaming about that would scare her so much. His dream was starting to get a little too problematic for his taste. He had enough to deal with right now, he didn’t need this as well.

“Well, my dreams, or dream I guess I should say, has been a little weird lately.”

“Weird? What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to describe. It’s always about the same person and it just continues on, never repeating itself, almost like a T.V. program that comes on every time I dream. I’ve been awakened by it a couple times and it seems to always be just on the edge of my memory, but never any specifics. I don’t know why, but I get the feeling they are about someone I know. Well, I don’t know if I know him. I don’t know what I know. I think the guy is in some kind of trouble, maybe, I don’t know, it’s complicated. I can’t remember these dreams, but the more I have, the more I seem to know about him.”

“You don’t dream about anything else, it’s always about this same guy who is in trouble?”

“Yeah.”

“Doesn’t that seem a little strange to you?”

“It does, but we have had a lot more important things to deal with, right now.”

“Yeah, I guess we do.”

They both sat for a moment, thinking. Lisa had an idea.

“There must be a reason for it and it probably has to do with our current situation.

The guy you’re dreaming about is probably you and it’s about the anxiety you have for what we’re doing. Maybe you see a sleep therapist to help you forget about these dreams and then you can sleep normal again.”

“A shrink? I don’t know, Lisa. Besides, considering the circumstances, I really don’t have the time for that.”

“I know, but there is something really strange going on here. I mean, you didn’t see what I did. Michael, you were looking at me in this accusing, angry look that really scared me. It was almost like you were someone else, the way your eyes glazed over.”

“I’m so sorry,” he said, embarrassed.

Lisa put her hand on his face. “I know you are, baby. I didn’t say that to make you feel bad, I’m just trying to make you understand that this isn’t just a bad dream if it keeps coming back. We have a great deal of work ahead of us and if you start losing sleep because of your stress, then you won’t be as sharp. I think it would be a good idea to get it fixed now, before it starts to wear you down. Who knows, maybe you could have some important information in there that will help us.”

“How could a strange dream possibly help us?”

“There’s been a lot of research into dreams and some doctors believe your sub-conscious mind uses your dreams to sort out an over-abundance of information.”

“I think I remember seeing something about that on the internet,” he said, thinking.

“That’s where I read it, and if you’re sub-conscious is trying to decipher extra information about our situation...”

“Maybe you’re right. So, then, maybe this guy could be the key to what happens. Maybe my sub-conscious has picked up some valuable information that we came across, but did not recognize it as being important at the time.”

“It sounds like a long shot, but I think it’s worth a try.”

Michael thought about it a moment. “I don’t know Lisa, that’s sounds like more than a long shot. Why don’t we just keep an eye on it and see if it goes away? If there is important information in that folder that we need, I am sure that between the two of us, we will find it.”

She smiled and tried to feel as confident as him about both, his dream not being a big deal and them finding the important information they needed to get Carmen.

“I don’t know, either, but I believe it is worth a try. Would you give it some thought?

“The shrink? Yeah, for you, I will.”

Lisa smiled again. “Thank You. Now, let’s have some breakfast and plan our day,” she said brightly.

Michael wasn’t feeling as cheerful as Lisa because now, even more than before, he couldn’t get The Dream off his mind, but she was talking about food and that always made him feel better.

“That’s a great idea.”

She put her arm in his as they walked to the kitchen.

“I thought you would like that.”

“That’s a fine idea, Jeffrey,” Joseph said. Once again, he sounded like a proud father, very pleased with the progress Jeffrey was making in his training. Jeffrey was surprised at how well he excelled when he applied himself. He was all smiles.

“Would you like me to take care of it this afternoon?” he asked.

“In this business, Jeffrey, timing is extremely important. It is a good feeling to know you have a well thought out plan, but a good plan is of no use if it is not properly executed. Therefore, we must take the individual good ideas we have, bring them together and see how they fit as a whole. You formulate a plan to fit your final goal, not the immediate goal. If you were to deal with this now, it could jeopardize something later. You may have to alter your original plan, according to how events transpire and that is where we are at now. So, let us see how this idea fits into our long-range plan, and then we will decide the proper timetable by which to execute it.

The assassin and assassin in training took the next hour and a half pouring over information and adjusting their plan. By the time they had ordered, eaten, and cleaned up

their Chinese carryout they were both satisfied with their newly adjusted plan. Jeffrey never felt more alive. Joseph was treating him with respect and he also trusted him more and more to handle higher levels of training.

The training wasn't just in being a smart assassin, Jeffrey realized, for he was also learning the nuts and bolts tools of the trade. He was learning to be a proficient marksman with several different weapons. Joseph explained it would take years of training to become highly skilled with many of the weapons he was learning to use.

Joseph even had him learning to use the computer. He was learning all the basic office and internet uses first, because the only thing he knew how to do on a computer was play video games. Eventually, his training on the computer was to advance into all areas, including hacking and money transfer to offshore accounts. It was an incredible amount of information and at times Jeffrey feared his head would explode, but he wouldn't change anything. He was feeling more confident than ever, which he truly enjoyed, but even more important to him than that, he was beginning to feel smart. He never realized that being intelligent could make you feel so powerful, like you knew something the guy beside you didn't, which he realized was exactly the point.

Jeffrey had always gained his confidence from his ability to kick anyone's ass. Well, almost anyone's, he admitted as he looked over at Joseph. With this new found intelligence, that he never knew he was capable of, his self-confidence was rising quickly to a level he had never experienced.

Joseph had complimented him earlier on that, as well. He told him he was a much more dangerous a man than he was a week ago, but he also reminded him he had a long way to go.

Jeffrey threw away the last remains of their lunch and wiped down the kitchen counter, which he never would have thought about doing a week ago. It was this organizing and efficiency stuff Joseph was teaching him that had his brain thinking about things that had never occurred to him before. Even little things like cleaning up after yourself when you're done eating became important. It kept everything around you neat and in order, which promoted efficiency the next time you needed to do something in that space, because there would be no clean-up involved, it would already be done.

Joseph finished organizing the papers they had been sifting through during lunch as he explained to Jeffrey what needed to be done next in their plan.

"So we begin the next phase of our plan. You go over to the docks and plant this note

on the manager's desk." He looked down at the paper quickly. "His name is Jerry Goregio and he was hand picked by Mr. Carmen to be the next Import Goods Office Manager. It must be his desk. He isn't very bright, but he is serviceable for what we need at the moment, so if we make it easy for him to find, I'm sure he'll go running to our love-bird detectives for help."

Jeffrey asked hesitantly, "And we are certain this office manager will call Mr. Deshay when he sees it?"

Joseph smiled, he actually smiled. Jeffrey couldn't believe it, he actually made Joseph smile.

"Yes, Jeffrey, we are certain he will call Mr. Deshay. You see, Jerry was chosen as the new Office Manager for a reason. Everyone is chosen to do certain things at certain times. You were chosen to be my successor, because Mr. Carmen saw something special in you. Frank Schenelli was chosen as manager at Import Goods because he was very talented with financial numbers and Mr. Carmen needed him to alter the books so that he could make a little extra money from Import Goods, tax free. This Jerry character was chosen for the same position, because he can do some math but is an idiot otherwise, and if we are unable to cleanup what Frank did, then we will need to have proof that they had been partners, skimming money from Import Goods, and when they had a falling out, Jerry killed Frank. None of this would have happened if Frank would have continued to accept his role, but he decided to try and take extra money, probably to help him disappear, so we had to kill him. We all have our specialties, we all have our roles."

Jeffrey was staring at Joseph with his mouth open.

Joseph smiled and said, "That's right Jeffrey, you are my successor, why else would I personally train you?"

"I had no idea."

"Well, you are. I didn't want to put too much pressure on you at the beginning, but you are progressing nicely, so I believe you can handle it now. You can handle it, can't you Jeffrey?"

"Um, yes, uh, I mean, yes, sir. I, I am honored. But, I, uh, I don't see how..."

"Just say it, the stuttering and unfinished sentences are nonsense. You must learn to say what you mean and be confident saying it."

"I'm sorry, I will. Well, what I was going to say was, you said it would take me years of training to become highly skilled at most of the things you are teaching me. How can I

possibly take your place now?"

"I never said it would happen now. I am counted on by many influential people all over the world and I am unique in that I only work for the bad guys. Most of the assassins out there are little more than mercenaries who will work for one government or another just as soon as they will work for a mob boss. I do not trust governments because the minute you do not fit into their plans, you become expendable. I like working for mob bosses for two reasons. When you're good, they show you respect, and they usually pay better. Even as good as I am, I will never tip the balance of power between good or bad one way or the other. If I felt that I could, and my work became a matter of purpose, then I would work for the side of good; the world would be a very difficult place to live if bad people were to rule. A world run by bad people would be chaos and I obviously like order, even though I sometimes create chaos. I do not overtly affect good and bad on a large scale, therefore, I have one purpose, make as much money as I can over a short period of time, then I will retire at a young age and enjoy life.

"However, over the years, I have built my reputation, even much more than I expected. A natural side effect of becoming the best. The relationship I have established with several major criminal networks around the world is unprecedented. Now, I am their man. Yes, I choose which job I want and when I will do it and I work by my own rules, without question, and that is because I never fail. But, I do believe I have begun to tire of the game. I relayed my desire to retire soon to a few of the influential leaders of one of the networks and they became naturally concerned that there would be no one else good enough to do what I do for them, without fear of failure. It was Mr. Carmen's idea that I train my successor. I agreed. So, I will train you for three years, then I retire and you will become their man."

Jeffrey was surprised by Joseph's empathy toward his role in life and how it affected everyone around him. Then he realized he had impressed himself with such of an intelligent assessment of the lethal assassin. He didn't bother to relay his thoughts to Joseph, nor did he continue to evaluate his own actions or how he felt about his newly acquired role in life. He was already a bad man, but now...

"So, that's how Mr. Carmen was able to get you to train me?"

"Yes."

"Amazing, this is all absolutely amazing. I didn't know he was so influential, and I really can't believe he picked me to take your place. I didn't even think he liked me."

“That’s because you didn’t pay attention to anything before, but now you do and you need to learn to evaluate people and know what they are thinking, sometimes before they know what they are thinking.

“Mr. Carmen is a wise man. He can see through the surface to find out what is underneath, better than most. He believed you had what it took to be my successor and I must admit I doubted his choice, at first. Granted, he knew you better than me and now I am beginning to see what he saw in you. It appears he was correct. I have certainly raised my expectations for you these last few days.”

Jeffrey smiled. “Thanks.”

“Yes, well, it appears we have gotten off track from our objective. The action will be picking up very soon and your assignments will become increasingly difficult and increasingly important. I wanted you to know everything so you understand your role in all of this. By letting you know how much trust has been placed in you, I believe it will in turn raise your confidence, as well. You must be completely confident in everything you do, even if you are not sure it will work. Otherwise, you will fail.

“Now, when you go plant that note on Mr. Goregio’s desk, you must be careful you are not seen. Keep in mind what we hope to accomplish with this note, which means you need to place it in an obvious place. He is stupid, yes, but if done correctly, even he will figure out that it was a plant and his very scared little mind will not know what to do. Eventually, out of desperation, we expect him to determine Mr. Deshay is his best chance at survival. You have come a long way in a short period of time, Jeffrey. I have full confidence in you.”

“Thank you, Joseph.” Jeffrey paused a moment. He wanted to ask a question, but didn’t want to stop the momentum of Joseph’s confidence in him. He felt he needed to ask, though, in order to fully understand the circumstances. He was surprised again that he was thinking and planning ahead. With his new confidence, even now growing, he decided to ask the question.

“Joseph?”

Joseph looked up from the file he had wanted to check one last time before giving Jeffrey his final instructions.

“Yes, Jeffrey?”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand how planting this note for Jerry to find will get the information to Mr. Deshay?”

“Human nature.”

“Human nature?”

“Yes. One of the most important tools for this occupation is the study of human nature. We take the information we have on Jerry Goregio and form a personality and character base for him. This base will allow us to determine what he will and will not do under certain controlled circumstances. Remember how I told you each person is selected to do a job? The late Frank Schenelli was selected to launder money through Import Goods because of his ability for manipulating numbers?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he was also selected based on the character and personality base we established on him. Frank was a very fair and loyal person, and he was also family oriented. Mr. Carmen was able to use this information, by threatening to kill Frank’s family, to get him to do his bidding, which worked very well for years until he surprisingly got brave and tried to get out, so he ended up dead.

“Mr. Carmen then chose Jerry Goregio to take Frank’s place because he is easily manipulated. He is spineless, selfish, and a dishonest idiot. He is the perfect person to help us cover up the Frank mess and, as an added bonus, to inadvertently set-up Mr. Deshay’s downfall.

“However, even someone as ignorant as Jerry will know what that notes means and he has no one he can trust. As we learned from the information we collected on him, most of his family avoids him and he has next to no friends. He will be scared and looking for a way out, so I believe human nature wins out in this case. Michael Deshay is probably the last person in a long time that was actually nice to him and he is very rich and looking for information about Frank Schenelli’s death. He even paid Jerry for information the last time they met, as we heard from our wire tap in Jerry’s office.

“There are no guarantees, of course, but I am fairly certain he will call our esteemed Michael Deshay for help or try and sell him information and then use the money to skip town.

“If it doesn’t work, we simply try something else.”

Jeffrey understood the plan, but he was less convinced than Joseph that it would work. Joseph’s record spoke for itself, though, so he kept his doubts personal. Instead, he got excited about his addition to the plan.

“Is this where my idea comes into play?”

“Yes, it is. When Mr. Deshay and Miss Johnson go to Import Goods to see the note, you will go to his office and plant a listening device, except we are going to add a little twist to your idea.”

“We are?”

“Yes. Remember now, the two vigilantes will be looking at a note with valuable information that they know was planted. They will know for the first time that we are aware of their investigations, so they are going to experience a gauntlet of emotions as they try to deal with this information. If they go back to his office to regroup, we can possibly gain some important information on how much evidence they have collected. Obviously, they don’t have enough for the police yet, but we do need to stay abreast of their progress. At this point, I am willing to take a chance. Once the reality of the note sinks in, I think they will be paranoid that they are being watched and listened to everywhere they go.

“Which they are,” Jeffrey interjected.

Joseph laughed, “For the most part, yes. So, increasingly paranoid, I think Mr. Deshay will be very cautious, such as having his office checked for listening devices. If we get information we need before this happens, great. If not, it won’t matter. So, since I believe they will suspect being bugged, what if we were to make it easy to find? Not too easy, but easy enough.”

Jeffrey thought hard as Joseph gave him time to figure out his plan.

“Uhm, what would human nature dictate?” He was trying to use some of the techniques Joseph had taught him. He glanced at Joseph to see if he had noticed what he was doing. Joseph smiled and nodded to him to continue the process he had started.

“There is always a chance this note could scare them off, but not likely. Mr. Deshay and Miss Johnson are both driven by their past to see this through.”

“Good, Jeffrey. What do you think they would do if they discovered a bug planted in Mr. Deshay’s office?”

“They would initially be worried that we had been there, but then they may be more comfortable to make a plan without being heard, because they found the listening device.”

“Excellent. That is excellent reasoning Jeffrey, and that is how we are able to formulate more precisely our final plan. Once our vigilantes feel they have rid the room of our listening devices, they will be given the confidence they need to come after us.”

“But, if they find the listening device we won’t know they’re plan.”

“That is inconsequential, because we will dictate the final confrontation. We will, in a way, formulate their plan for them by controlling the situation that they come after us, and they will have no idea they are being manipulated. Mr. Deshay believes himself to be clever using former cops and private detectives to gather information off the streets, but the information his people receives off the streets is easily manipulated with money and fear. The things we do now are simply to push them into coming after us, and then we can use our plan to ruin him.

“Remember, that is our purpose now. Mr. Carmen believes killing him would let him off the hook for how Mr. Deshay embarrassed him in front of the mafia community, with all of the noble work he did on the eastside of Cleveland. That was Mr. Carmen’s territory and he had been their hero by doing little things for them from time to time, like organizing park clean-ups and giving away Thanksgiving dinners. Well, all of the little things he did paled in comparison to what Michael Deshay did for them. Now, that community no longer needs Mr. Carmen, and he has been unable to get his drugs back in there.

“He wants Mr. Deshay to be humiliated among his peers. He wants him disgraced in the business community. He wants him to lose everything.

“This isn’t about who we think is right or wrong; never think about who is right and who is wrong, because it just doesn’t matter to you. Remember, you are their man, now. The most influential bad guys in the world will have you at their disposal when you take over for me one day. We are their man.

“So, Mr. Carmen is our employer for this job, and it is our duty to see that our employer is happy. Can you accept that?”

“Hell, I don’t care. I’m just here to learn to be a bad-ass and earn a lot of money.”

“Exactly.”

“Lisa, no.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You can stand there on your soapbox and look down on me all you want, I want justice and justice would be their death.”

“I agree with you, justice would be their death, but we cannot be the ones to carry-out

that justice. We live in a society with laws and those laws are there for a reason, and if everyone carries out their own justice, then we have anarchy. We must leave it to the police.”

“If we leave it to the cops, then justice will never happen. Look at all we have done and we still don’t have enough evidence. They don’t care that Kenny never had anything to do with gangs, or that he was an excellent student who worked full time. He was a young black man in a poor, gang infested neighborhood and I’ll bet they have already filed away his case; just another black on black crime. They probably don’t even know he was killed by two white guys. If we don’t get the evidence to prove other-wise, these people will never come to justice.”

Michael softened his demeanor. “I know Lisa, you are exactly right and it is extremely frustrating when the bad guys get away with their crimes, but I still believe we can’t have a bunch of vigilantes out there running around trying to take care of justice themselves. That would just create even more death among the innocent because the vigilantes would not have the resources to make sure they always went after the right guy. Even the police, look how difficult it is for them to get every bad guy, but they do have the best resources and trained officers, so we must trust them.”

“But they don’t always use their resources and they don’t always get the bad guys.”

“I know, and with many of the laws continuously being manipulated to protect criminal’s rights, which should be an oxymoron, it makes it even harder for them to do their jobs properly, but that doesn’t make it right to be a vigilante.”

“I didn’t say it was right, I said it was justice.”

Lisa was ready to burst at the seams with frustration. She hadn’t meant for Michael to find out about her plan to either kill or have Carmen and his thugs killed. She couldn’t even truthfully admit to being sold on her new plan. One minute she was resigned to trusting Michael and following his plan, but then she would have time to think and her need for revenge would come back even stronger and take over. That was how she felt now and had even put together the minor details of a plan to take him out. She had been hoping they could piece together enough information that she could find a way for a hired killer to get to them or even better, get lucky and get to do it herself. Truth be known, she didn’t really know if she could actually kill another person, but then she was having a difficult time seeing Angelino Carmen as a person. She believed her hatred for the man would win out and, given a chance, she would definitely pull the trigger.

She was happy about her continued growing trust in Michael, but frustrated that because of her trust, she had slipped when they were talking about possible ways to make Mr. Carmen pay if they couldn't get the evidence they needed. Michael wanted to expose him in the business community as the crook he was, but Lisa felt that was a long shot and it wasn't proper revenge anyway. Her brother was dead. His family would never see him again. Justice was death for Carmen.

"Justice is a matter of principle. If you are not doing what is right, then it is not justice. Lisa, I know you believe what you're saying is justice and I once did, as well."

Michael paused a moment and looked away.

Lisa's anger boiled and she looked at him sharply. She had wanted to ream him for implying that he even came close to understanding what she was going through, but his look stopped her with the spiteful words still on her tongue.

"What do you know..."

He wasn't listening anymore anyway, he was somewhere else. He thought he was over the murder of his parents. After all, it happened when he was a child, but his feelings for Lisa and her tragic loss had caused old emotions to re-surface. He wanted justice for her, as well, justice he had never obtained for his parents. Even as he lectured her on society's responsibilities toward law and order, he wondered at his lack of conviction for those words and knew he wouldn't be bothered one bit if that despicable degenerate Carmen were to somehow end up dead.

Lisa curbed her anger, wondering what was wrong, what was bothering the man she loved. Had she said too much? He continued to make the effort to understand her pain and her anger, and he was very patient with her frustrations. She respected him for his desire to always do what he felt was right, but something had changed in him out of nowhere. He was hiding something from her. He asked for her confidence in him, but he was not willing to reciprocate that confidence.

"Michael, what is it?"

He shook his head slightly, coming back to his present situation. He had never shared his pain with anyone but Judy and he wasn't sure he could right now.

"Nothing."

"I know you have something deeply personal bothering you. I know it has been bothering you for some time. I noticed it the first day I met you, when I told you what happened to Kenny and you were telling me I needed to trust someone."

He looked over to her briefly, then went over to his favorite chair in the living room and sat down. She followed him into the living room and sat across from him, on the couch.

“Michael, I’m a good listener.”

He felt a warmth building in him that he had never felt before, and he knew exactly what it was, it was his love for Lisa. He did trust her, it just hurt to revisit the memory of his parent’s murder, but he needed to tell her and he could see in her eyes that she needed to know that he trusted her. Now was finally the time.

“When I was a kid, we didn’t have much money,” Michael started.

His voice was a little shaky. Lisa knew immediately he was about to share with her what he had been hiding deep inside for so long. He was always very confident and strong. Suddenly, he didn’t look either; it was almost as if he was a scared little boy again. She felt his vulnerability and this, in turn, made her feel vulnerable. She was transfixed to his every word.

“My parents were good people, but poor. Unfortunately, they both dropped out of high school when my mom turned up pregnant, with me, of course. Neither could get a decent job, they tried, but without an education my mom ended up as a cleaning lady and my father as a construction laborer. My father was determined to provide better for his family, so he began taking classes at night at an adult school and earned his GED. He was so excited about his accomplishment, but wasn’t satisfied. One night, he and my mom sat down together and made a plan for a better life.

“I was young, so I don’t remember everything, but I remember that he did begin taking college courses while he continued to work and even convinced my mom to start working on her GED. When she first started, she was taking the same level math I was taking in fifth grade. It was weird for me to help my mom in math, but it also kind of made me proud.

“My parents knew they had a difficult road ahead, but they were working toward the future, our family’s future. Eventually, my dad said, they would work their way up to better jobs as they became more educated. My dad called it our ‘Ten Year Plan,’ which would culminate with their ability to send me to college.”

Michael smiled at that and Lisa added a smile for him and for her own parents, who had sacrificed much for their kids, as well.

“They loved each other very much, I remember that. High school sweethearts don’t

make it very often, especially when the girl gets pregnant, but my parents were going to be the ones who did.”

Michael began to struggle emotionally with his memories. Talking about it actually kept him from focusing on how much it hurt, but when he stopped to ponder a memory, the pain of their loss hit him like a ton of bricks. He didn’t really understand why because that was so long ago, certainly he should be over it by now.

Lisa had a horrible foreboding steel over her. Everything he had told her thus far was wonderful. Yes, they were poor, but his parents loved each other and were working hard for a better life, but with the heavy emotional toll the telling was taking on him and his use of the past tense when referring to his parents, she had a bad feeling about what was coming.

“One night, some men busted down our door. They beat my mom and dad with baseball bats, careful not to kill them, just hurt them badly. I tried to run and hide, but they grabbed me and made me watch the beating, then they held us at gunpoint.

“They kept yelling at my father, “Where’s our money?” My dad and mom told them we were poor, we didn’t have any money. Their leader yelled, “You got your drugs, I get my money.” My dad tried to explain to them they were mistaken, but they wouldn’t listen. The leader yelled something about how my dad was making money off his drugs, but then not paying him his money. Then he yelled, ‘Why do you disrespect me? As if respect has anything to do with criminals.’

My mom and dad insisted it wasn’t them, they had the wrong place. My father pleaded for them to listen to him. The men searched our tiny apartment, but of course there was no money or drugs. My mom and dad shielded me as they were shot to death.”

Michael’s entire body shook as he began to cry.

“Oh, God,” she said. Lisa wrapped him in her arms and held him. It couldn’t have been more than a couple minutes before Michael stopped crying. He quickly recovered and regained control. She had a feeling he had done this before, not allowing himself to grieve fully, always cutting off his sorrow and not letting his emotions run their course.

He was a survivor, at least, he always thought of himself that way. Placed by Social Services into a home, he grew up living with a family that was never overtly mean to him and provided for him, but there was never love. He had found out later that they once had their own son, but he accidentally drowned in their swimming pool when he was five and by the time they had recovered from their son’s death, they found out they could no

longer have children. It was three years after their son's death when they decided to adopt, and that ended up being Michael, who was the same age their son would have been. They thought he could replace their dead son, but it didn't work out that way at all. If anything, they were often cold toward him because he didn't act the way their son had acted when he was alive.

When Michael was sixteen he secretly started his own business. He bought doughnuts from a local doughnut store, and then resold them for pennies more at all of the local convenient marts. He did surprisingly well and still maintained a 4.0 GPA at school and graduated Valedictorian of his school. Not only did he make good money, but it kept him out of the house and away from the very sad life of his step-parents. They weren't bad people, they just hadn't learned to move on from tragedy and Michael didn't want that kind of life.

On the day he graduated high school, he moved out of his step-parents home and with the rather large amount of money he had saved over the first two years of his little business, he expanded his business and everything took off from there.

He worked very hard to become what he was today. Now, the big business owner felt embarrassed for crying in front of Lisa. So much for being the big, strong man.

His hatred for Carmen and all those like him was becoming so fierce that it was developing into something inside him that he didn't like or want. There was an ever increasing set of bad circumstances surrounding Carmen. The memories of his parents death and the gang problems when he was helping the eastside community clean-up their neighborhood, and now the death of Kenny and all of the pain Lisa was experiencing because of her brother's death. Yes, he hated Carmen, but he must remain in control of his emotions so he can make good decisions. He looked Lisa in the eyes.

"I don't know how, but we will get Carmen, and we will get him the right way."

She nodded her head in agreement. He was probably right...maybe. She wasn't sure if she agreed, but if he could be strong through his tragedy, she would at least try to do the same through hers.

"O.K."

Jeffrey returned from his little mission at Import Goods to find Joseph on the phone.

“That is helpful, I will remember your cooperation,” he said as he hung up the phone.

Jeffrey walked into the living room of the penthouse suite to make himself seen. He was feeling particularly pleased with his work, confident he had done well.

“Jeffrey, just in time. Did you hear any of my telephone conversation?”

He momentarily worried he was in trouble for hearing too much, but he knew not to lie to Joseph. He always seemed to know the difference between a lie and the truth.

“I just caught the end of it.”

“Good, that’s all that you needed to hear. It is very important that you make those providing you with information feel appreciated, because it makes them more willing and helpful the next time. It is also important to make sure those who do not cooperate with you understand it is in their best interest to help you when you ask. Sometimes it may mean you lean on them, but it is best if you can devise a way to make it appear they decided to help you of their own accord. Do you understand?”

Jeffrey smiled, for he actually did understand and happily declared as much to Joseph.

“Good. Now, how did your errand go?”

“It went very well. I planted the information on Jerry’s desk while he was at lunch. His desk was a mess, so it was a little tricky deciding where to put it. There was a receipt on top of his mess for a temporary secretary who was scheduled to come in that day, so I figured she was being hired to help him clean up the mess. With that in mind, I put the note at the bottom of the pile of papers. If I’m right and I believe I am, it will be one of the last papers they come across; that should make an impact.”

Joseph thought a moment.

“I believe you are right, Jeffrey, I am very impressed. That was first class work.”

Jeffrey smiled. “Thank you.”

“The phone call I just finished has provided us with more good news.”

“What’s that?” Jeffrey asked casually, forgetting his professionalism for just a moment. He winced. He hated it when he ruined his good moments with careless mistakes. Joseph noticed his concern, but maintained his decision it was time for him to fix these mistakes on his own. Their assignment was getting too involved for him to continue holding Jeffrey’s hand. He must be responsible for self-correction.

“Do you remember what I told you about Mr. Deshay’s family?”

Jeffrey remembered in an instant. He had spent some of his own time memorizing the file Joseph gave him. It wasn’t as comprehensive as Joseph’s personal file, which was

for his eyes only, but it still had a lot of information for him to learn. He told Jeffrey he would give him more according to what he proved he could handle.

“I believe you’re referring to the fact he has no family.”

Joseph smiled at Jeffrey’s recovery from his little slip. The look of satisfaction on his face led Jeffrey to believe he was beginning to enjoy his tutoring project.

“You are coming along nicely, Jeffrey, and your competence comes at a very good time. We may not be very far away from the moment of truth, if you will, so action based on observation and accumulation of knowledge is essential. Can you do that?”

“Yes, sir, I can.”

“Good. Now, as far as Michael Deshay is concerned, we have a nice little jewel of information that has been dropped into our lap from a friend in the police department. Apparently his parents were murdered by drug dealers when he was nine years old. They were very poor and lived in a bad neighborhood and apparently they were confused for the previous tenants of their apartment, who were drug dealers, and his parents were executed right in front of his eyes over a bad drug deal they had nothing to do with. Tragically, the murderers were never found. I would like to think this has been gnawing at Mr. Deshay’s insides for quite some time.”

Jeffrey smiled and joined in on the thought.

“I would think he would be supremely motivated to exact some sort of revenge on someone, anyone, of the criminal persuasion.”

Joseph looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

“Nicely said, Jeffrey.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“There is one more piece of information about our distinguished Mr. Deshay that, if I understand the information given to me, he doesn’t even know.”

“We’ll be right over,” Michael answered and put the phone down.

“Trouble?” Lisa inquired.

“I don’t know, Jerry is very upset about something. Apparently he found something he wants me to see. I don’t know what it is, he wouldn’t tell me. He was ranting and raving about how I have to help him get out of town.”

"If he's that scared it could be something important," She guessed.

He ushered her out the door as he said, "That's exactly what I'm thinking."

It didn't take long for the two to get to Import Goods, for Michael took advantage of what his new Ferrari had to offer.

When they arrived at Jerry's office they found a frightened man sitting at his newly cleared desk, with a piece of paper lying on the surface in front of him. The only other item on the desk was a closed briefcase off to the side. He looked casually at the entrance of Michael and Lisa. He was no longer near hysterics. In fact, the apathy in his eyes was almost pathetic, as if he had no confidence in the help he was desperately seeking from Michael only twenty minutes earlier.

Michael got down to business right away.

"Jerry, what's wrong? What has you so spooked?"

Jerry looked up with an almost vacant look in his eyes.

"My death sentence."

Michael looked at the paper sitting in front of Jerry on the desk. He couldn't make out what it said, the writing was too small.

"Listen, Jerry, it's probably not as bad as you think," Lisa said.

He looked up from the paper he was staring at in front of him and looked over to Lisa. Even in his partial state of lethargy, he still took the time to look at Lisa from head to toe. Lisa looked over to Michael in a way that warned him to do something before she kicked his male chauvinism right in the teeth.

"Lisa's right Jerry, it's probably not as bad as you think."

He looked over to Michael and gave him a defeated smile.

"Oh, no?" He pushed the paper along the desk toward Michael, who watched the paper coming toward him with an overwhelming curiosity. What could it possibly say to cause such an adverse reaction in Jerry? Jerry was still talking, but he was barely listening, he wanted to see the paper.

He reached for the paper as Jerry was saying, "I had a chance to think things over while I was waiting for you and I realize now that it really doesn't matter what you do to help me. They'll find me. You can't hide from them. They will find me and they will kill me."

Michael didn't say anything. He reached for the paper again, but Jerry didn't let him have it.

“I took your advice Mr. Deshay.”

Michael glanced at Lisa and then looked back to Jerry, not knowing what he was talking about.

“I hired a temp to help me get my desk organized.”

Michael had forgotten about his advice. He quickly surveyed the cleaned up office and desk and then gave Jerry his complete attention.

“It is very clean, Jerry.”

He smiled dejectedly again.

“Everything was going great. Hell, I think she might have even liked me.”

Lisa, off to the side, rolled her eyes. The man had a one track mind; even the possibility of death wouldn’t deter him from his sexual innuendos.

“We decided to tackle the desk last since it was probably the toughest. We got down to the last stack of paper and went through it quickly, feeling pretty good about ourselves over such an accomplishment; well, I was, anyway. She was just doing her job.

“Then I reached this.” He patted the mysterious paper with the hand he had been protecting it. “I know you want to see this paper very badly, but I must warn you first, if you read this paper, then you will know what I know and there is no turning back. This paper will automatically give you information that will put your life in danger. I suggest you forget about this whole thing, it goes much deeper than either of you know, and you cannot win against these people.”

Michael and Lisa exchanged looks. They had no idea if Jerry was over-reacting, but he was too hardened toward life to be so shaken by just anything. Michael took Jerry’s warning more serious, but, in reality, it really didn’t matter. If they were going to see this thing through then they probably needed to see that paper. He could see the answer in her eyes even before she nodded her agreement to look at the paper. He turned back to Jerry.

“Let’s have a look at that paper, Jerry.”

Jerry looked at him with a very serious look, “As you read this note, keep one thing in mind, it was not here when I started this job. I know that for a fact, because this desk did not look like the mess you saw the last time you were here, when Frank had the job. He was very organized, but I was a little overwhelmed at first and things just began to pile up on me. Every piece of paper that was on this desk before we cleaned it today was put there by me, every piece of paper but this one.” He lifted his hand.

“It’s ironic Mr. Deshay. I put all that time and effort into getting my job organized only to have the last piece of paper throw my life into disarray.”

His sudden philosophical outlook on life took Michael by surprise, so even though he had already picked up the piece of paper, he didn’t read it right away. Even with the anticipation of the importance of the paper boring into his curiosity, he felt he should take a moment to reassure the frightened dockworker turned paper-pusher.

“Jerry, there’s nothing to worry about, I’m going to keep my end of the deal. There’s a limousine on the way here and there will be someone in there who will explain everything to you. These men are real professionals and they are going to set you up safely somewhere, unknown to everyone, even me. You will have a new identity, a nice house, a nice car and a good job. They will not be able to find you.”

Jerry looked amazed. “You did all that?”

“I told you I would I help you, and I keep my word.”

“Wow, I was thinking of a plane flight out of town. Do you really think they won’t be able to find me?”

“I am certain you will be safe.”

Jerry smiled with more confidence and to the surprise of both of his guests he thanked Michael as he reached for his briefcase.

“Maybe your right, maybe I will be safe.”

With Jerry reassured, Michael lifted the paper and read its contents. Upon completion, he immediately gave it to Lisa. He watched for her reaction as she quickly read it. She could feel their eyes on her as she took a moment to take in the ramifications of the paper, so she handed it back to Michael trying to hide the nervous look in her eyes. He took the paper back as his cell phone rang. They all jumped a little at the musical noise piercing the silence of their uncertainty. He answered and immediately hung up without saying another word.

“Are you ready to go Jerry, the limo is here.”

Jerry looked at the two a moment and realized the information wasn’t open for discussion.

“Yeah, I’m ready to get the hell out of here.”

He stood up, with briefcase in hand, and then he went out the door cautiously, still not completely convinced of his safety, or at least not his immediate safety. He would hate to get killed before he was safely in the limousine and on his way out of town.

They went outside to see a limousine surrounded by four men in suits. Jerry thought they looked very dangerous and suddenly felt much better about the possibilities that Michael would be able to protect him. The limousine was parked next to Michael's Ferrari and one of the back doors to the limousine opened, but no one got out. Jerry looked at Michael.

"It's best they don't get out. They hide people for a living, they must remain a secret, as well."

Jerry nodded his head in understanding and walked cautiously toward the door of the limousine, apparently deep in thought. Just as he reached the open door, he turned back to Michael and Lisa.

"Mr. Deshay, you do realize that paper was meant to be found?"

"Yes, Jerry, I do."

He nodded his head and got into the limousine. The limousine pulled away and Michael and Lisa got into the Ferrari to do the same. Once they were on their way, she said, "So, they know what we've been up to."

"That doesn't really surprise me. I'm sure Mr. Carmen has just as many resources as I do, if not more. After all, he probably does this kind of thing on a regular basis."

"It's almost as if he's daring you to come after him."

"Yes, it is," Michael agreed. "He's probably been waiting for an opportunity like this to get his revenge."

She looked at the note on the paper and read it out loud.

"Frank, we are very disappointed that you would take advantage of our generosity. If you are not happy with our special arrangement, you should discuss it with us. We believe disciplinary actions are in order."

She stopped reading and looked over to Michael as he drove.

"They purposely put the note on Jerry's desk, well after Frank's death, but we can't prove that, and they kept the message generic on purpose, even though the meaning says so much more. In all appearance, it is just a standard disciplinary note for a bad employee."

"Angelino Carmen is not a stupid man. He did take a chance putting that last line in there, though."

She read the last line.

"I'm sorry to hear about the loss of your employee. The Management." He's rubbing

our faces in it, Michael.”

“I know. He may have made a mistake this time, though.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Well, it is known to the police that Frank died before Kenny. If we were to show this note to them, it might be enough to get them to investigate our angle.”

Lisa thought a moment. “I don’t know, Michael. I mean, with the way he worded it, he could say he was talking about Kenny quitting. Or he could say he didn’t even know Frank was dead at the time, and he heard about Kenny first. I mean, he didn’t even sign it, it just says ‘The Management,’ which means this note could be from anyone.”

Lisa was right and it frustrated him. How could the two of them possibly go up against a crime network? However, if anyone had a chance to get Carmen, it was probably him. He had the money and resources that most people didn’t have. Angelino Carmen put a lot of money toward the destruction of people’s lives, Michael could certainly do the same thing to try and save lives. He would gladly put his entire fortune toward the destruction of Angelino Carmen if that was what it took. Michael got a menacing grin at the thought of Carmen’s demise.

Lisa watched him, wondering what he was thinking, and then she noticed the grin on his face. It wasn’t his normal, friendly smile, it was almost scary. Her thoughts went to the night he was talking in his sleep, but this was different. When he had been talking in his sleep, it was as if he was someone else, this time he was still Michael. He had something dangerous in mind, though, she was sure of that. Michael finally spoke.

“Guys like Carmen, they have a warped sense of respect. The man has the money and the means to stop selling his drugs and stop all the killing and still be successful, but he’s just like any thug on the street. He thinks that if he bullies, or even kills someone, that others will respect him. He thinks fear translates into respect, but he’s wrong.

“I embarrassed Carmen on the streets because I showed him that true power comes from the spirit of people who will not bow to his intimidations. Men like Carmen don’t make any sense. If he was truly interested in gaining my respect, he would quit crime and use his money for the good of the community, but he just doesn’t get it. He thinks I embarrassed him, so he wants revenge. He doesn’t even realize he embarrassed himself.”

Lisa could almost feel the fire burning inside him, as well as hear it with every word spoken. She was glad for it, but it also worried her a little. She was pretty sure an all out war with Carmen was a bad idea. She just wanted to find a way to make him responsible

for her brother's death. She had to make sure Michael stayed focused, they must be subtle if they were going to pull this off.

"I know. I see this all the time with the kids in my neighborhood, but Carmen is very dangerous. With his money, he can reach a long way. We must exercise caution."

Michael smiled.

"Are we experiencing a little role reversal here, or what? Are you now the voice of reason and I the loose cannon?"

Lisa smiled.

"Oh God, I hope not. If I'm the voice of reason, we're in trouble."

Michael pulled into his driveway and turned off the car. He faced Lisa.

"We will get him."

"I hope your right," she said.

The body guards were still stationed around his house, and one was already walking up to the car to escort them to the front door. He turned to Lisa and put his hand on hers.

"Look around you, Angelino Carmen isn't the only one with a lot of money and resources. He finances evil, and I will finance stopping him. I can't think of any better way to spend my money than to see him go down. Don't get me wrong, it is going to be difficult and it is going to be dangerous, but I will use everything I have if that's what it takes to get him. I will not allow him to ruin anymore lives. He's going down and we are the ones who will make it happen. We will get him."

She looked into his eyes and couldn't help but believe his words. She trusted him implicitly. He kissed her and smiled. The kiss took her by surprise, but it was a pleasant surprise. She smiled back.

"Let's go inside, we have some work to do," he said.

"Yes we do," she answered and smiled mischievously.

The fireplace gave off the only light in the room. Romantic music filled the air. An over-sized lamb-skin rug provided the comfort for the two naked bodies intertwined in love. Their sweat mixed and shined by the light of the fire. Simultaneously, they reached the peak of ecstasy and then lay in each others' embrace.

Lisa reveled in the unbelievably good feeling of lying in Michael's arms. The world

was so right at this very special moment. She was amazed at the thought of how far away from passion they had been just a few hours ago, trying to figure out a way to stay alive while putting an end to the reign of a very bad man in their hometown. This respite was welcome in so many ways, if only for the pleasure of sharing their love for each other through their bodies. They needed this and deserved this and were almost desperate in showing that to each other, as the unspoken worry of what would happen to them hung in the air, but they did not let it spoil their moment.

Michael had poured them each a glass of wine to sip on as they sat by the fire. The idea originally was to relax a little before they started to work again. At least, that was the guise they used before their flirting turned passionate. Looking back, she realized the mood had been way too romantic, even in the face of all their problems, to have seriously thought any work would get done. They were two people newly in love, amidst troubling times. They were two lovers who needed each other. She smiled. A little happiness was welcome now more than ever.

She looked into Michael's eyes and he returned her gaze. She could see happiness in his eyes and it pleased her that she was the reason.

She shouldn't get too caught up in the moment, but couldn't help herself, she was feeling so close to him. She was no longer falling in love with Michael...she was already there. She loved Michael Deshay and she wanted to tell him.

"Michael?"

"Yes?"

"I..."

The doorbell rang. They both glanced over toward the door and then back to each other.

"Go ahead, what were you going to say?" Michael asked.

The mood was ruined, she wasn't going to rush it out before he goes to answer the door. She would have to wait for another right time. Under the circumstances, who knows how long that could take? He knew, of course, they had both said it before, but this was their first perfect moment and she wanted to tell him she loved him. Well, it had been a perfect moment.

"Nothing, it can wait. If it's one of the bodyguards, it may be important."

"You're right, I better go see who it is."

Michael got up and started toward the closet.

"But I want to hear what you were going to say; what you say is important to me."

Lisa smiled. "Okay."

He pulled out a robe for Lisa and handed it to her, and then he put one on and went to answer the door.

"I'll be right back."

When he arrived at the front door, he looked through the peep hole and it was one of the guards. He opened the door and asked, "John, is there a problem?"

"Uh, well, sir...I don't know, it could be...I'm sorry to disturb you, but this lady says she has a date with you tonight."

The guard had stepped aside to reveal Rebecca Trudeau. Michael's mouth dropped open as he instinctively looked back toward the living room and then back to Rebecca. He felt a wave of embarrassing heat overtake his entire body.

Rebecca stepped forward, but the security guard wouldn't let her pass. She looked at the man's hand as it lay across her bare shoulders and then up to the bodyguard. She wore a look of death, but still managed to look stunning in her red evening dress. The bodyguard gave Michael a look that shouted, "Rescue me." Michael gave a single nod that it was all right and Rebecca proceeded forward.

"New security system?" She asked sarcastically.

Without the large security guard blocking her path, he was able to get a better look at her. Her evening dress was a very sexy deep red, spaghetti strapped, with a plunging neckline. She knew Michael's favorite color was red.

"Uh...it's kind of hard to explain."

"Are you going to the opera like that? It starts in forty-five minutes," she said.

Michael looked down at his robe.

"The opera." He said it slowly as he started to remember that he, in fact, did have a date with Rebecca. It started to sink in now just how badly he had screwed up. He had completely forgotten about her, let alone their date. Considering what he had been through this week, it was certainly understandable, but he wouldn't be able to explain that to Rebecca, or more importantly, Lisa. He was in big trouble and he knew it.

"Yes, the opera, and you're not even showered. Did you forget about..." the words slowed and then stopped as Rebecca noticed Lisa peeking her head around the corner into the hall. She had heard voices when she was in the living room, but couldn't hear what was being said. She had been curious what was taking Michael so long and now she

knew.

At the site of a very beautiful woman, dressed in a gorgeous evening dress, Lisa forgot her modesty and stepped completely into the hallway. The two woman's eyes met and they seemed to know each others' story instantly. They both looked at Michael. He was beet red in the face by this time and completely at a loss on how to handle the awkward situation.

Rebecca regrouped quickly. After all, she was a highly successful business woman who had been running her father's business for some time now and she knew to never be caught off guard. Roll with the punches, even when it feels like you're going to throw up all over your beautiful ten thousand dollar dress.

"I guess it's safe to say you have forgotten about the opera."

Lisa, not to be out done at brushing off the hurt she felt said, "The opera? That's sounds fun. Michael, why don't you hurry and get ready. I'll just get my things and leave."

Michael did not miss the emphasis on the word "leave," nor the sarcasm put into the statement, nor the hurt in either woman's voice.

"Wait, Lisa."

He didn't want either woman to be hurt, but he knew it was too late for that. He loved Lisa and would not lose her because he forgot to cancel a date. He should have remembered to call Rebecca and explain why he could no longer see her. He wished he had remembered. Now he had to try and explain the situation to two very angry women.

"Please, just wait. I have a lot of explaining to do to both of you."

He turned to Rebecca.

"Rebecca, a great deal has happened in the last few days, please give me a few minutes to explain."

"Michael you don't owe me an explanation, I just wish you would have called and cancelled our date."

"You're absolutely right, unfortunately I forgot. It's not like me to forget something this important. You know me. You know I am very organized and would never intentionally do this."

"Yes, I know." She was sincere. She knew there must be a reasonable explanation. She was hurt, but she owed it to their friendship to give Michael a chance to explain.

"Come in, please. It will only take a few minutes."

"Alright."

Rebecca stepped through the door, passing Lisa. They smiled weakly, but courteously as she passed. They were both adults and there was no reason to get petty. Rebecca figured that Michael and Lisa would probably have a few words of their own, though most of them would likely happen after she left. Even so, she stepped into the living room to give them some privacy in the hallway.

Once Rebecca was in the living room, Michael stepped close to Lisa.

"I can see your mind racing, so I'll tell you right away, this is nothing. Rebecca and I have been business associates and friends for awhile, now. We just recently decided to date and this would have been our second date. She is a friend and I must treat her respectfully, so I'm going to go in there and respectfully tell her that I can't see her anymore."

Lisa looked up into his eyes.

"I'm going to tell her I can't see her anymore, because I'm in love with you."

Lisa smiled brightly. She wanted to be angry, but she couldn't. Before she got carried away, she had to make sure of one more thing.

"What about the first date?"

"The first date happened before I met you."

She smiled again and nodded. She half looked over her shoulder, in Rebecca's direction. "She's very beautiful."

"And you made me completely forget about my date with her."

She wanted to cry with happiness at that comment.

He gave her a loving hug and spoke softly.

"Lisa, I love you."

"And I love you," she responded. She had gotten the special moment to tell him after all. It wasn't as romantic...well, in a way, maybe it was more romantic.

"O.K., I need to straighten this out with Rebecca now."

Lisa let go of the hug.

"Yes, you do. Is it safe to call momma?"

"My phone lines are secure, yes."

"You do what you have to do and I'll go upstairs to make my call."

"Thank you."

She went upstairs and Michael took a moment to collect his thoughts. He had to be

careful explaining everything to Rebecca, because of the danger of the situation. The less she knew, the safer she would be. He must stick to the basic facts about him and Lisa. He couldn't help feeling bad for her. It had looked like they would, at the least, begin seeing each other to find out if they should be a couple, and just like that it was over. He could only hope she was a very understanding woman. Michael walked into the living room hoping Rebecca would be leaving as his friend.

The room was still lit only by the fireplace. Rebecca stood next to the lamb skin rug, with her back to Michael. When he entered, she turned slowly.

"Very romantic," she said with tears in her eyes.

Joseph placed the phone back in its place on the end table.

"The information on the fake drug deal is officially being leaked. They should have it no later than mid-morning."

Jeffrey sat in a chair across the room from him. He even appeared different when in leisure.

"And we wait?" Jeffrey asked.

Joseph nodded. Jeffrey smiled wickedly.

"Wait for the fun to begin."

Joseph was, once again, proud of his student.

Michael fell onto his bed, back first, as if he was re-enacting the old Nestea Plunge. Lisa, who was already in bed, squirmed out of the way, so as to not be crushed by this big man. She screamed, and then laughed.

"What a week," he said.

She leaned over and kissed him. "Yes, it was." She began to run her fingers through his hair and gently massaged his scalp as they recapped the amazing course of events that had happened. They also realized they had not gotten any work done and would have to work twice as hard tomorrow to catch up.

Lisa's gentle massaging had completely relaxed him and he began to nod off, her

words fading. She was saying something about how she hoped everything had gone well with him telling Rebecca he couldn't see her anymore. He smiled as he drifted off, thinking about how cute she was in her subtle jealousy. His talk with Rebeca had gone as well as could be expected.

Rebecca admitted to developing strong feelings for him, but she did not turn bitter. Despite the awkwardness they knew they couldn't avoid, they both wanted to see if their friendship would endure.

By this time, Lisa's message had put him to sleep. He was lying on the covers and inadvertently taking up most of the bed. Lisa didn't care. She lay beside him and snuggled even closer against him. He looked so peaceful.

"Sweet dreams," she whispered. Michael did dream.

CHAPTER 10

Derrick awoke peacefully, but with a question on his mind. He sat up in bed and asked aloud, “What did he do that for?”

“Do what?” someone asked.

Derrick turned sideways to the sight of a hot Latino girl in bed with him. He thought for a moment and vaguely remembered hooking up with her at the party the previous night; he had been very drunk.

“You decided to stay, I see,” he grunted, a little perturbed and confused as to why she was still in bed with him. “Yeah, I hope you don’t mind. It was late and I was drunk,” she explained.

“Whatever,” he said as he lay back down to think for a moment and then surveyed the room. He didn’t recognize where he was and the girl had just confirmed she had stayed with him, so he obviously wasn’t at her place. He must have taken over one of the guys’ rooms by accident, probably too inebriated to know where he was going, so he claimed the first enclosure in his path. It did have the same look and feel as James’ place.

“I wonder whose bedroom I took over?”

“Oh, this isn’t your room...aren’t you rollin’ with them?” she asked.

Derrick looked at her a moment. He wasn’t completely sure he knew the answer to that question.

“No, I’m not,” he decided. At least, as far as she was concerned, he wasn’t. They didn’t need her spreading that little tidbit through the hood. It would be one thing if they were doing business with a white guy, but it could be trouble if anyone thought they were accepting him into their little gang. Explanations would be needed and they didn’t want the attention at the moment.

Derrick and the girl sat silent a few minutes while he considered his options. Then, he remembered the money, his money, and needed to know its location. His short term memory failed to provide him an adequate answer as he glanced around, not seeing the briefcase anywhere.

After last night's party he half expected it to be gone, there had been too many people. It was supposed to just be some friends and some girls, but word spread quickly and the party grew. He had fun, though. Most of the guys' friends had actually been cool to him and he got laid. He looked around the room again. That money was his ticket to becoming an arms dealer in his own right.

He absent-mindedly noticed clothes scattered all around the room as his memory slowly came back. He smiled knowingly as he got out of bed and began putting his clothes on.

"We were pretty crazy last night," he said.

The girl smiled. "Yeah...we were like animals."

His thoughts were clouded, though, with the remembrance of being with two different women. He had definitely drunk too much alcohol, uncharacteristically, and now it was confusing his memory. He looked over to the girl.

"What's your name?"

The girl looked disappointed. Derrick thought maybe he had asked her that question last night, as well, but couldn't be certain. Then, out of nowhere, a name popped into his head and before she could answer, he asked, "Is it Lisa?"

She was obviously disappointed again.

"No, it's Christina."

He was too preoccupied to care much about her disappointment. As soon as she said her name, his memory cleared a little more and he remembered Lisa was the girl in his dream. He didn't like the way this dream was starting to mess with his memory, causing him to mistake dream for reality and vice-versa.

Making up women in your dreams was fine when you're a horny high school kid, but at twenty-seven? His dreams were starting to get a little too weird for his taste.

Christina watched Derrick and she could tell something was wrong. He probably had a girlfriend, the arrogant guys like him usually did, and those were the ones she was usually attracted to; that would be her luck. She liked him and was hoping he would want to see her again. She decided to find out what was going on.

"When you were waking up, you asked me, 'What did you do that for?' What were you talking about?"

He stood in the middle of the room, half dressed. He wasn't sure, well, actually, maybe he did know. He could actually remember parts of The Dream. He remembered

the girl, a very hot black girl. No, wait, he remembered two girls. That's right. The guy had a chance to keep two beautiful women on the hook and he blew it. *Love will mess with your mind.*

In the back of his mind, he wasn't reassured that everything was normal. After all, this wasn't just any dream, it was too personal for a normal dream and it seemed to be picking up where it left off each time he dreamed. It felt like he was dreaming a Soap Opera.

He glanced up and saw Christina staring at him. Lost in his own little world he had forgotten she was there, again. Slightly frustrated, he decided not to worry about The Dream for now because he had more pressing matters that demanded his attention. First and foremost, he needed to find his money. He glanced at the girl and said "It's nothing, I wasn't really talking to you, I was thinking out loud about something, don't worry about it."

"Does it have to do with your girlfriend?"

Derrick knew the game she was playing, but he wasn't in the mood for it.

"I don't have a girlfriend."

Christina smiled. "Oh."

"I'm not the girlfriend type." He turned and left the room, hoping that either James or P-Dawg had his money.

Christina still sat on the bed, naked. She couldn't believe he just left her there. What was she supposed to do now? She had gotten a ride to the party with her friends, so she had no way home. It was obvious he had used her for one night, as most guys she meets usually did, but for some reason he made her more angry than usual because she wanted to be with him more than the usual. They had so much fun partying the night before and she really thought something was happening between them. Very irritated now, she climbed out of bed and got dressed. *He had his fun, now he can take me home.*

"Alright, so what's up?" Pee Wee asked.

"Those Iranians are probably talking all kinds of smack about the deal. Do you think anyone will touch us now?" P-Dawg directed his question toward James.

James sat in a chair in the small living room, thinking, while the radio blasted

gangster rap. “I don’t know, man. I’m sure they got some story going to make it look like we were the ones who went bad.”

“Maybe they didn’t say anything,” Truth offered. Everyone looked at him, hopeful. “I mean, it could be embarrassing that they got their asses handed to them by a small group of amateurs,” he finished confidently.

“I heard that,” Pee Wee added in agreement and got up from his seat on the couch to meet Truth half-way for a fist bump.

James remained serious, though. “That is possible,” he said in half-thought. He had a bad feeling it was more than wishful thinking. Then, something occurred to him, “It probably doesn’t even matter.”

“Whadaya mean it doesn’t matter?” P-Dawg asked.

“Bottom line is, we have a load of weapons we have to get rid of, regardless of what our reputation has become and I’m sure someone will want them.”

Everyone sat in silence a moment, then James spoke again.

“I just hope Derrick will be able to hook us up.”

The guys looked over to James as the statement hung in the air amongst them like humidity on a hot summer day. There was nothing you could do about it but accept it and get used to it being around.

Everyone knew it meant keeping Derrick around for at least one more job. The guy saved them in the deal with the Iranians and that’s the type of guy you want on your side when you’re looking for more trouble.

Surprisingly, T-Bone spoke up. He was sitting in a chair that was too small for him, as was the case with most chairs he sat in, which made him look even bigger. He didn’t talk a lot, but when he did speak, everybody would listen. He appeared to be in deep thought as he prepared to speak.

“D will come through.” It was short and sweet, but it spoke volumes.

They were all thinking the same thing, but each was hesitant to be the one to voice it. As was their custom, they all looked to James again. He felt like a father whose children were waiting for permission to go get ice-cream.

“I was thinking the same thing. Everyone agree?”

P-Dawg spoke up, “He’s cool, man.”

“He’ll do his thing,” Truth agreed.

They all looked at Pee Wee. Early on he and James were the ones that hated Derrick

the most, but now they both accepted his skills.

“I don’t like it any better than you do, James...but he knows what’s up. I say he’s alright, man.”

“All this love going around has brought a tear to my eye.”

The group swung themselves around to face the entryway to the upstairs. Derrick stood there, leaning against the doorway, with a smirk on his face. The guys couldn’t help but laugh and throw him a few friendly expletives. He walked into the room and after a round of street style hand shakes and chest bumps he sat down on the other end of the couch from Pee Wee. There was another movement in the doorway as Christina arrived and stopped. All of the guys were now looking at her like they were appraising a painting, except in a sexual way. She looked to Derrick for help, but there was no help to be found from him.

He looked over to James, “I don’t suppose you’re keepin’ my money safe?”

James moved his glance away from the pretty girl and looked at Derrick. “Yeah, it’s safe.”

“I was hoping you would say that, I couldn’t seem to remember where I put it.”

James looked around at the guys with a smirk of his own, “And this is the guy you want to trust with our lives. Everyone laughed, everyone except Christina. She had no idea what they were talking about, she just knew she was being ignored.

Pee Wee stated to Derrick, “So D, I’ll bet those Iranians won’t mess with us again. We got ourselves a reputation, now.”

“Word,” P-Dawg added.

“Fraid not, man.” Derrick’s voice of dissension was not what they wanted to hear. “Our show of force scares no one, especially not any of the big hitters. However, revenge may be in order.”

James looked Derrick in the eyes and said, “We obviously have business to talk about then,” and threw a glance toward Christina. Derrick didn’t waiver from James’ eyes.

“Yeah, I suppose we do.” He then looked over to Christina, “You got anybody who can pick you up?”

Once again she had all of their eyes on her. Normally she liked the attention, but not this kind of attention. Her irritation toward Derrick rose again, but why did she still want him? That made her angrier. She had not been able to stop herself from going to bed with him the night before and now she was dealing with the consequences. She wanted

to tell them all to “Go to hell,” especially Derrick. With all of the attitude she could muster under the circumstances, she simply said, “Yeah, I got someone.”

Pee Wee laughed, “Damn D, you cold.”

“As we have learned, you have some knowledge of the business, care to share it with us,” James remarked.

It had been completely quiet for the twenty minutes it took Christina’s ride to arrive, except for Pee Wee and Truth, who were playing Halo 3 on P-Dawg’s X-Box 360.

As soon as the girl was gone James broke the silence, anxious to find out what they should do next. Even though they would rely heavily on Derrick’s knowledge of the business, James still felt responsible for the guys, for he was still their leader. Derrick appeared to be partially distracted, though.

While they were waiting for Christina to leave, Derrick’s thoughts strayed to his dream, The Dream, as he had begun to refer to it. He didn’t want it to become a distraction, but he had nothing else to do while they were waiting for his play toy from the previous night to go, so his thoughts wandered. It was on the verge of becoming a nuisance. Was he having dreams of being someone else? Maybe it was because he had been trying to walk the straight and narrow before meeting these guys, but it was too strange to imagine being someone who was good and nice. It just wasn’t natural for him.

However, with the girl finally gone, he had to refocus his thoughts on business. James re-asking his initial question had thankfully brought him back from his dream frustrations.

“Yeah, I know a little bit about the business. I told you about my hook-up with a former apelial forces guy. Well, I also made some friends on a four year stint at Cleveland State Penitentiary. Ya’ll know what it’s like inside, everyone has a war story, right?” Derrick looked around at the guys, expecting their agreement, but only drew blank looks.

“Pee Wee has been in juvenile hall, once, the rest of us have never been arrested.”

Derrick looked at James, stunned by his statement.

“What?” He exclaimed.

Angered, Pee Wee asked, “What, you s’pose because we’re black we gots to have

been arrested?’

“I suppose because your criminals and you suck at it, you gots to have been arrested.”

“Fuck you!” Pee Wee said, as he jumped forward out of his seat, his hand reflexively reaching for his gun in his waistband. Derrick sat calmly in his chair, staring Pee Wee down. So much for peace between the two.

Pee Wee didn’t pull the gun out, but he kept his hand on it, ready to use it. He had reacted before thinking of the consequences and worriedly expected Derrick to make a move, but he just sat there staring at him.

“Be sure,” Derrick said menacingly.

They continued to stare each other down. Derrick could see the doubt arise in Pee Wee’s eyes, but he could also see the pride. Pee Wee could very well do something stupid because of that pride, so he prepared for action. If he killed Pee Wee, the others would kill him. If he let Pee Wee live, Pee Wee would likely look for an opportunity to take him out later. He measured up the room in his mind; James would have to go immediately after Pee Wee, he was the smartest, then P-Dawg because he was the wild card, so Derrick didn’t know what to expect from him. If he somehow managed to get by those three, he would have to hope that T-Bone’s size would make him slow to react and that Truth’s youth would scare him into indecision. He doubted he would make it to P-Dawg and if he did he doubted even more that T-Bone and Truth would prove ineffective.

He always knew he would die in the game, but he had expected it to be against an enemy and he just didn’t see these guys as an enemy. But the ego of a gangster is a tentative thing, so, enemy or no, he would shoot them dead until he could no longer pull the trigger himself. His only real chance for survival was for Pee Wee to back down and that was a fifty-fifty proposition, at best.

Pee Wee didn’t know what to do. He was being challenged and normally he would act. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, he was scared of Derrick. He looked into his eyes and saw death.

Then T-Bone surprised them yet again when he started laughing. Gently at first, then it built up into full merriment. His large body shook until it appeared the chair would disintegrate underneath him.

“What’s so damn funny?” Pee Wee asked, even more irritated.

“We did suck,” T-Bone said as he continued to laugh. James and P-Dawg looked at

each other, then over to Truth and then Pee Wee.

“We did suck,” P-Dawg said and started laughing, as well. The others joined in and even Pee Wee broke down and started laughing. Everyone was having a good laugh, everyone except Derrick. He had always had a chip on his shoulder and Pee Wee had called him out, and that needed to be addressed. He had meant to stay cautious, and it wasn’t the first time his temper had gotten him in trouble, it likely wouldn’t be his last...or maybe it would.

Derrick’s hard stare lingered on Pee Wee while the others continued to have fun with the joke. Pee Wee could almost feel Derrick’s anger reaching out to him, daring him to do something stupid. He had wanted out of the situation and T-Bone’s joke was his opportunity. He was hoping Derrick would let it go and they could go back to the way things were before his poor judgment.

Derrick was always loyal to his friends, but getting the friends was the hard part, because he was not quick to trust. When he was in prison he commanded the respect of the hardest criminals, but he earned that respect the hard way, by not backing down when challenged. He had to kill twice while inside, but it made the rest of his stay much easier. Everyone at the prison knew one thing was certain with him...don’t threaten him unless you plan to follow through with it. He wasn’t quite sure what kept him from killing Pee Wee, maybe the fact he was miserably outnumbered, or maybe it was because Pee Wee reminded him of himself at sixteen; a crazy son-of-a-bitch, not afraid of anything. He convinced himself it was for the opportunity. He needed these guys for the opportunity.

The guys had calmed down from their joking as each in turn realized Derrick hadn’t been laughing and was still eyeing Pee Wee. Derrick had finally decided to let it go, but he had taken too long to curb his anger.

James said “C’mon D, let it go. It’s cool, now.” James looked to Pee Wee with a hard look. “Right, Pee Wee.”

“Yeah, it’s cool, man.”

“I think we’ve come to an understanding on the subject, we all need to respect each other more, agreed?”

“Agreed,” they all repeated. Derrick glanced at James, “Agreed.”

And that was that.

Back to business, Derrick asked, “O.K., James, how have you guys managed to stay out of jail?”

“Well, to be honest with you, we haven’t really been doing this very long.”

“Makes sense, but you said you were dealing small-time through connections with Fred until he hooked you up with a connection for this bigger deal.”

“That’s right, me and P-Dawg were working for Old Man and doing some smaller deals on the side, but T-Bone was still working construction, Pee Wee was working at McDonalds and Truth was working part-time at his uncles flower shop while finishing up his senior year.”

“And how long ago was this?”

James looked at the guys, “What, two, three months ago?”

“What?” Derrick couldn’t believe it.

“What?” James asked.

“You said you and P-Dawg saved up over a period of time for this deal.”

“Yeah, a period of two or three months.”

Derrick couldn’t help laughing.

“What is so damn funny?” James asked, with a little irritation of his own.

“I’m sorry, man, I don’t mean to laugh. I’m laughing at myself, really. I just assumed, by the way you told it, that you and P-Dawg had saved up over a long period of time.” James didn’t really get the significance of that statement.

“So, who cares how long it took?”

“If you had been pulling off smaller deals over, say, a two year period, you would, at least, have a little experience. Sure they would be smaller deals, but at least you would have been through different situations. You would know certain things to watch out for and you would have learned how to read people so you know when someone is lying to you or if you’re about to be set-up. You do know there are undercover cops whose sole job is to go around and make deals with arms dealers? That’s how they catch people like us.”

Nobody said anything. He looked around the room. At least he finally had everyone’s attention.

“Granted, I’m impressed you saved that kind of money, that fast, but guys, three months is not experience in this business, that’s barely a summer job.” He knew very well how dangerous of a position they were in. They could trust no one, and they had to watch out for the people they angered from the botched deal on one side and the cops on the other side. They would have to be very careful and very prepared. He was worried

before when he thought they only had a couple years of small-time experience, and now he was contemplating going into a major, complicated deal, with back-up who had practically no experience.

Well, he didn't get a reputation in Cleveland for being crazy by playing it safe. He couldn't help finding it amusing that three days ago he was trying to figure out how to be a normal, law-abiding citizen...well, maybe not normal. Whatever made him think he could be anything other than a criminal? Maybe it was the influence of *The Dream*, he thought amusingly.

Well, he wasn't a good guy, nor would he ever be. He would continue to do what he knew best, he would be an arms dealer. Now he was back and maybe with an opportunity here in L.A. He didn't want to scare the guys away because it appeared they had stumbled onto something potentially lucrative, and if he worked it right, he could possibly maneuver into a position to step up with the big boys. Derrick smiled at the guys wickedly.

"Like they say, sometimes it's better to be lucky than good. Apparently, you guys are lucky and I can teach you to be good."

"We never really intended to be criminals."

"What?"

"We never really intended to be criminals."

Derrick looked at James with a sarcastic grin.

"What, you thought dealing guns was legal?"

James ignored him. He was kind of off in his own little world. "We tried to get by on jobs, but, well, we figured we have a right to nice things, too."

"Yeah, man, but we ain't gettin' nice things workin' at McDonalds. We had no choice but to become gangstas," Pee Wee added.

"You always have a choice, we all do. At some point in time, we all have made the choice to be criminals. It may be because we think we deserve this or that, or it may be because we want to be a big shot. The truth is, it doesn't really matter why we became criminals, we just did, and we all made the choice to do this. So, if we're going to do this, let's be honest with ourselves and do this thing right."

James glanced at Derrick, only to see him looking at him expectantly. He didn't know why Derrick was looking at him that way, but he was still thinking about the whole decision to be a criminal. James never wanted to be a criminal, but he did make the

decision. He wasn't feeling so good about that decision now, but what could he do, they were in a situation and the guys needed him. He glanced up and saw Derrick still looking at him with a look that still expected something from him.

"What?"

"Look man, I get that you were all nice kids at one time and didn't have the patience or the desire to get your money the old fashion way, so you made the tough decision to be gangsters. That decision has been made and here you are, so it doesn't do any good thinking about whether you made the wrong decision now. It's time to put the gangsta face back on, you know, the one you've shown me since I met you."

"I don't know that I would agree with your explanation of how we got here, but we are here."

"Exactly, so, tell me your plan and then we can tweak it where it's needed."

James looked down at the floor, appearing to consider a plan for the first time.

"You ain't got a plan, do you?" Derrick asked.

"No man, that's why we're bringing you in," P-Dawg said.

Derrick looked over to P-Dawg, and then he looked around the room slowly, studying each guy separately. He already knew he had P-Dawg's complete confidence. Truth was a thinker, so he couldn't tell if he trusted him or not, he just knew he was constantly under the guys' observation, but you can never underestimate the value of an intelligent man. He had learned that working as a hired gun for Sarge, back in Cleveland. He told Derrick that if he ever got set up on his own, he needed to make sure he was not only surrounded with competent muscle, but he should always have some brains around to help him stay out of trouble. Perhaps Truth would become even more valuable down the road, unless he ended up going to college like he said he wanted to.

Next, he looked over to the mammoth T-Bone. He was definitely there for his brawn, not his brains, but his intimidation factor was a useful commodity. Then there was Pee Wee and James. He believed he had earned James' respect. He had listened to Derrick during the last deal, but only because his life was in peril; although, he was looking to him for a plan now. It would be best if he found a way that would leave James with the most responsibility, so as not to bump heads over who was in charge. That could be resolved later when they saw just how good he was at this and then they would realize they needed him to be their leader.

In reality, Pee Wee was probably his biggest critic, but he had scared him. Pee Wee

liked to have his hand on his gun and he talked a big game, but Derrick saw the fear in his eyes. He had seen that look before and knew it well. Also, Pee Wee trusted him one minute, and then would lose his temper at him the next. All in all, though, Pee Wee was actually warming up to him. The others weren't completely sold on the whole criminal thing, they just wanted money. Hell, who didn't, that was certainly his driving force. Pee Wee on the other hand was into the whole thug life, and he would be the most enthusiastic one of their group to be involved in this deal.

"So, what's the plan D?" P-Dawg asked.

"No," Derrick answered.

The guys looked at each other. James spoke up.

"What do you mean, 'No'?"

"It's no good. Maybe you guys should get out of this while you still can."

"Son-of-a-bitch, I knew we couldn't count on this sorry..." Pee Wee began, but stopped because Derrick had got up from the chair in the corner and was walking over to where he sat. He stopped a couple of feet short of Pee Wee, who had stayed seated, but his hand went to his gun and he looked up at him defiantly.

Derrick asked him, "How'd you get mixed up with these guys?"

Pee Wee held his look, still defiant. He could see Derrick wasn't being threatening or sarcastic. He was asking him a genuine question and he knew exactly what he meant, because he was well aware that he was different than the others. He knew James wanted them all to be legit some day, but he had no intention of going legit, he was a player for life.

Pee Wee took his hand from his gun and looked over to James.

"My uncle ran with James and P-Dawg, he was in the car Maddog unloaded on. He made them promise to take care of me if anything happened to him. Somethin' did."

"Your dad?"

"Crack head died two years back. My moms lived on the street, hooking for drugs 'till she ended up dead. I lived with my uncle."

"I hear ya', my dad was a drunk. He killed himself and my mom in a car wreck. Shit happens, huh."

"Yeah, shit happens," Pee Wee said weakly. "I told these fools I could take care of myself, but they wouldn't listen, but it's cool, we're homies."

Derrick turned to the group as he walked to the center of the room and spoke.

“Pee Wee is just a kid and he can’t decide whether he hates me or not. Hell, I don’t know from one minute to the next if he’s going to shoot me in the back, but I gotta tell ya’, I would probably feel safer having him watching my back on a job, than any of you.”

James stood up defensively. “What the hell are you talking about? You can trust any of us.”

“I can trust you to hold my money for me, yeah. I don’t doubt your honesty for one second, James.” He smiled. “I don’t know why I didn’t see it before, but now, everything is starting to make sense. Pee Wee is the only one among you who knows he wants to be doing this. The rest of you aren’t sure, except James, and you definitely don’t want to be doing this.

“So,” James stated.

“You don’t get it, man. You have to be a little crazy to do this.”

“We ended up doing fine last time...with your help, but we still did it,” James said.

“That was survival, man. You would be surprised what you can get yourself to do when your life is on the line with people shooting at you. This time, you know what you’re facing going in. That means you have time to think about it, that means you have time to get nervous and scared before anything happens, not to mention you surprised those Iranians who tried to jack you. But word will get out and you won’t surprise anyone else. Put those two things together and, needless to say, I’ve seen guys get stage fright under those circumstances.”

“That won’t happen,” James insisted.

“I just don’t think you’re bad enough to be ruthless, if needed,” Derrick said.

“Well you better belie’ dat, mother fu...”

“We will do whatever is needed,” James interrupted Pee Wee. “It’s not like we’re killing innocent people here, these are bad people. We will take from these bad people, as our means to an end. I know that doesn’t make it right, but that is what we choose to do... whatever it takes.” His conviction caused his voice to finish at a higher pitch than when he started, even though his voice remained at the same volume the entire time.

Derrick didn’t miss the sarcastic emphasis on the word “choose,” but at least he could finally see some intensity in James’ eyes. The intensity was in his whole demeanor and Derrick liked that. He pretended to consider what James had said as he began to reel them in.

“We got your back D,” T-Bone said.

“Yeah, man, let’s do this,” P-Dawg added.

Pee Wee said, “Your right, I still don’t like you, but you’re good at this shit, and this is bi’ness, man.”

“Is true, is true,” was Truth’s addition to the moment.

Derrick pretended to consider their words for an additional moment as he glanced at each of the guys.

“All right,” he finally answered, “but on one condition.”

“You have a phone call.”

The prisoner looked up at the guard in a way to let the guard know he had disturbed him. The guard shifted his weight and looked away. The prisoner smiled. He then got up from his bunk, where he had been laying down. The guard opened the cell door and stepped to the side as the prisoner walked passed him. The prisoner could see the guard was still uncomfortable, which continued to satisfy him a great deal. Everyone feared Sarge, even his jailors.

“This is Sarge,” the prisoner said into the phone.

“Sarge, what’s up, you big son-of-a bitch,” answered the voice from the other end of the call.

“This better be Pretty Boy or you’re a dead man, and don’t think I can’t reach you from inside.”

“Someone spit in your oatmeal this morning,” Derrick joked.

“Shit, none here stupid enough to do that. You do realize you’re the only asshole who’s ever gotten away with talkin’ shit to me and that’s only because you saved my life.”

“You don’t say.”

“I do say. Now, why are you bothering me at nap time? I almost had to kill a guard because of you.”

Derrick laughed a moment, but then he got serious.

“Well, Sarge, this is business. I’ve run into some amateurs who happened across some merchandise from a small group of Iranians. I thought maybe you could direct me to who they belong to or someone who might want them.”

“Let me guess, you’re in Cali’, aren’t you?”

“Uh, yeah,” Derrick answered hesitantly.

“Damn Derrick, how’d you get mixed up in that deal?” Sarge asked, irritated.

“You know about the deal,” Derrick stated more than asked, because of course Sarge knew about it, since he got information on everything that meant something. *Shit*, he thought, *that means the deal meant something*.

“Of course I know about the deal, I always know about the deals. The Iranians are pissed off, man.”

“I figured. They obviously wasted no time to get their story out there.”

“That’s how they work, now what the hell happened. Were you taking chances?”

“No, this wasn’t even my deal. I stumbled across it and just played back-up. Listen Sarge, they were the ones who went bad in this thing and now they’re pissed because it back-fired and we kicked their asses. They had these kids pegged for suckers, man. I thought it was small-time and rode along for the easy money, but when we got their, my skin started tingling. You know I’m never wrong when my skin starts tingling. We were lucky to live through that one.”

“You mean those kids were lucky to have you along. The Iranians never did like to play by the rules. Man, I hate doing business with those bastards.”

“I can see why.”

“And what about you, Derrick?”

“What?”

“I swear, it’s like you’ve got radar for lost causes. You’re one of the best men I’ve ever worked with, but you tend to find these losers from time to time and either get locked up or almost killed. If you just worked with the professionals, you wouldn’t get yourself into these messes, and you would never get caught. You’re too damn good to get caught. If I had you on my last job instead of that hack Jacobs, I wouldn’t be in here right now.”

“Yeah, well, you try to help out a so-called friend and sometimes it backfires, I warned you about him.”

“I hardly need a lecture from you. I told you I pay my debts and I owed him going back to Desert Storm. Now, he and I are done. That still doesn’t explain why you didn’t sniff this one out better.”

“What can I say Sarge, I have no excuse. I came out here for a new start and got

desperate. This one, yeah, well, it was careless on my part, but it's not necessarily all bad. If we're not totally screwed, here...it could work out all right for me."

"So you want me to perform a miracle?"

"Something like that."

"I'm telling you Derrick, if you were anyone else, I wouldn't get involved, but you saved my life, I owe you."

"I told you to forget about that, but I would appreciate your help."

"I can't just forget you saved my life. Besides, if I did, then I would have to kill you for sleeping with my wife."

"C'mon, man, I told I had no idea she was your wife. Besides, technically she was your ex-wife."

"I never liked the ho' anyway. I divorced her in the first place because she was sucking me dry and I don't mean the good way."

"Don't they always."

"At any rate, I'm thinking I can use my reputation to put the truth of what happened with your deal out there, and hell, I'll even spread word that you're a legit dealer. Everyone knows the Iranians reputation, it shouldn't be too hard."

"That would be good," Derrick said, thankfully.

"Call this number I'm about to give you in twelve hours...exactly. The man you're going to speak to is Columbian. He'll probably want to negotiate some drugs into the deal, are you interested?" Sarge asked.

"You know how I feel about drugs, Sarge."

"Yeah, alright, no drugs. I keep telling you there is big money in drugs, and guns kill kids, too, you know."

"Sarge, we've been through this."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll arrange it."

"Thanks, man. Oh, hey, what's this guys' name I'm calling?"

"No names. Just call the number in twelve hours and he'll set up a meeting. The twelve hours will give me time to make your name good on the market. He will be ready to deal then."

"Cool, so, what's your bill for saving my ass?" Derrick asked.

"Who says I'm saving your ass. Be careful on this one Derrick, this guy is dangerous, but I'm afraid this is the best I can do under the circumstances. Use all of your skills."

I'm telling you, this guy is mean and nasty and delights in keeping that reputation. If you want to pull out now, tell me. Once you get started, this guy will make you finish...one way or another."

Derrick didn't need to think about it, he was at do or die time in his life anyway and he didn't care enough about anyone else to worry about his partners' lives.

"I'm cool."

"All right, man. As I say, be careful on this one. The good new is, if you can teach these kids to look professional in time and pull it off...this guy is also known to reward those he trusts and you could become established in the market, just like you always wanted."

"That's what I like to hear. Thanks, man, this makes us even."

"This hardly makes us even, hell, I don't even know if you'll survive. No, this one's on the house, I still owe you..." Sarge seemed about to say more, but Derrick interrupted.

"Enough about the damn you owe me bullshit. I told you, there is no such thing as paybacks between me and you. Hell, you taught me most of everything I know. I save you, you save me...this could go back and forth a long time, you know."

"Yeah, if we live that long."

"True."

Sarge gave him the number to call and then they said they're good-byes.

Just as Sarge was about to hang up the phone he noticed the prison guard pointing to his watch. The guard seemed to have regained some of his courage while he was on the phone, and well, he couldn't have that now, could he? He hung up the phone and walked over to the guard, causing him to immediately wish he hadn't bothered Sarge.

Sarge stood within the guard's comfort zone long enough to make him more than a little unsettled, then he smirked and moved on. As he walked backed to his cell he started to piece together in his mind how he would set things up for Derrick. This would not be easy.

Derrick hung up the phone and turned to the others who were anxiously awaiting the results. He smiled. "So far, so good."

There was mild celebration amongst the guys, but he couldn't help thinking about the warnings from Sarge to be careful. He trusted Derrick and had never been so tentative before. Who the hell was this guy that even Sarge sounded wary of, and had the bad deal been so bad that they could only deal with someone as ruthless as this guy? He couldn't

help wandering if he had gotten in over his head, although he didn't really care at this point. He was already beginning to feel the adrenalin rush for the upcoming deal.

"We need to prepare, but first...breakfast," Derrick announced.

"I agree," T-Bone said.

"You would," Pee Wee added. "We should call you T-garbage disposal."

T-Bone wrinkled his brow, as if he didn't get it. "That's stupid Pee Wee, it doesn't even make sense, I don't eat garbage."

P-Dawg jumped in to diffuse the situation. He didn't want Pee Wee to get started or he would make fun of T-Bone being a little slow of wit, all day.

"T-Bone, I saw you eating breakfast not more than an hour ago."

T-Bone smiled. "Oh yeah, well then, how 'bout some brunch?" he asked with a horrible English accent.

Derrick laughed with the others and answered, "Brunch it is."

Everyone began shuffling out the door with Derrick as the last out and James was waiting for him just outside the door.

"I just want you to know your money is safe," James said.

"I know," Derrick answered with a look of trust and James could tell he was sincere. The two didn't say anything else, but exchanged something along the line of mutual respect, and then they went for brunch.

"It's on," Derrick said as he hung up the phone, "two am at Seal Beach." Everyone looked at each other. "Alright then fellas, James said, we have to prepare...let's do it."

By ten thirty p.m., every detail had been triple checked by Derrick and James. Everyone stood in the garage beside the van, which was now packed with their stolen booty. Derrick finally admitted aloud, "I think we're ready."

Derrick's "one condition" had been that he was in charge. He welcomed their suggestions, but this would be his plan and everyone must follow his plan. James agreed immediately and then the others followed. James still played an important part in helping put everything together and they found out that they all actually worked very well together.

The guys exchanged looks of surprise. Two hours earlier Pee Wee had made the remark to P-Dawg, "Man, I don't think he'll ever be satisfied." But now it appeared he was satisfied with their preparation, so he looked to James to see if he agreed and James nodded.

"Everyone knows exactly what they're doin' and when they're doin' it. We have the arsenal we need..." Derrick continued to evaluate the plan even as he spoke. They couldn't afford him missing one single detail. "I guess the only thing left to do is get some sleep, we need to be sharp."

"Sleep? Man, I couldn't sleep now if I took sleeping pills," P-Dawg said.

"He's right D," James said.

"I understand the adrenaline is starting to flow, but that's exactly why I want you to try and sleep. At least take the time to rest in your beds, even if you don't sleep it will help to calm you. The adrenaline can help make you more aware when it comes time for the deal, but it can work against you if you let it take over too soon. The deal is almost four hours away and by the time we go, you will have used up all of your adrenaline. You found out the hard way that anything can happen. Trust me, the best thing to do is just lie down and relax and think through every detail of the plan, it will help you prepare. I'll come get everyone at one, all right?"

Everyone agreed, James locked up the garage and they all went to bed. Derrick didn't expect to sleep either, he never did before a deal, but he did find it useful to use the time to help him relax and make sure he had covered every detail.

He lay in bed thinking, jokingly, that he shouldn't have sent away the girl from the previous night, sex would have helped to relax him. Finally, he did start to relax, even as he began to realize how much all of the preparations had tired him out. It was certainly more stressful when you were in charge of the deal. It also just occurred to him that the deal had helped him to forget about The Dream, as well. However, now The Dream could provide a welcome distraction from the impending deal. He would soon find out.

Derrick did fall asleep, and he did dream.

CHAPTER 11

The alarm went off at 8:15 a.m. Michael woke up and turned it off, then reluctantly sat up in bed and leaned back against the headboard. He felt tired, or perhaps sluggish was a better word, like he had slept too long. He sat there a moment thinking about nothing in particular, and then he looked at the clock. He felt like he was supposed to do something, but he had no idea what it was he needed to do. He realized he desperately wanted to remember, needed to remember. No, he didn't need to do something...*It was him.*

Michael could remember part of his dream. This guy in his dream had something very important planned. He put every effort into remembering what it was, but didn't understand why he cared so much about a dream.

“What are you up to Derrick?”

Michael froze. He remembered the guys' name. This dream, The Dream as the guy in his dream, Derrick, appropriately called it, was becoming more and more real. Worse, it was becoming more and more involved. Even now, awake, he felt like he was somehow connected to it, or it to him. But how? Suddenly, he realized he had just remembered something else about The Dream, this man was bad, very bad, and somehow he was connected to him.

The phone rang and he welcomed the distraction. He looked at the clock as he picked up the phone, it was now 8:22 a.m.

“Hello?”

It was Lisa. “It's good to hear your voice,” he confessed, but at the same time he was thankful she wasn't there because he didn't know whether he had talked in his sleep again. He worried she might still be a little fearful about what happened the first time she spent the night. He couldn't help wondering if staying the night with her mom was an excuse to not stay with him, just in case he had The Dream again.

They had both fallen asleep early, askew on the bed, and had been awakened by Lisa's mom calling to ask her if she could visit them. No doubt her mother missed her

and was worried about her and it was the right thing for her to do. He assured himself it was simply so she could spend time with her mom.

Now on the phone, sure enough, she wanted to know how he slept, and if everything was all right. He understood the implications of her words.

“Is that why you didn’t come back last night? Have I frightened you?” he asked.

She tried to explain that she wasn’t frightened in any way and that she really wanted to be there to help him, but her momma had begged her to stay.

“It’s O.K. Lisa, I understand.”

“Where did you go?” Momma asked Lisa.

“I had to make an important phone call.”

“To that rich man who was going to be Kenny’s boss?”

“Michael? Yes, why?” she asked her momma, trying to look as innocent as possible. She knew what her mom was doing, “laying the trap” as Kenny used to call it. Momma would ask a simple question that she already knew the answer to, just to set up the lecture she had planned for you and there was no way out of it.

“Baby, what have you gotten yourself into with this man?”

“I don’t know, momma.”

She didn’t like playing dumb with momma, knowing it would only make her angry, but she really didn’t know what to say. She had known the man less than a week, how could she tell her momma that she was helplessly in love with him and he felt the same about her. That thought in itself made her head spin.

“I think you do know,” momma said.

Lisa looked at her. “Must you always look right through me,” Lisa said as she gave her a hug.

“I’m your momma, it’s my job.”

“Sometimes I think you do your job too well.”

“There’s no such thing as doing your job too well. Now, come on, out with it.”

Lisa began thinking about how serious her relationship with Michael had become in such a short period of time and wondered if it would survive their current struggle...if they would survive their current struggle.

“Lisa.”

She looked at her momma, not knowing how deeply she wanted to get into this with her, but then her feelings came out in a rush.

“Momma...I...uh, I may have fallen in love with him.” There, she said it. Momma would just have to deal with it.

“I know that.”

Lisa gaped at her, confused. If she knew then why did she ask? She looked into her momma’s eyes. A great deal was communicated between mother and daughter at that moment, without a word needing to be said. By this time they both had tears in their eyes. Momma smiled and put her hand on Lisa’s hands, which were wringing each other.

“Baby, you have to follow your heart.”

Lisa smiled back. She didn’t exactly have momma’s blessing to be with Michael, but at least she would support her decision.

“Now, we need to talk about the real reason I called you here,” Momma said in her matter of fact tone that said she would talk and Lisa would listen. This was what Lisa had been trying to avoid, but she wasn’t surprised that momma wouldn’t leave a single stone unturned.

“Now that you and...” She had forgotten his name.

“Michael,” Lisa offered, almost amused.

“Now that you and Michael have found each other, the two of you can abandon this madness you’re involved in. You have Terry and me hidden in someone else’s house while the two of you are out playing detective. Lisa, this is serious. These people are professional killers. You two cannot expect to win this. You didn’t see the look in their eyes when they...”

Momma collected herself and faced Lisa.

“Please, baby, let the police handle this.” She paused a moment, trying to hold back her emotions. “I can’t lose you, too.” She began to cry.

Lisa didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t let things go now, she was in way too deep. On the other hand, she felt terrible for momma, just now realizing how selfish she had been, letting her need for revenge to consume her and keep her from considering what effect this would have on her momma. She knew there was a chance she wouldn’t survive, but her anger kept pushing her deeper and deeper. If she didn’t make it through alive, what would happen to momma? How hard would it be for her to

lose two children, so close together, to the same murderers?

Lisa hugged her and tried to comfort her. Lisa had Michael now and together they could do this, she truly believed that. The only thing she could do for her momma now was to finish this and come back alive.

“Don’t worry momma, everything will be all right. I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

Lisa went to the door to leave, then stopped and looked back. Momma looked at her, begging, “Please don’t go, Lisa.”

“I love you momma,” she said and went out the door.

Momma put her head in her hands and wept.

Lisa got in the back seat of the car Michael had provided for her, and the driver backed out of the garage, into the alley. Lisa gazed out the window as the car drove away. Tears came unbidden.

“The doctor will see you now, Mr. Deshay,” the secretary stated.

“Thank you,” Michael answered as he stood up and walked through the door.

“Mr. Deshay, it is good to meet you, I’m Dr. Yashida.”

“Nice to meet you,” Michael said politely.

The doctor was able to determine immediately from his demeanor that this was his first trip to a psychologist and he was not happy about it. His secretary, Judy, had made this known to the doctor when she made the appointment for him and made the doctor swear she would never tell him that Judy told her that, but it wouldn’t have mattered. This wasn’t the first time the doctor had encountered a “macho skeptic,” as she like to call them. Psychiatric humor, she supposed, but it was the best lingo she could come up with to describe the macho attitude of most men that think they don’t need a “shrink” and in the rare cases of using hypnosis, that they couldn’t be put under anyway.

“Please, have a seat,” the doctor offered.

“Thank you.”

“Your secretary said you wished to be hypnotized in reference to a recurring dream, is that correct?”

“Yes,” Michael answered, still visibly uncomfortable.

“I see.”

The doctor had been leaning back against her desk, half sitting, but now she decided to stand up and walk around to her chair to give her a moment to consider his need over his anxiety.

“Mr. Deshay, most people have misguided views about hypnosis, so I’d like to take a few moments to explain to you what we will do and what our objectives will be.”

“Fair enough.”

“Hypnosis has been around since the 19th century and different techniques have been used and improved to give the modern mental health professional a more clear and concise method for implementing a hypnotic or trance-like state. Those of us in the medical profession consider it to be a highly skilled process, if you want it to be done right. You can find a dime store hypnotist on your local street corner, or even take an internet course and get a certificate as a therapist. However, if you are interested in how these dreams relate to your mental and physical well being, they should be analyzed by a professional. So, you have taken the first and most important step by being here in my office.”

“I understand, you want to make sure I’m not crazy.”

“We don’t use such negative terms to define someone’s mental well-being.”

“It’s O.K., I understand what you mean. Actually, I did some research this morning on the subject of hypnosis and dream analysis and I don’t foresee any problems.”

“Good, I like my patients to be well informed and active in the process of mental health. However, even with your preparations, it is my responsibility to make sure you understand everything we will be doing today. For instance, the importance of hypnosis is related to connecting your conscious mind with your unconscious mind. Much of what the unconscious mind is capable of is still unknown, but we can use relaxation methods through hypnosis in order to tap into the unconscious and determine reasons for your actions that you may not even be aware are there.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“Great, then we’ll get started.”

The bodyguard assigned to drive Lisa to the safe house to visit her Momma dropped her off at Michael’s house a little earlier than she had expected. That, of course was do to how her conversation with momma had deteriorated. She had planned on staying longer

to help momma feel less anxious about staying in the safe house, but momma just put too much pressure on her about this...thing against Carmen that she and Michael were trying to do, of which they hadn't completely figured out yet.

She got out of the car and began to walk up to the front door of Michael's house. She had noticed the beauty of the all white contemporary house before, but hadn't yet had a chance to stop and consider its grandeur. It fit Michael perfect. It was big, but not too big, modern, with a reasonable amount of flare, but not overdone or garish, with ample foliage. Most of all, it was welcoming and comfortable inside and out. It was a beautiful home, but could it be her home?

She finished her appraisal and resumed her route to the house once again when, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed one of the security guards approaching her. She politely turned to face him, calmly, although she was a little nervous over his need to reach her before she entered the house. It was the same man who had politely minded his own business during the fiasco of the previous night when that beautiful lady showed up for a date with Michael, wearing a sexy red dress, which Lisa knew was Michael's favorite color. She still felt embarrassed by it, even though she knew it was an honest mistake on his part. She actually felt flattered that she could make him completely forget about his date with such a beautiful woman.

"Hi, Miss Johnson, how are you?"

She appreciated the man's professionalism and politeness.

"I'm fine, thank you." She glanced at the house, once again curious why she had been cut off from reaching the front door.

"Mr. Deshay asked me to relay a message to you. He said to tell you he had business to take care of this morning and that he would like to meet you for lunch."

She glanced at the house again finding the message a little strange. What business would he have to take care of without her? They were in this thing up to their necks together. He shouldn't make any moves without at least telling her, and to just relay a message like this...

Something just didn't sound right. She didn't mean for it to happen, but she couldn't help thinking that not that long before she left to visit her momma last night, there had been a beautiful woman, in that damn red dress, standing in his living room. A woman who was supposed to be his date. A woman with whom he already had a relationship. Lisa looked toward the house, again. She tried to fight off her suspicions. Her thoughts

were vaguely interrupted by the bodyguard saying something.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” she asked.

“Mr. Deshay said he would be at Carlucci’s Italian House by noon, if you wanted to meet him there. If you can’t, then he said to please call Miss Jenkins, because she would have some information to give you.”

Lisa looked at him abruptly. “Why can’t I just call him on his cell phone?”

“He said he would be unavailable most of the morning. He said he would explain it all at lunch.”

Lisa didn’t really hear the last part because her head was spinning. *Unavailable most of the morning?* She looked at the house and thought, *“Wasn’t last night enough for the two of you?”*

She turned half-way to the guard.

“Thank you. Uh...you know what? I think I may have left something inside, would it be alright if I went to check real quick?”

It was obvious she wanted to make sure Michael wasn’t inside with the pretty little blond from the previous night. Inside, Lisa knew Michael would never have called the woman back after she went to visit momma, but jealousy threatened good reasoning. The bodyguard maintained his professionalism, even though he did have to hold back a smile.

“I’ll open the front door for you Miss Johnson, Mr. Deshay said to make you feel at home. Take as much time as you need.”

She looked at him, studying his face. He was serious, but that didn’t make sense, unless...the rush of embarrassment flooded through her until the rush of being ashamed quickly took over. She knew Michael loved her, how could she not trust him. The first test of their relationship and she failed; she was insanely jealous for no reason. She glanced at the bodyguard, but he was politely looking away.

“Excuse me?”

The bodyguard turned to face her.

“What is your name?”

“John.”

“Thank you, John, but I don’t think that will be necessary...do you?”

She still felt a little ashamed, but even though she knew it wasn’t true, she still needed the assurance.

“I’m sure that what you’re looking for isn’t there, Miss Johnson. It hasn’t been there

since it left before you last night.”

Lisa smiled, embarrassed, but relieved.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome Miss Johnson. Oh, by the way, Mr. Deshay has left his limousine at your disposal, and I have a team, including me, who will be with you wherever you need to go.”

A limousine and a team? Michael was going out of his way to make her comfortable and safe, and she was jumping to conclusions.

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary.”

“Mr. Deshay expected you would say that, so he asked me to relay to you the safety concerns you now face.” John leaned forward slightly in a confidential manner.

“Between you and me, Miss Johnson, I would hate to have to face him if he found out you were driving around town without me.” She smiled, so John continued, “He would prefer you used the limousine at all times, with or without him. Two of our best men, and me, will be with you at all times. It would be wise, Miss Johnson.”

“So he doesn’t want me to use his driver anymore?”

“No, he didn’t feel comfortable with you only having one person to protect you, so he assigned a team to you.”

A team of bodyguards, just to protect her, she had never felt so important. “He thinks of everything, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With a last glance at the house, she was in the limousine, in better spirits. She was surprised by her jealousy, but that was something she could work on. The more time she spent with Michael the more she would learn to trust him. They had fallen in love very quickly, after all, and they still barely knew each other. She stopped berrating herself for suspecting him of being with another woman. This was the time where they had to find out if they were compatible, in every way, especially their trust.

She called Judy and found out that some of the information that Michael was expecting had come into the office. Judy thought it important that he get the information at their lunch meeting, so Lisa was on her way, team and all, to his office to pick up a packet Judy had prepared for them.

Lisa noticed early on that Michael and Judy appeared to be very close. Judy displayed an almost maternal watchfulness over him. She obviously cared deeply for

him. He told Lisa that Judy had worked for him from the beginning, in the lean days. It was hard to imagine Michael in the lean days and she thought there were probably some great stories he could share with her about those times. It also told her that Judy was very loyal to Michael and he to her, so she decided she definitely wanted to get to know Judy. Anyone who was important to Michael suddenly became very important to her.

Lisa arrived at the office around 10:15 a.m. She was hoping Judy would tell her what was so important that Michael had to take care of this morning without her. Immediately she realized that she was being suspicious of his activities again.

Perhaps she was trying too hard to find something wrong with the perfect man. Well, there was no such thing as the perfect man, of course, but he was as close as any man she had ever met, he was perfect for her. She took a deep breath to help her relax, needing to learn how to let things happen naturally. There was no reason to look for something wrong with him.

She reached the thirty eighth floor, and after stepping out of the elevator she made her way toward Michael's office. As she continued on her path, she marveled at the thought, *Less than a week ago I walked down this hall for the first time. I was going to see a man I didn't know, but who I already didn't like.*

She smiled as she walked through the glass doors to his office, *Now I love him*, she thought pleasantly.

"Hello, Miss Johnson, how are you?" Judy greeted Lisa in her usual friendly manner, a friendly manner that was natural and genuine.

"Hello, Judy. And please, Judy, call me Lisa."

"Well, thank you Lisa, I will."

"So, how are you Judy?" Lisa asked.

"Other than losing sleep and my hair turning grey worrying about you and Michael, I suppose I'm fine."

Lisa couldn't help smiling at how easily Judy had accepted her into Michael's life.

"We're being as careful as possible, Judy, I promise," she tried to reassure her.

"I know you are dear, I'm just an old worry-wart," she said as she noticed two men dressed in very nice black suits, standing just outside the office doors. Lisa followed her glance to the men and said, "Michael won't let me go anywhere by myself, right now."

"Well, better safe than sorry, right?"

"I know, and thank you for your concern, it's nice to have people around who care."

Lisa thought of her poor momma and again silently berated herself for causing so much worry for her. She held her emotions in check and smiled at Judy. "He is very lucky to have you."

"Thank you, that's very sweet." Lisa could see the worry, even in Judy's smile. She looked down at the folders of information that had arrived for Michael.

"Here's the information that Michael requested," Judy said, handing Lisa three large manila envelopes.

"This is a lot of information," Lisa said, with an almost questioning tone.

"My thoughts exactly."

On the way over to Michael's office, Lisa tried to come up with a way to ask about his whereabouts, while not sounding suspicious of what he was doing.

"Has he called recently?"

"As far as I know, he hasn't. There was a man working on the phones for about twenty minutes, so he could have possibly called then, but he would have probably called my cell phone if he was having trouble getting through, so, I doubt that he called."

"Oh." She was still a little disappointed he didn't tell her personally where he was going when she talked to him that morning, but she decided to stop being suspicious of his every move and just take it for granted he had a good reason.

Judy could see her disappointment at not knowing his whereabouts, which was natural with new love. She knew exactly why he had decided not to tell Lisa he had gone to see a psychologist, he was embarrassed. He had even been embarrassed to tell her, but he seemed to need to tell someone and old habits meant he would turn to her first. She informed him that if he was as serious about Lisa as it appeared he was, he was headed for trouble if he kept secrets from her. He agreed, but then he told Judy about The Dream and how he had scared Lisa while talking in his sleep and he didn't want her to think he was going crazy.

He figured he would get his dream analyzed and that would help him to figure out why he was having the weird dream and then he could put it behind him. Then, maybe he would tell Lisa about it, but he wanted to know it was over with and back to normal before he told her, that way she could know for sure that there was no reason to fear him.

Judy expressed her worry about The Dream and agreed that he was doing the right thing by seeing a psychologist, but she still disagreed with him not discussing it with Lisa. She thought it better that he trust Lisa and tell her everything. Michael was very

headstrong ever since she had known him and she didn't expect he would change now.

She, of course, would honor his wish that Lisa not know where he was at the moment. She did feel bad for Lisa, though. Her feelings had been hurt that he was trying to hide his whereabouts from her, so Judy did her best to reassure Lisa that it was nothing. Judy wished Michael would listen to her when it came to women, though, as he brought them in easily enough, but then would sabotage anything close to a relationship just as easily. Up until now, the sabotages almost appeared to be on purpose, but Judy knew that wasn't the case this time. The poor man had made a habit that was proving hard to break, even for the one who he finally wanted to build a relationship with, and maybe more.

"He goes off on his own sometimes to deal with things. He's just not used to having a partner who...works so closely with him. Don't be too hard on him, Lisa, he'll come around, he's quite taken with you."

She looked up quickly and smiled. "He is?"

"Oh, yes, dear. Believe me, I know him better than anyone."

Lisa looked at her watch with a satisfied smile and couldn't wait to see him. In her excitement, however, she had forgotten the name of the restaurant. She looked up to ask Judy its name, but Judy spoke first.

"Oh, by the way, your boss stopped by here yesterday to see you."

She was beyond surprised by this information.

"My boss? He stopped by here?"

"Yes. He said he wanted to make sure you were all right. He said he had talked with your mother and she said he could find you here. You and Michael were at lunch at the time and then never made it back for me to tell you."

Lisa was stunned. That's just not something her boss would do. He was a nice enough man, but to travel across town on his lunch break, just to check on her? The man just didn't have that kind of dedication to his job or his workers to do such a thing, not to mention he was mad at her for using her vacation time without warning. He said she couldn't take vacation time without more notice. She eventually talked him into it, but then why would he come here looking for her if he knew she was on vacation.

"He's kind of an intimidating man, it must be unsettling working for him," Judy said conversationally. Lisa hadn't really been paying close attention to everything she was saying because she was trying to piece together the strangeness of the situation. Judy started to say something else, but then it just occurred to her what Judy had said.

“Intimidating?” That was the word Judy had used to describe her boss. That was the word that would be the furthest from describing the meek little man. He had to be the most plain, non-threatening man she had ever met.

She felt her insides tighten.

“Judy, what did my boss look like?”

She explained in detail. This was not a man you would easily forget, especially his eyes. She couldn’t get those deep, haunting grey eyes out of her memory. Lisa vaguely recognized the features Judy relayed to her, but they didn’t belong to her boss. It was driving her crazy that Judy’s description sounded so familiar, but she just couldn’t quite place it. She leaned against the desk with her hand, trying to remember who it was that matched the description. She had seen haunting grey eyes recently. They were evil eyes that practically jumped off the pictures where she had seen them. Lisa sat down quickly and opened her briefcase on her lap. She pulled out some photos her and Michael had been reviewing yesterday, her hands stopped abruptly at the picture of Joseph Trumaine. *Shit*. She had mentioned to Michael when she first saw the picture, that it seemed appropriate the number one hit man in the world would have such disturbing eyes.

She showed the photo to Judy.

“Yes, that’s him.”

She dropped the photos of the mafia players they knew were involved onto Judy’s desk and reached for the phone.

“I’m going to try Michael’s cell, we need to talk to him, now, something’s going on.”

Judy had reflexively looked down at the pictures Lisa dropped on the desk. She immediately recognized the photo of Jeffrey Smith, Joseph’s protégé. She grabbed the photo and looked up at Lisa worriedly.

“This is the man who was here earlier, working on the phone in Michael’s office.”

Lisa glanced at the photo as she began to push the buttons of her cell phone, but then she froze.

“He was the phone repair man?”

“Yes.”

She hung up the phone and looked Judy straight in the eyes.

“Don’t ask me any questions, just follow me, we have to get out of here, now. We’ll call Michael from the limo.”

The alarm went off and Derrick awakened. He was calm, but worried, being able to remember nearly everything about his dream.

“Lisa’s going to get herself killed,” he thought. “And why would he go to a shrink?”

He took a moment to wonder why he cared, it was just a dream; no, it wasn’t.

For the first time he was willing to acknowledge that it was more than just a dream. Something wasn’t right, he was beginning to think of these people as if they were real.

“Man, I can’t mess around with this right now, I’ve got more important business to take care of tonight.” And now he was talking to himself.

It was time to get ready to go, so he went around and woke up the guys. Surprisingly enough everyone was able to get to sleep. They had worked so hard all day preparing, they didn’t realize how tired they were. Everyone was groggy, which was the desired effect. He knew that by the time they got out to the deal sight everyone would be wide awake and the adrenaline would be pumping.

The guys were a little too sluggish, however, so Derrick hurried them along because he wanted to arrive at the designated meeting site before the buyers got there. That would give him a chance to inspect the area around the transaction, as well as the site, itself. He didn’t want a repeat of their last deal. They would be ready for any set up this time, on their terms.

The guys slowly began to wake up and therefore their excitement level continued to increase, as well. Before long the group was back to their boastful talk and high level of confidence in anticipation of a successful deal.

Derrick reviewed their plan one more time and at 12:30 a.m., finally satisfied they were ready, the small group was on their way to the biggest and possibly most dangerous night of their lives. Sobering considering they’re last deal.

At this time of night they wouldn’t have to worry about traffic, a rarity in Los Angeles. “Too many people,” Derrick had complained several times since he moved to Southern California. However, minus the traffic, James told him they would be able to get to their destination in Seal Beach in about 25 minutes, and he wanted to be an hour early for their preparations. Derrick drove the van, with Pee Wee riding shotgun. James and T-Bone rode in James’ Mercedes, ahead of the van, and P-Dawg and Truth rode in P-Dawg’s Mercedes, behind the van.

Derrick and Pee Wee rode in silence for much of the way. Even though Derrick had won Pee Wee's respect, they didn't exactly have a friendship. He would rather have his respect anyway. He glanced over to Pee Wee, who appeared to be calm, at least. Derrick had a few butterflies of his own, as he always did before a deal, but he thought of it as healthy nervousness. It kept you sharp.

He glanced over again, but this time his gaze stayed on Pee Wee a moment longer. Pee Wee noticed, glanced toward him, then continued staring straight ahead. Derrick saw what he expected to see, that gleam in Pee Wee's eyes. He recognized that gleam. In fact, he was counting on it. It was the gleam of someone who enjoys the thrill of the crime. He had carried that gleam since he was young. He had purposefully paired himself with the kid, because he wanted Pee Wee to learn from him. Derrick had plans for the Pee Wee.

He looked back to the road, then asked him, "What're you going to do when this is through?" Pee Wee continued to stare forward, after a few moments he said, "I don't know, what do you care?"

Derrick glanced over to Pee Wee with sarcasm on his breath and a devilish smile on his face. "What if your homies decide to call it quits? What if they take their share of the money and decide to go legit with James? What're you going to do?"

Pee Wee's jaw flexed a couple of times, but he continued to stare forward. This was a sore subject for him, because he wanted to stay with the guys, but they just didn't have the love for the game like he did. James wanted to get all of them out, and he knew James would try to talk him out of continuing in dealing guns, but his mind was set. He may not have liked Derrick as recently as three days ago, but he knew where his future would be and so did Derrick.

"I told James his promise to my brother ends after tonight, I make my own decisions from now on. They can do what they want, you know what I'm going to do."

Derrick did know. Pee Wee was young and had many years of crime ahead of him, unless he did something stupid and got killed along the way. A liability of the profession. Prison didn't present much of a problem for Pee Wee right now, as a minor.

Derrick could use someone he could train personally, which would allow him to stay hidden from the police. Yeah, he had plans for big plans for Pee Wee.

The group had finally reached the turn-off and after several more turns onto roads that appeared to get narrower and more poorly paved, they finally came to rest on a dirt road,

apparently in the middle of nowhere. They arrived at the designated spot where they were instructed to meet. There was a huge boulder on the side of the road marking the spot, but someone had painted a huge red X on the side of the rock anyway. The person Derrick had spoken to on the phone had said X marks the spot. “How clever,” he said as he stepped to the side of the road for a closer look.

“Are these guys smart asses or what?” P-Dawg asked.

“Apparently, they are known to have a weird sense of humor and are very confident,” he said.

“Yeah, they’re fucking hilarious,” Pee Wee chimed in.

“Nevertheless, let’s check the area and get set up,” he instructed.

As everyone dispersed, he turned around in a circle, slowly, surveying the area the best he could in the darkness.

He could hear that the ocean was close, but he couldn’t see it from his position. It must be just over the rise in front of him. The land was as flat as a dinner plate, otherwise. The dirt road carried on for as far as his eyes could see, although that wasn’t particularly far in the darkness, and he knew they were not close to anything or anyone that could provide them help, particularly shelter or cover if things went bad. He had to make sure things didn’t go bad.

Fifteen minutes passed and James and P-Dawg returned from their reconnaissance of the area.

“It’s clear,” James informed him.

“Good. We’ll turn the van around and park it on the side of the road, so the side door will open on the road. Then, we’ll back up both Mercedes, trunk to trunk, at the side of the van, just as we planned. When they’re ready to see the weapons, the cars will drive forward till the back ends of the cars are at the front and back end of the van, and then we are open for business. Both cars will be parked at the opposite ends of the van and everyone will get out and take their positions. I want the cars to provide cover for us while we show the weapons at the side door of the van and I want them both to be able to take off in opposite directions if the need arises.”

“I’ll take care of it,” P-Dawg said.

“Is the van about ready?” Derrick asked James.

“Yeah,” was all he said.

Derrick could see something was bothering him.

“What’s up James?”

He looked at Derrick. “Do you think we can really pull this off?”

Derrick thought for a moment. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see a lot of dust rising off of the dirt road, far away. He looked over and saw P-Dawg and Truth were just finishing parking the cars in position. They got out of their cars and stood beside T-Bone and Pee Wee. They had noticed the dust as well. Each man had an oozie in their hands and a nine millimeter in shoulder holsters. They looked over to Derrick and James in expectation. Derrick took it all in and turned back to James.

“We’ll soon find out.”

James had no reaction. He had begun to get used to Derrick’s glib sarcasm and extreme confidence in everything he did. He just hoped it wasn’t over-confidence this time.

“Are you comfortable Mr. Deshay?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He was comfortable in the lazy-boy type chair and felt surprisingly calm. The doctor had been taking her time getting him ready for hypnosis on purpose. Experience told her time helped to relax those who didn’t trust the procedure. The doctor made a mental note to think of a better term, “procedure” had a negative connotation to surgery, so she definitely needed a more soothing word for the future.

“It’s natural for people to be afraid of the unknown, but you have managed to relax rather easily,” the doctor explained, sounding surprised to him.

Michael’s mind was on Lisa. He decided he would tell her about the hypnosis as soon as he saw her and apologize for not telling her. Without that guilt to worry about anymore, he relaxed even more, for he knew why he wasn’t nervous about the hypnosis. He didn’t believe he could be hypnotized. He was too much of an analytical thinker to allow someone to separate him from controlled thinking, which is how he thought of hypnosis. He looked at it as the doctor relaxing you until your mind could be tricked into doing what the doctor commanded. He didn’t believe his brain would allow it to happen.

He replied, “It must be the chair, this is a great chair.”

The doctor noticed the light sarcasm. She had hypnotized many skeptical patients in

her fifteen year practice and knew when that old machismo was surfacing. She finished preparing Michael with a little sarcastic smile of her own.

“It is a great chair.”

With all of her brain-wave monitoring equipment finally hooked up, she dismissed her assistant and declared herself ready to go. She retrieved her lucky gold locket, given to her by her grandmother when she was a little girl with the wish that her granddaughter would become someone who helps other people. She was proud she could make her grandmother’s dream come true.

“So you really do swing a locket in front of my eyes?”

The doctor smiled. “No, this is just a keepsake I keep with me that reminds me of the responsibility of my profession. The swinging locket in front of the eyes technique is no longer used by professionals. The concept behind hypnosis is relaxation of the body and mind, and the locket was an elementary method for initiating relaxation back in the old days. Modern techniques have proven to be much more effective.”

“I am most relaxed just before I sleep, but yet I do a great deal of creative thinking about my business while I am waiting to fall asleep.”

“So you don’t believe I will be able to put you under hypnosis because your mind is used to working at optimal level, even while you are resting.”

The doctor was just as certain that she would be able to hypnotize him as he was certain she could not.

“Nothing personal doc, but yeah, that pretty much sums it up.”

“Do you go to sleep quickly or does it tend to take you some time to fall asleep?”

“It varies, but I guess if I have something important that I’m working on, it will take a little longer to fall asleep, because I need that time for brainstorming.”

“Exactly, and that is what must be overcome when I attempt to put you at optimal relaxation. Some people, especially business types such as you, have so much to think about all the time that they tend to have trouble falling asleep because they cannot shut their mind down. You are laying in bed, body relaxed, but your mind is not relaxed, therefore it becomes a matter of waiting for your mind to finish what it is thinking or tiring itself out by thinking too much, before you are able to sleep.

“Makes sense, but what can I do, I can’t just shut my mind off.”

“That is the challenge. There are several proven techniques that can be used to relax your mind and body and initiate hypnosis. Once you are under hypnosis, I will use a

fairly new technique, which I personally developed, that allows me to slowly detach your brain from the daily stresses and eventually come to complete relaxation and dream recovery.”

“To be honest with you doc, I don’t think it will work. I have so much on my mind right now, I just don’t know if it will allow itself to be detached from thought.”

“Not detached from thought, just more relaxing thought.”

“You mean like those radios that you can listen to the ocean waves or forest sounds or crickets or whatever while you’re trying to go to sleep. I tried one of those, but I couldn’t go to sleep with all that noise.”

The doctor smiled. “That is the basis of the Forest and Stream Method, but it doesn’t work for everyone, which is why I came up with a new technique that will work for everyone. I call it the Maze Method.”

“The Maze Method? It sounds like it could be a brain exercise, like mice going through a maze.”

“Very good Mr. Deshay, that is correct. Scientists use a maze to teach mice a specific learned behavior. Certainly the human brain is much more sophisticated than a mouse brain, but we are still essentially like all other animals in the fact that we learn, almost exclusively, through repetition. The Maze technique I have developed is simply a tool to help you teach your brain, through repetition, to relax.

The psychological maze becomes a learned pattern, and just like in any concentration type game you would play, your brain has to concentrate on a specific goal, in this case following the correct path. And because it is a learned pattern, each time you come in for hypnosis, it becomes easier to put you under, because your brain can more easily accept the path it knows leads to complete relaxation.”

Michael didn’t mention that he expected this to be a one shot deal, that he expected this problem to be resolved.

“What if my brain goes down the wrong path? Wouldn’t that cause my brain to work harder trying to find the right path?”

“That is a great question. Keeping you on the right path is my job. I am the calming voice keeping you on the right path. You see, I know exactly what mental corridors, if you will, your brain must follow in order to reach the path to complete relaxation. We will go through a process where you will agree to follow my voice and therefore my instructions, exactly as I give them to you, throughout the process. My voice will lead

you down the correct path, through the maze, to complete relaxation. It is at that point your mind will be relaxed enough that we can explore your dreams.”

He thought about it and had to admit it sounded viable.

“It is an ingenious idea doc, I’ll give you that, but you’ll have to forgive me for being skeptical, I know how my mind works and it can be stubborn.”

“Understood. In fact, that is one of the reasons I chose a maze. Believe me, there are many people who feel the same way you do about hypnosis and who have stubborn minds. The idea of the maze is that you are bound by the maze to continue on the path. At first I worried some may get claustrophobic, rebelling against the idea of being enclosed in a maze with no end, but that is why we make the psychological agreement before you start and as you begin to relax, so that you follow my instructions. My instructions take out any negative connotations that your brain may try to attach to the maze and help you to see the maze as a good and comforting place. And once I get you to complete relaxation, the maze also helps to lead you to whatever it is we need to analyze. For some people, they may want to quit smoking. Or, for others, I may need to unlock their past, because their brain has put up a barrier against a tragedy and suppressed that memory.”

Michael wondered at that idea. He had lost his parents in a very tragic manner, could he have suppressed memories? There were many childhood memories that he couldn’t remember, no matter how hard he tried. Unfortunately, he didn’t have time to think about it because the doctor was continuing her explanation.

“In your case, which is uncommon, I need to investigate your dreams. Each of these different subjects can represent a path in the maze. Once you have reached the path to complete relaxation, then I will lead you down another path in the maze that leads to your dream. I have been using this method for three years now and it has been extremely successful. I have actually patented the idea and other doctors now use it with great success, as well.”

“Congratulations.” Michael couldn’t help thinking how people will make money off of anything these days.

“The key is, you must follow my instructions.”

“I will.”

“Good. Now, if you’ll just lie back on the chair, we can get started.” Michael fully reclined into a near laying position as the doctor began the process.

“In a moment I'm going to relax you more completely. In a moment I'm going to begin counting backwards from 10 to 1. The moment I say the number 10, you will allow your eyelids to remain closed. The moment I say the number 10, you will, in your mind's eye, see yourself at the top of a small set of stairs.

“The moment I say the number 9, and each additional number, you will simply move down those stairs relaxing more completely. At the base of the stairs is a large feather bed, with a comfortable feather pillow. The moment I say the number one you will simply sink into that bed, resting your head on that feather pillow.

“Number 10, eyes closed at the top of those stairs.” The doctor's voice was calm and she spoke at a slow, steady pace. “Ten, nine, relaxing and letting go. Nine, eight, sinking into a more comfortable, calm, peaceful position. Seven, six...going way down. Five, moving down those stairs, relaxing more completely. Four, three, breathe deeply. Two, on the next number, number one, simply sinking into that bed, becoming calmer, more peaceful, more relaxed. One...sinking into that feather bed, let every muscle go limp and loose as you sink into a calmer, peaceful state of relaxation.

“You are doing very well, Michael. Now, I am going to give you a signal so you can enter into hypnosis more easily. I am going to count from one to three. At the count of three, you will open your eyes, remaining deeply relaxed. When I say, ‘Sleep now’ and snap my fingers, that will be the signal for your eyelids to close down and you will go deeper into hypnosis.

“All right, one, two, three...open your eyes. Sleep Now!” The doctor snapped her fingers. “Close them down and go deeper asleep.” Michael breathed with that identifiable pattern of a deep sleep.

The doctor smiled. The tough guys never believe they can be hypnotized, but his brain was just as susceptible to the powers of meditation and suggestion as anyone else.

Michael had drifted slowly at first, thinking of Lisa as he absentmindedly followed the doctor's instructions for entering the maze and was soon walking down a path with vast walls on both sides of him. He always prided himself on having a great imagination and did his best to make his maze both stylish and formidable as possible...then something else crept into his consciousness. It was frustrating to him because he wanted to continue to think of Lisa, but something was preventing him. He tried to force his thoughts back to Lisa, but it wasn't working.

He believed his mind to be strong, but now, something more powerful was taking

over and directing his thoughts and he didn't like it at all, but then someone told him to relax and he wasn't angry about it anymore, after all. He had been listening to someone's instructions...hadn't he? He stopped at an intersection in his maze, questioning which path to take. A voice told him to go right, but there was something to the left, though he didn't know what, but something that seemed to almost pull him in that direction. Again the voice told him to follow the path to the right, for it led to complete relaxation. That sounded like a good idea. He could follow that path and relax and think about Lisa. He didn't understand how, but he was indeed beginning to feel more relaxed, so he continued on the path.

Then the feeling came back. Whatever it was, it was close and it had instantly become very important to him, and it was just on the other side of the very tall wall he was standing next to right now. It was dark and quiet, but he knew something was over there, something important. Whatever was happening on the other side of the high wall was now more important to him than the maze and complete relaxation, and he realized he must find a way to get there. He looked both ways, but only saw the massive wall going on seemingly without end. Then he turned and saw what he needed leaning up against the wall on the other side of the corridor. It was a ladder, and it appeared to reach to the top of the wall. He walked over to the ladder and picked it up with ease, pleased with his good fortune at finding it there, and placed it against the wall that he needed to get over. He climbed to the top of the ladder and then maneuvered himself on top on the wall. Michael looked down around him and saw that the maze was vast, beyond his sight, and everything around and above him was dark.

What is that? he thought. His eyes seemed to be adjusting to the lack of light now because something was beginning to come into focus around him, and he could hear something as well. Something familiar...the ocean. There is no ocean in Cleveland, or all of Ohio for that matter, and the waves were definitely too strong to be Lake Erie. He was obviously dreaming. Was he supposed to be dreaming?

He began to survey the landscape and realized he had no idea where he was, but he felt compelled to find out quickly or he would miss something important. The maze had been completely forgotten and no longer could be seen below him. Instead, the maze had become a desert.

To his left he saw a car parked on the side of a dirt road. In fact, there were several cars parked intermittently along this dirt road, all high priced cars, including a limousine,

and another a van. They were parked along a dirt road that must be close to the ocean, because he could hear it in the background. He could even smell the salt in the air and he could feel the unmistakable breeze you can only get when close to the ocean. This is no dream, he thought, he was there. How and why he didn't know yet, but he intended to find out.

Michael looked at the cars again. They were parked unusually, almost in a pattern, and it cut off the road from being used in both directions. Curious, he thought. He was supposed to be learning a pattern, but he was sure it didn't pertain to this one, so he brushed it aside.

Someone opened the door to one of the Mercedes Benz and got out of the car, and Michael began to feel a little uneasy. Something about this didn't feel right, and the man getting out of the Mercedes...Michael somehow knew him. He wanted to get a better look at him to be sure, though. He took a step toward him, but something tugged him back the other way. He glanced behind him, half expecting to see someone there with him, but there was nothing there but dirt road, sand, and patches of desert grass for as far as the eye could see. He didn't want to go that way. He turned to go the other way again, toward the confection of cars, but once again he felt a tug on his mind to go the opposite direction.

"Michael, I need you to come this way with me."

He turned to see who was there. Nobody. Frustrated, he again felt that he should walk down the empty dirt road, but he just did not have any desire to go that way. He glanced back to the man whose identity he needed to know, but the man began to get further away. He turned his head back to the dirt road and realized he was walking away from the mysterious man. It angered him a little, realizing he was somehow being forced to do something he did not want to do...to walk down that lonely dirt road. He stopped yet again and attempted to walk the other way, needing to know who the man was.

"Michael, I insist you come this way, you agreed to listen to my directions and I need you to come this way."

Michael was, once again, walking down the dirt road, mesmerized by the commanding voice. He vaguely remembered his agreement to obey that voice, knowing it would lead him to complete relaxation, and he was a man of his word, so he must listen to the voice. He just wished he had a chance to ask Derrick some questions first.

Michael spun back around toward the man by the Mercedes Benz; he knew his name.

Of course, it was Derrick. He was the key to this whole dream and Michael suddenly felt like he must speak to him now, so he began walking toward Derrick with a purpose.

“Michael, you will come back!”

He decided he would listen to the voice and go back down the dirt road, just as soon as he spoke to Derrick.

“Michael, I'm going to count from one to five, and then I'll say, "Fully aware." At the count of five, your eyes are open, and you are then fully aware, feeling calm, rested, refreshed, and relaxed.

All right, one...slowly, calmly, easily you're returning to your full awareness once again.

Two...each muscle and nerve in your body is loose and limp and relaxed, and you feel wonderfully good.”

He did feel better. He was much more relaxed now, but he remained determined and strode confidently toward Derrick.

“Three...from head to toe, you are feeling perfect in every way, physically perfect, mentally perfect, emotionally calm and serene.

On the number four, your eyes begin to feel sparkling clear. On the next number I count, eyelids open, fully aware, feeling calm, rested, refreshed, relaxed, invigorated, and full of energy.”

Michael was nearing the cars now, fully refreshed and calm. Derrick had his back to him, but must have heard him coming because he was beginning to turn toward him. Michael realized he had no recollection of what Derrick looked like. He was about to actually see Derrick's face clearly for the first time. Michael didn't understand why it was so important, but he now knew that this was the important event that was about to happen. He must see what Derrick looked like. But why would that be important? Did he know the guy?

“Number five...you're fully aware now, eyelids open. Take a good, deep breath, fill up your lungs, and stretch.”

Michael jolted awake. He looked over to the doctor with accusing eyes.

“You were out of my control, Mr. Deshay, I had no choice but to bring you back.”

Michael tried to remain calm, but the urgency was obvious, “Something important was about to happen. You must take me back, now.”

“I can't do that Mr. Deshay, it is too dangerous. I have never seen anything like this

before...your dream almost completely took over.”

Michael began to get angry, but forced discipline to remain calm.

“This is very important. I know the dangers, now take me back.”

He noticed the doctor had a light sheen of perspiration on her brow. He couldn’t imagine how hypnosis could be so straining.

The doctor noticed his glance. She wiped her brow with the sleeve of her blouse. It just wasn’t supposed to be so demanding. She had to work way too hard to keep control of him during the session, and then, he had taken over completely. She had to make him understand the danger of what had happened. She showed him the mark of perspiration on her sleeve.

“This is not supposed to happen during a session of hypnosis. I feel like I just ran a marathon, but with all my effort, I barely was able to bring you back. If you go back, I have no idea what will happen. I have no idea if I can even bring you back.”

“I will come back when I have discovered what I need to know.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just know...somehow.”

“Mr. Deshay, this is without precedent. There is no case study with which to compare. One moment everything was fine, you were safely within your maze walking down the correct path, very relaxed, then you changed out of nowhere. I couldn’t control what you were doing. This has never happened before.”

“I remember being in the maze and feeling relaxed, but then The Dream pulled me in.”

“Mr. Deshay, we were going to explore your dream, but we needed to get you to your destination first, so you would be completely relaxed and we could manage your dream properly.”

“You don’t understand doc, I had no choice in the matter, it pulled me in, and I had to get to The Dream no matter what.”

“I had to completely abandon my technique and fight as hard as I possibly could to bring you out of your hypnosis.”

Michael thought she was being a little over-dramatic. He felt no panic the entire time he was there and his thoughts were completely lucid. The only strain he had felt was when she had forcefully continued to keep him from seeing Derrick’s face and then abruptly removed him from his dream. If he didn’t go back now, he wouldn’t see what

was going on, and most importantly, he would not see Derrick's face. He needed to go back now, if it wasn't already too late.

"You have made me aware of the risk. I will sign a waiver, but I must go back, now."

The doctor lost her temper. "I don't have a waiver for this!" She struggled to maintain her dignity and professional manner.

"I think it would be best if we took this in small steps. I could get a dream analysis team together and I could put you under for small amounts of time. We could monitor your brain patterns and analyze your dream in increments until we can figure out what is happening."

"Maybe in the future, but that does not change the fact that I must go back now."

"Mr. Deshay, I really think..."

"I need you to take me back, now."

The doctor worried Michael would leave if she didn't agree to put him under hypnosis again and she must not lose the opportunity this strange dream presented to her career.

"O.K., O.K. I'll take you back, but I strongly advise against it," the doctor warned.

"Duly noted."

"Please, just state into the tape recorder that you absolve me of any liability for whatever may happen during the course of this hypnosis."

"Yes, of course."

CHAPTER 12

There were three cars and a limousine. The cars had slowed as they arrived, then one of the cars had continued past the two Mercedes and the van. The driver then performed a perfect spin, at high speed, and positioned the car at an angle blocking the road from escape. The car couldn't have been more than twenty yards from Derrick's makeshift gun shop.

He had quickly noted that they could probably ram the front corner of the car blocking the street and get through, if needed. There was little to no embankment on either side of the road. One side was the small hill of sand that eventually led to the ocean and the other side was nothing but sand and desert plants. On a normal night, it was probably a nice, secluded spot to take a girl for some alone time. Tonight, it was probably a good spot to set a trap, which was likely the reason why it was chosen by their contact. Hopefully, it was nothing more than a precautionary measure on their part to assure a good deal. Just in case, though, he had begun thinking of scenarios for escape as he waited for the other two cars to pull into their positions.

The other two cars had stopped about twenty yards before reaching the van and did not proceed forward. They were parked side by side on the narrow road. The limousine rested comfortably behind them.

Then, everything got quiet. None of their men made any movements. They were probably communicating with wireless headsets. Derrick had thought of it for his guys, but didn't have the time, and he felt training for their plan was more important, but they would certainly be a future investment if things went well tonight.

Now, Derrick stood facing his opponents, wondering if his men would make it through the deal alive. Then, suddenly he felt someone behind him and turned, but no one was there. That was strange, but even more strange was the feeling of familiarity that he identified with The Dream. *Not a good time*, he realized and forced his concentration back on the gun deal.

After about five minutes he got tired of waiting and went to James' Mercedes, opened the passenger side door and sat down. Truth was at the controls of the expensive automobile and T-Bone sat in the back, ready.

He decided to take the initiative and see what happened.

"T-Bone, shall we?" Derrick got out of the car and T-Bone followed his lead, positioning himself just off of Derrick's right shoulder and one step back. Sarge had taught him that presentation was everything in this business. "When you set up for a deal you set up for safety first, then presentation. When you present yourself, look like you know what you're doing," he had said. The very large T-Bone standing off his shoulder was a nice addition to the intimidation factor.

Derrick had no trouble appearing confident, as always, and he knew a lot about guns. Sarge had warned him about being cocky, as he knew he was sometimes. Many arms dealers present themselves as ruthless, but two dealers trying to appear more formidable than the other was just asking for trouble. He checked his attitude. Confident, not cocky, he reminded himself.

Two gunmen got out of the back of both cars parked in front of the limousine. He could hear the doors to the car at his back opening as well, but did not turn. He must show no signs of fear, or even appearing uncomfortable with the fire-power they display. He had told his guys the same.

"They will take advantage of any weakness," he had explained. "Show confidence and they'll think you know how to handle yourself under any situation."

Derrick knew many dealers used former military guys, and although he had been trained by a military man, his team only had time for a crash course, so he was at a definite disadvantage. However, this was foreign military power, so he had no idea what level of training they had. He would try to keep an eye out for signs of their experience, which could help determine if this deal would be legitimate or a trap. A professional buyer who deals straight would more than likely hire more reputable mercenaries.

He kept his eyes toward the men emerging from the cars in front of him. Two of the men positioned themselves at the head of the cars and the other two continued forward, quickly covering the distance from the cars to Derrick.

The two men stopped a few feet in front of him, almost mirroring Derrick and T-Bone, that is, the spokesman stood in front with no weapon visible, while the bodyguard remained off his shoulder and one step back, with oozy in hand. The bodyguard was

rather large, as well, though not quite as big as T-Bone. Their spokesman took control immediately. He acted like a professional talking to an amateur. Even though it was true, Derrick didn't like it and had to check his attitude, once again. Sarge was trying to help him repair their ill gotten reputation through this deal, but it was hard to tell what had been said about their first deal and if Sarge's efforts had done any good.

"Let me see what you've got."

Derrick didn't answer. Instead, he took a moment to study his business counterpart. The man was of South American descent, but definitely preferred the American pimp style. He wore a deep purple, five button wool suit, perfectly tailored, with matching tie and light purple or violet shirt. His white leather shoes were already dirty. He also wore enough bling to do any rapper proud. The man appeared to be getting a little impatient with the mini stand-off, and Derrick made a mental note of it. He may be able to use the man's arrogance and impatience against him, if needed.

"What about your boss?" Derrick asked.

"Don't worry about him, just show me the stuff."

Impatient and cocky...not to mention a little annoying, Derrick thought. *Just don't get personal*, he reminded himself from Sarge's training. If he kept his head about him, he could use this man's deficiencies against him, or, this could be a test to see if he would act professional under pressure. If it was, Derrick was determined to pass the test.

Once again he took his time answering. It was an old trick Sarge had taught him to get the control back to his side.

"Follow me," Derrick answered with just a hint of command and turned to walk to the point where the trunks of the Mercedes met. The man followed directly behind him. As soon as he reached the designated spot, each Mercedes moved forward, exposing the side door of the van, and then the van door opened. James stepped out of the open door and stood there, oozy in hand. Once the Mercedes had been positioned at each end of the van, as they had practiced, the doors to the two Mercedes Benz opened and two men stepped out of each car simultaneously. They took their positions around the cars in a half circle, facing the dealer and his bodyguard. The man was hemmed in and if any firing were to begin, he and his bodyguard would die quickly.

It looked so good that Derrick couldn't help but feel proud of his team. He turned to face the man and motioned him forward toward the van with an arm of invitation. They were still out-numbered, but his confidence was soaring. He had made an impression and

he knew it.

Their guest tried not to look impressed, but he was and so was his bodyguard, who began to look a little nervous.

Good, he thought. Both of these men were way too sure of themselves since arriving to the deal. Derrick was not a pro, but he was experienced enough to know not to let the dealer have complete control. He didn't mind letting them lead throughout the deal, after all, they were the customer; he just didn't want them to think they could bully their way through the deal and get whatever they wanted. He needed to prevent the man from becoming unreasonable during bargaining.

The dealer instantly liked Derrick. He liked his flair and was interested to see if he could keep control of the deal without going overboard. He had been informed how they got a hold of these weapons and the stories circulating from the Iranians. He knew those particular Iranians, though, and he knew they were a bad lot. He was actually impressed these kids got through it alive, let alone come away with their money and the weapons. Yeah, he liked this group. He just hoped he didn't have to kill them.

Impassively, he said "Very impressive. Now, if the show is over I would like to see the weapons."

"Of course," Derrick answered without emotion. He didn't want to look like a schoolboy who just asked a girl to the dance and she said, "Yes." He was a little angry at the guy's attitude, though. Initially he seemed impressed, or maybe it was surprise at their organization, but now he acted almost bored with the spectacle. He had no appreciation for their attention to detail and obvious discipline.

"After you," he invited, motioning toward the van with his hand. The man went forward till he reached the side door and then waited for Derrick to show him the weapons. Derrick nodded to his team and they all turned, facing outward, in case of an attack by the dealers other men. The dealers' eyebrows lifted. Derrick smiled and walked forward. *He is impressed*. Now he was satisfied and ready to deal.

He stepped up beside the man, opened the first large case and proceeded to show the man the guns. He had practiced handling all of the merchandise when they were preparing and therefore showed them off with knowledge and precision. His bargaining power had just risen by proving his knowledge of the true value of every gun he was selling.

Everything appeared to go well. The man never exactly became congenial, but he did

become much more conversational. Once they started into the demonstrations of the weaponry, he had become almost friendly. Derrick got the feeling the man liked guns almost as much as he did and by the time the deal was done he actually liked the guy. He wondered if dealers became friends from time to time or if this was all an act.

The negotiations took nearly an hour. Derrick had spent a lot of time dealing with weapons before, but he had wanted to really impress so he could get more business, so he did some research about the weapons on the internet, as well. He brought up points of interest about the different weapons and how each would be useful in different terrain and for certain types of warfare as they might apply to revolutionaries or mercenaries. He was prepared and it had paid off; he had struck a good deal. Neither of the men felt cheated and they even shook hands, respecting each other as a worthy opponent.

“Agreed?” the man asked Derrick.

He hesitated only a moment, for dramatics.

“Agreed.”

The man turned and made his way back to the limousine. Derrick continued to monitor all of their guards for any unwarranted movements, but then noticed his own men were attentive in keeping watch, so he refocused his attention on the back door of the limousine, where the dealer stood patiently.

The window began to open smoothly from top to bottom until finally coming to rest three-quarters of the way open. The dealer leaned over to speak to the darkness within. Derrick watched curiously, hoping to catch a glimpse of the mysterious man inside. The negotiator had stopped talking and assumed a peculiar look on his face, then stood up straight and looked down to the ground and slowly back up again. If Derrick didn't know better, he could swear the scene looked like a child being disciplined by his father. This made him increasingly curious. *I wish I could hear what was being said*, he thought.

Just as he began to wonder if the man in the limousine would call off the deal because he didn't get the price he wanted, a briefcase emerged from the darkness. The negotiator received it with thankfulness on his face. The window ascended to its closed position once again and the negotiator stood up straight, took a few seconds to restore his pride and cockiness, and then started forward. Derrick waited patiently for the man.

“He was very impressed with your negotiating skills,” the man said to Derrick.

“You don't say,” he said with an air of arrogance, but a touch of humility.

“He would like to do business with you again.”

“Good.” Derrick took the sarcastic edge off, but stated it very matter-of-fact, to let the man know he had expected as much. He was probably walking a fine line, but it had worked so far, so he couldn’t change the persona he had created now.

The man appeared unaffected by his game and pressed onward. “Inside the briefcase, along with the money, you will find a piece of paper with a phone number. Call that number and give the number code assigned to you; the code is written on the back of the paper. Your number will be accessed through a computer and made available to our top clients. The boss usually doesn’t make his top clients available to new dealers, but you come highly recommended and have lived up to your billing. The boss likes well organized dealers and he only offers the best for his top clients. There will be no other direct contact from this time forward, everything is done electronically. If you continue to do well, you will all be rich men.

“So I won’t be dealing directly with you anymore.”

“This was your audition. The boss usually doesn’t attend deals, but you have a mutual friend. He wanted to see your talent in person. Now he can, in good conscience, send you to his best clients. You will start off in smaller quantities and work your way up. Eventually you will need to hire more men to handle the bigger deals. We will guide, as needed.”

“Do I work for your boss or am I still independent?”

“You are independent. You can come and go as you please, choose what deals you want or don’t want. Also, we don’t just deal in guns, we handle other items, as well, but that is up to you. Your mutual friend said you don’t deal in drugs, but there is so much money to be made, maybe you will reconsider. As I said, that is up to you.

“You are free to deal with other dealers, but if you treat our clients with respect and continue to make good deals, you will get plenty of work through the boss and will have no need to look elsewhere. He likes you, he likes your style, and he doesn’t say this about many. An opportunity like this doesn’t come around often, so I highly recommend you take advantage.”

Derrick didn’t have to be told twice, he knew he had scored big time. He had finally made it, but he wanted to continue to be a cool customer, so he simply nodded his head once in understanding.

The negotiator handed him the briefcase.

“When would be the best time for me to make this call?”

“All the information is provided for you in the briefcase. Don’t worry, everything is first rate with the boss, and he has a good reputation for taking care of those who work for him. He will take very good care of you.”

Derrick offered him the key to the van.

“I’m not worried, here’s the key to the van. Please express my gratitude to your boss for the business he is bringing my way.”

“I will convey your message.”

They shook hands again and Derrick said, “Pleasure doing business with you.”

The negotiator nodded, gave the key to his bodyguard and then retreated back to his car. The bodyguard got into the drivers side of the van, turned it on and then waited. The car that had been parked opposite the other two turned around using a three point turn and then sped away. The other two cars sandwiched the limousine with one at the lead and the other following behind and drove along the dirt road until only the dirt being kicked up by the tires were visible. They obviously knew where the dirt road led to in that direction...and Derrick thought he had been fully prepared. If they had been forced to flee that way he would have had no idea where they were going. A mistake that fortunately was now a mute point, but lesson learned. No need to tell the guys about that, not when they’re confidence in him would be sky high now. He would make a mental note and learn from his mistake, feeling fortunate it did not cost them this time.

He turned toward the guys to congratulate them on a job well done. James was staring at him and he didn’t look happy...but he didn’t look angry, either. He had heard the entire negotiations. Derrick thought the excitement of what was happening might persuade James to join him in the business, but that look told him it would not happen. James wanted to go legit and would probably have the money to do it now. Just when he was getting to like the man. It would be a shame to see him go, so Derrick decided to have a long talk with him later to see if there was any chance of changing his mind.

He went over to James and offered his hand.

“Good job, man,” Derrick offered.

With the other group completely out of sight now, the guys finally broke formation and were arriving to where Derrick and James stood, with inquisitive excitement on their face. James shook his hand, even though he was not pleased with everything he heard. He supposed they could talk about it later. The guys were too excited about their apparent success to make a big deal about it now.

With everyone back safe at the crib and all the victorious excitement and re-telling of exactly what happened in the negotiations, Derrick laid down to go to sleep. The adrenaline had finally subsided enough that he may be able to actually get some shut eye...maybe. He began to think over the events of the night and their unlikely accomplishments. He was on his way to being a big shot, just like he always wanted. Yes, he was still a bad guy, but there was nothing he could do about it, this was who he was. He didn't even know why he was bothering to think about the fact that he had sealed his fate of continuing to be morally objectionable, it never bothered him before. He had only considered going legit before to stay out of jail, not because he wanted to be a good guy. It appeared James was having some affect on him after all. Not that it would do any good now, he was set just the way he had always wanted.

James had mentioned that he wanted to talk to him about these "plans" he had made for all of them without consulting him, but Derrick convinced him to wait till morning because he wanted the guys to be able to revel in their glory. He began to nod off as he wondered if he could keep his team together. Then as his thoughts began to drift away from the deal, he began to see something else. What it was, he could not tell, but he could no longer control his introspection. He wanted to savor in the success of the deal, but he kept thinking about...about ...a maze? He wasn't sure, but now he felt so relaxed it was easy to fall asleep, and dream.

"What do you see now Mr. Deshay?"

"I see you," Michael answered as a matter-of-fact.

Dr. Yashida had been looking in the direction of her impressive library against the wall, but this answer had taken her by surprise and she turned to see him looking at her. His eyes were supposed to be closed, but he didn't even look like he was under hypnosis anymore. She had been very nervous when first putting him under, after the debacle of her first hypnosis attempt with him. She had stayed very attentive to every detail he described as he made his way through the maze. Everything went very smoothly and she was able to lead him to complete relaxation. Then she cautiously permitted him to

explore his dream, which he was able to do effortlessly. He described what sounded like an illegal gun deal and at times would go from a third person to a first person narrative, as though he was seeing the gun deal through the eyes of one of the leaders. At some points it sounded as though he had made himself the leader of one of the gangs. His description carried on after the deal was over and seemed to follow the perspective of the gang leader as he left the deal site and went home. Michael's descriptions were calm and very detailed and Dr. Yashida actually began to feel confident that everything was under complete control this time. She even relaxed enough to turn away from him and stand up and walk around as she continued to guide him through his dream, trying to find information that would be helpful to her understanding why he was having this dream. She had ended up in her office chair, reclining comfortably, facing her library that lined the entire wall. Michael mentioned the gang leader, whose name was Derrick, had lain down to go to sleep, then there was a pause, and now he was staring at her. He appeared to have come out of hypnosis of his own accord. She stood up worriedly and walked over to him.

"What do you mean you see me? Where are the people you were just talking to me about?"

"They're gone. When Derrick goes to sleep, I stop dreaming about his life until he wakes up again, then it continues...that's why I'm here."

"Mr. Deshay, you should not be able to look at me. Are you...awake?"

"Yes, I am."

"You are no longer under hypnosis?"

"No."

"That is highly unusual. You are not supposed to come out of it until I tell you to."

Michael noticed the worried look on the doctor's face and he could hear the strain in her voice.

"Well, for some reason I have. There's no danger in that, is there? I mean, I feel fine."

"I am not sure. I have never had this happen before. I have heard of it happening before, in rare cases of demonic possession, not to alarm you, but I don't even know the outcome of those cases." She was thinking even as she was speaking, grasping at straws to identify a reasonable explanation.

"I feel fine and I don't think I am demonically possessed, if that reassures you at all,"

Michael explained with a humorous glance.

The doctor looked at him suspiciously, trying to decide if he really had come out of hypnosis, or if he was so deeply under that he only thought he had come out of it.

“Perhaps I should go through the steps of bringing you out, just in case. I mean, well, just in case.”

“Better safe than sorry, huh” Michael joked.

“Yes, definitely.” The joke was obviously lost on her.

The doctor went through the formality of bringing him out of his hypnosis, but he felt no different.

“How do you feel?” the doctor asked.

“The same, I feel fine.”

“You present some very strange possibilities Mr. Deshay. May I suggest our next appointment be as soon as possible?”

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary, I have found out what I needed to know. I won’t be coming back.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that. I was of the understanding you wanted these dreams to end.”

“I do.”

“You said you have found out what you need. What is it that you have figured out and why not continue?”

“If nothing else, I found out that they won’t stop until they’re finished. I have no control over them and neither do you. They have been growing stronger and stronger, almost daily. A few days ago I could only remember traces of having had a strange dream and now, I remember everything. I believe this is something that must run its course.”

“With all due respect, but that is exactly why it is so important that you return. If they are getting stronger, they could leave a lasting mental impression on your psyche.”

Michael smiled, “Oh, I am sure you are correct on that point, whether good or bad...” he left the thought hanging, not sure he wanted to know the answer, and knowing that neither of them had the answer to the question anyway.

The doctor was sure this dream was a case study she could build a career on and didn’t want to let the opportunity pass. “I could study these dreams and then perhaps begin to counter them. I could bring in a highly qualified team to help me. We would

monitor your sleep, there is very sophisticated technology in dream analysis these days and in a week or two we could possibly have a firm grasp of what is happening in your dreams. You would make a wonderful test case.” She had gotten carried away and let the last part slip.

Michael smiled. “As exciting as it sounds to be a ‘test case,’ I have more pressing matters I must attend to.”

He got up to leave.

“Well, uhm, at least consider my offer, please. I am confident I can help you.”

“I will, thank you.” He said his polite “good-byes” and left.

The doctor had been successful in stimulating The Dream, but unfortunately he was unable to get a good look at Derrick. At first he had been a spectator, as usual, then The Dream took an unusual turn, changing his perspective to the same as Derrick’s. It was as if he was looking through Derrick’s eyes. They’re connection had just become even more intimate, almost as if they were the same person. Except that he maintained his own thoughts separate from Derrick’s. He didn’t know if this should be a cause for more concern or not, but strangely he had a feeling that the connection wasn’t a danger to him. He still felt an urgency to see what Derrick’s face looked like and therefore began to put more weight on his theory that he knew the guy somehow, but then, how could he actually see through the guy’s own eyes if he wasn’t an extension of his own being? If this was just a dream and Derrick was his fantasy of himself as a bad boy, then the same perspective would make sense, but if it is some kind of connection to someone he knows...how is it possible to see through his eyes?

Michael checked his watch as he reached his Mercedes, 11:15 a.m. It was still a little early to meet Lisa at the restaurant so he decided to see if she had gone to the office, yet. If not he would try her cell-phone.

There was no answer at the office. *That’s unusual*, he thought. Judy always takes lunch at noon and she would have told him if she had a doctor’s appointment or some other commitment. He had a bad feeling as he tried Lisa’s cell phone and began driving toward the office.

CHAPTER 13

“Let’s see, it’s eleven o’clock,” Lisa thought out loud. “You said Michael wanted me to meet him at the restaurant at noon, right?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I can take you to the safe house and still get to the restaurant a little early. I better try him on his cell phone so that he knows what’s going on,” she reasoned. Safely in the limousine with Judy and on the way to taking her to the safe house where Lisa’s mother and brother were staying, she felt much better.

“Lisa, I don’t mean to interrupt, but I really shouldn’t have left the office like that. Mr. Deshay is responsible for several large companies, so we can’t just shut down, someone needs to be there.”

“I know Michael relies on you a great deal, Judy, but I also know he would be much angrier about losing you than he would be about not having anyone at the office for a few hours. It’s too dangerous for you to be there right now, so I’m afraid the business will have to wait until I can talk to him. If he wants to send you back, well, then I’ll have something to say about that, too.” She smiled reassuringly and Judy’s worried face brightened a little, as well.

Judy realized she didn’t really have a say in the matter and appreciated Lisa’s concern and friendliness. She was probably right, of course, but Michael did rely on her a great deal. She wasn’t just his secretary, she was more like his assistant. She watched over things for him when he traveled, or couldn’t be in the office. He trusted his board of directors, but they just didn’t have time for many of the day-to-day affairs that he preferred to stay abreast of, which permitted him to stay in touch with the real people that ran his companies, the everyday workers. This reminded her that Michael had built a company with people who truly cared about its success and they would keep the business running smoothly without her for a few hours.

“Whatever you think is best, Michael trusts you a great deal, as well.”

“He does?”

Lisa was infinitely surprised by Judy’s statement, but didn’t have a chance to pursue further explanation, for her cell phone rang.

“Hello?” she asked, knowing it was Michael from her caller ID.

“Hey, Lisa,” he stated into his blue tooth headset as he drove his Mercedes 500SL convertible. He usually used one of his Luxury cars when taking care of business and saved his exotic sports cars for pleasure and parties. Going to the psychologist was neither a pleasure nor a party.

“Hi, Michael, I was just about to call you,” Lisa said.

“You sound stressed, are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I have a few things to talk to you about, though, and they’re urgent. I should be able to make it to the restaurant early, can you?”

“Yes, of course, but maybe you should tell me now if it’s an emergency.”

“It’s not an emergency...just urgent. Most of it can wait until lunch.”

“O.K., did you happen to make it to the office, I called and there was no answer?”

“Yes, I’ll tell you about it at lunch.”

“Tell me about what?”

“About what happened.”

“Something happened? Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“Is Judy alright? Is that why there was no answer at the office this early in the day?”

“Judy is fine, she is with me.”

“With you? Why is she with you? Lisa, what happened?”

“Michael, relax, please, everyone is fine. I’m a little suspicious about a few things and wanted to play it safe, so I brought Judy with me. I’m going to take her to the safe house and then I’ll meet you at the restaurant. From what I understand it will take about twenty minutes.”

“The safe house? You’re beginning to worry me again, but just make sure Judy is safe and I’ll get some security lined up for the office and someone to cover for Judy.

Lisa agreed and said her goodbyes. Michael was always calm and confident when dealing with business, but as soon as a loved one was in danger...and in this case both Lisa and Judy may have been in danger.

The limousine pulled into the large garage off a secluded alley. After Lisa introduced

Judy to her Momma and little brother and made sure everyone was settled, she was back in the car and on the way to the restaurant to meet Michael. Finally with a few minutes to herself, the enormity of the situation hit her. She put her head back against the seat and took a deep breathe. She couldn't help thinking she could have such a wonderful life with Michael, if they could just live through this crisis.

Michael began dialing the number to the head of security at his high-rise office complex. He was angry. But who was he angry at? Was he angry at security for not doing...what? He didn't even know what happened, and neither did security. Was he angry at himself for not being able to prevent Lisa and Judy from being in danger?

He stopped just as he placed his finger on the last digit of the phone number. He hadn't been this angry in a long time and even when he had, he was always able to maintain a more disciplined control of his emotions. If he had spoken to his head of security with this much anger, he would have been embarrassed for all of the things he would have regretted saying.

Michael knew who was responsible for his anxiety. His anger should be directed at Angelino Carmen, because if something had happened at the office, there was no doubt in his mind Carmen was connected to it in some way.

Feeling reasonably calmer, he made the call to Ben and made arrangements for around the clock security for his penthouse office. Then he called the President of Operations for Deshay Enterprises and informed him that he and Judy would be away for a few days, therefore he would be in charge in his absence. Tom Gordon was very intelligent, a solid decision maker, and a good man. Michael was confident he would do well in his absence.

He was almost to the restaurant now, and realized he couldn't wait to see Lisa. He smiled. Now if he could just figure out a way to protect her.

"What the fu...assholes!" Derrick yelled as he was awakened by a dousing of ice water.

The guys laughed almost uncontrollably, then P-Dawg said, “You sleep too much D.”

“Yeah, well, someone who looks as good as me needs his beauty sleep.”

“Shit, you better go back to bed then ‘cause you look like a drowned rat,” Pee Wee said.

Everyone laughed.

“I, on the other hand look this good no matter how much I sleep,” P-Dawg said, patting his tightly faded afro lightly with both hands.

“You look like you need an over-dose of sleeping pills,” Pee Wee cracked.

Everyone laughed again.

“I’m sitting here in a puddle of freezing water, with nothing on but soaked boxers. If ya’ll don’t mind...I don’t swing that way, man.”

The guys laughed again and a few lewd comments followed as they ushered themselves out of his bedroom.

After they all left, Derrick smiled. Hell, these guys might become his friends after all, but then his mind went right to business. He could add a few of his most trusted friends from Cleveland to the team and he would be all set. He made a mental note to call Sarge and thank him for the hook-up and get his input on potential team members.

However, there was still the matter of James to deal with and that was likely to happen this morning, and he could be a problem. The guys looked up to him and even though Derrick headed up the last deal, James was still their leader. Derrick already had Pee Wee, but the others could be a tough sell without James. On the other hand, if he could get James on board the others would definitely follow, but then there could be some leadership issues. Well, he would cross that bridge when he came to it, right now he needed to find a way to get James on board.

Then he thought, “Right now I need a hot shower.” He gathered up some clothes and went into the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, he felt like a new man. The rejuvenating powers of hot water were amazing, he contemplated as he wrapped the towel around his waist after drying off, and proceeded to brush his teeth and trim his scruffy beard.

He looked in the mirror as he ran his hand across the top of his military short hair, causing water to spray into the air behind the progress of his hand. He was taking his time getting ready, for there was no hurry. He could do whatever he wanted. He had plenty of money and much more would be on its way before too long. Not only did he have his share of the money from this deal, but they didn’t have to give up the money

from the botched Iranian deal, so he was sitting pretty with cash.

Derrick then realized he still had Fred's garage as his place to live and started laughing. *Screw it*, he thought, *I don't have anything important there anyway*. It wouldn't take Fred long to figure out he wasn't coming back. He could have P-Dawg call him and tell him, but Fred would probably have it rented by the end of the week anyway. It would turn out to be a good deal for him, since Derrick had been there less than two weeks, but had paid for six. He didn't care, he would be living in style very soon. He felt so in command of his life at the moment, and it felt good.

In the back of his mind he thought of The Dream, which was something he didn't have any control over, but that was a minor problem. Yes, his dream was becoming more and more life-like and less and less like a dream. Yes, he was worrying and wondering about people who didn't even exist, but...it was still just a dream, it had to be. What else could it be? He left the bathroom and walked over to the dresser by the window. He began to put his jewelry on as he looked out the window. He didn't wear much, just two cool looking rings he picked up along the way, a necklace, and a decent watch he got from a jewelry store burglary a while back. He would have to upgrade his bling now.

He couldn't help thinking back to the deal again and how well everything went, except there was that moment when he felt...what was it? He felt like someone was watching him. He had looked in the direction of the sensation, but didn't see anyone, just desert. He had wondered at the time if a spy had been sent from the Iranians and his sixth sense was trying to warn him, but somehow he knew that wasn't the case. Thinking about it now, he knew who it was. He knew it was Michael Deshay.

Just then Derrick saw movement in the garage as he looked down from his second story window. He couldn't tell if it was one of the guys from the distance, but the person didn't act like someone who belonged there. He could barely see through the rectangled windows of the garage door, but he had a bad feeling they were being robbed, and that's where the extra guns were stashed.

He threw off his towel and quickly slipped on a pair of shorts. He grabbed his gun from under the pillow on the bed and ran out of the bedroom. He ran down the stairs to see if everyone was accounted for in the house.

"What's up D?" T-Bone asked worriedly.

Derrick looked around the living room as he asked, "Everyone's here?"

"Yeah, man, everyone's here."

“What’s up, D?” James asked.

“Someone’s in the garage,” he stated as he quickly disappeared out the back door.

Thinking quickly, James commanded, “Pee Wee and Truth check the house and the yard, P-Dawg and T-Bone, let’s go.”

They all pulled their guns and dispersed.

Derrick rushed to the garage door and quickly, but quietly opened the side door and stepped in, placidly closing the door behind him. The two Mercedes fit snug in the small two car garage. He crouched behind the one closest to the side door he entered through, taking a moment to listen and adjust his eyes to the semi-darkness. It sounded like someone was into their private stash of guns on the other side of the garage.

He made his way around the back of the Mercedes, deciding he was going to sneak up on the thief from between the two vehicles, as that would put him closest the culprit without being seen. He didn’t know if this guy had a gun of his own, but he was elbow deep in a stash, most of them probably loaded, so surprise and close proximity to his prey would be important. He noticed the side door to the garage open and was glad his back-up had arrived. They got there a little quicker than he expected and he was surprised they didn’t storm in with guns blazing, which is why he wanted to get there first, he didn’t want to bring any extra attention to them with a shooting. It was a tough neighborhood and shootings were fairly common, but he didn’t want to take a chance on the cops being called. It appeared the guys were actually learning from him by coming in quiet. Pleased with his role as teacher, he made his way to the space between the two cars and was about to spring his trap.

“Behind you!”

Derrick spun around with his gun raised and saw a strange black man preparing to shoot him and immediately unloaded four rounds from his nine-millimeter into the man’s chest. The man’s body reverberated at the impact of the bullets, throwing him backward until he impacted against the garage door with a thud. The side window on the far wall imploded with the force of a body flying through it, the body landing on the hood of one of the Mercedes. Derrick’s gun was at the ready, but he recognized T-Bone’s hulking figure. The side door he had entered through was kicked in and James came barreling through with his gun raised and ready.

“Derrick! Where are you?”

“Behind the Benz! I’m alright, there’s one by the guns.”

He stood up cautiously, gun pointed in front of him. T-Bone was on one knee on the hood of the Mercedes, gun pointed at the crate box where they stored their personal stash of weapons.

Derrick looked over to see James, who was poised in front of the Mercedes and his gun pointed at the crate, as well.

P-Dawg and Truth came running into the garage.

“What the hell’s going on in here?” P-Dawg asked.

Truth, looking around the rest of the garage, saw the guy Derrick shot and went over to examine the leftovers. P-Dawg took it all in and understood immediately. He took a quick survey underneath the cars, as he made his way to the area in front of the gun crate. Derrick let his gun fall to his side as he reached the front of the crate, then Truth rounded out the group.

The original burglar Derrick had spotted was nowhere to be seen. He looked at the box and smiled. “Well guys, I wonder how our guns are doin’?” He asked very loudly and sarcastically.

P-Dawg piped in, “Yeah, perhaps they’re about due for a cleanin’.”

Derrick said, “Yeah, but I wonder if they’re still in good shape. I mean, we could open the box and they might start shooting at us for no reason. Maybe we should all just step back and start shooting holes in the box, you know, to see if they’re unsteady.”

T-Bone was getting a kick out of Derrick’s charade and added, “Good idea D, want me to unload a clip right now?”

Derrick didn’t even get a chance to continue when someone started knocking lightly on the lid of the crate, from the inside.

“Hello? Please don’t shoot, man, there’s someone in here.”

Everyone smiled.

Derrick feigned surprise and said, “There is? What a surprise. Well, whoever you are, let’s see if you can come out of there slow enough that we don’t have to fill you with lead.”

“Don’t shoot, man, I’m coming out slow, I don’t have a gun, I’m coming out slow.”

“Don’t have a gun? You got nothin’ but guns you fucking idiot?” Pee Wee barked.

“I think he means a gun of his own,” Truth explained with a smile on his face.

“Yeah, he’s a real quick one,” P-Dawg surmised.

“Alright, man, real slow,” Derrick said.

“Real slow, man. Look at me, I’m real slow.”

“Yeah, we got that part,” Truth joked.

The guys couldn’t help but smile as the little man slowly climbed out of the crate of guns. Derrick could see the utter fear in the man’s eyes, and this pleased him.

He could also feel James’ scrutiny, though and glanced over to him. Sure enough, James studied him as if he were a lab rat.

Derrick was different from them and it had nothing to do with the color of his skin. This was what he wanted out of life. He wasn’t like them, except for maybe Pee Wee and James had been hoping he would be able to eventually lead him away from this kind of life. Looking at him now, James knew he was lost for good. He held the same type of enjoyment for the criminal life as Derrick. He looked back to Derrick, and he could only hope he hadn’t lost the guys to this bad man.

Derrick held his glare defiantly. *Too bad*, he thought, he had really come to like James, but now they’re relationship would become a battle for control of the guys.

“What do you think James, shall we just shoot him, or should we torture him first?”

James did not plan on answering, for he knew Derrick was no longer really interested his opinion anyway. He wanted to hear the man beg for his life some more, caught up in his small amount of power.

Derrick wasn’t disappointed. The man begged and pleaded for his life, and promised him the world if he let him live. His enjoyment was short lived, though, as he soon became bored with the charade that he had created.

“O.K., enough sniveling,” Derrick instructed the man. “How many of you were involved with trying to steal our guns?”

“Just me and Tyrone, man. I swear, man, just me and Ty.”

“So, you and Ty just happened to be cruisin’ the neighborhood and said, ‘Hey, that little white garage behind that little white house looks like it would have some guns we could steal.’ Is that what you’re tryin’ to tell me?”

“No, man, nothin’ like that. I’ll tell ya’ straight up, words out on the street that James and his boys hooked up with a badass white boy from back east and that ya’ll been gettin’ paid. We just wanted to see what we could find, know what I’m sayin’. I happened across these guns by accident, man. Ty didn’t even know I found them. He was supposed to be lookout, man.”

Derrick shared a significant look with James, again. This one had a whole different

meaning, though. It probably wasn't a good thing that word was out they were making a lot of money. *That didn't take long*, he thought. He had no idea how word could have spread about him already, but now that the word was out, it would likely lead to more burglary attempts, or straight out armed robbery. *Attempts*, he thought as he looked over his shoulder, back to the pitiful would be burglar who lay on the floor in a heap of blood. They had to establish that it would be hazardous to anyone's health to come after their property.

"Tyrone won't be lookout no more," P-Dawg said as he looked in the direction of the bullet riddled body.

"Yeah, well...let's see here," Derrick thought out loud, wondering if the police would show up for some gun shots in this neighborhood. He couldn't take a chance, but if they did show up, at least it would probably take awhile to get there. Police response tended to be slow in poor neighborhoods and they needed to do a few things before the police arrived, if they did arrive. Then he had an idea.

"This is what we need to do, we need to cover ourselves by making sure the cops show up and there is nothing suspicious, just a dead robber. P-Dawg, you go make a 911 call so it's on record you reported a burglary. As far as you go..." Derrick had begun tapping his index finger against the little burglar's forehead, "We're gonna let you go."

"You are?" the man said, obviously surprised.

"Yeah, ain't that nice of me?"

The little man nodded his head emphatically and thanked Derrick with the same vigor.

"Just be sure you spread it around what happened to your buddy Tyrone. Let it be known it's a bad idea to show up around here, 'cause you will end up dead. The only reason you lived through this, is to spread the word. You let that be known, as well. You think you can handle that?"

"No problem, man. I'll get the word out tonight, man, you'll see. I'll do a real good job getting the word out."

"You do that. If you come back and try again, there will be no second chances, you will die," Derrick finished with emphasis, looking deep into the man's eyes. The intimidation tactic worked, he could see the fear in the man's eyes.

"I, I'll spread the word, man. You don't have to worry 'bout me. I'll never come back here again, unless you want me to. I can do things for you, man. Other things, not

just spread the word, I can get you anything you need and I can hook you up with people. I know everyone, man, I hear everything. I can get you information, anything. Just mention my name, Mouse, to someone and I'll hear that you want me. I can help you with anything, man."

"I'll keep that in mind, Mouse. For now, just spread the word this place is off limits. Any uninvited guests will die. We're moving our shit to a secure location, anyway. Make it known we don't stash any goods here, anymore. Security is about to move up to the next level. You spread that around for me, Mouse."

P-Dawg re-entered from having made the 911 call, he gave Derrick a nod as Mouse tried his best to reassure him that he was the man for the job.

"No problem, man. That's a good idea moving your shit and I'll tell everyone it's going to a secret location, no problem, man. Consider it done." Mouse began to feel more confident. After all, he was providing a service. Derrick wanted to keep things moving because they had work to do before the police arrived.

"Alright, get out of here."

"Right, I'm out. I'm out to spread the word." Mouse left quickly just to make sure Derrick didn't change his mind at the last second and kill him.

Derrick looked around at the guys.

"Well, this should actually be pretty easy. Other than the guns, we can pretty much leave everything where it is. James, this is your house and I used your gun...you have to become the shooter, is that cool with you?"

"Yeah, the gun I gave you is legal. It's my registered house gun."

Derrick gave him a double-take. "You gave someone you didn't even know a gun registered to you?"

"I didn't give you that nine until after the first job, and I trusted you by then. Besides, my house gun was the only back-up hand gun I had at the time and we didn't have time to get anything else before the deal. We weren't set up quite as good as we are now."

Derrick smiled. "True, and I am thankful, let me tell you. Your house gun saved my life."

"It's cool."

"O.K., so, you will basically tell the police you did what I did."

"Which is?"

"All the cops need to know is, you heard a noise in the garage when you went to get

something from your car. You snuck in the door with your gun drawn and tried to sneak around the back of the cars to surprise whoever it was that was in here, you heard a noise behind you and was lucky enough to shoot the burglar before he shot you. There was someone else, but he jumped out the side window and escaped, you didn't get a look at him."

"Sounds simple enough," James answered. He didn't necessarily like taking credit for the kill, but he knew it was needed because he was the homeowner and therefore less suspicious. His grandfather had left him the house when he died and his dad and uncle owned the two Mercedes, but they were currently on a business trip together out of town. He was supposed to be watching their cars for them. It would not draw nearly as much scrutiny if he became the shooter. It would look like two car thieves had been thwarted and one of them ended up dead. It was a clean case of self-defense by a home owner, even in this neighborhood that meant something.

Derrick turned to T-Bone.

"T-Bone, help me get this crate onto that over-head storage area, and we will need to stack boxes on top of it and around it to make it blend in. If we do it right, they won't even notice it."

"No problem D."

The crate was soon stored on the shelf and well-hidden amongst the other storage items. There was plenty of junk to stack around and in front of it, to the point you couldn't even tell it was a crate. Derrick looked around and then realized they would have to move the broken glass.

"Be careful you don't cut yourselves doing it, but we need to throw most of this glass outside the window. If the burglar jumped out the window to escape James shooting his gun, then there should be more glass outside than inside.

"Good thinking D," P-Dawg said as he retrieved a broom and dust-pan out of a side closet and swept up several piles of glass and threw them out the window.

"Clean the glass off the Benz, too. Leave a little, but most of it can go," Derrick said.

"And be careful," James said as he began to look more closely at the scratched and dented hood. "I'm gonna' have to pay a mint to fix this." He looked menacingly at T-Bone as he said it.

"Sorry, man. I heard gunfire and this was the quickest way in. I thought D could be in trouble."

James sighed, "I know, it's cool."

"He was trying to save me, I'll pay for it," Derrick offered.

"Nah, man, you were just protecting our property, I got it."

"Well, at least you can easily afford to get it done now," Derrick said with a smile.

James looked at him, but he didn't smile back.

Two hours later, the entire mess of police, ambulance, and coroner had come and gone. Derrick had decided to take James' Mercedes for a drive to get something to eat, so he wouldn't be around while the police were there. It was probably the longest fast food run he had ever made, considering south-central probably wasn't the safest place for him.

He quickly made his way to the Interstate 10 freeway and drove west until he reached Santa Monica. He needed to go somewhere he wouldn't have to worry about dying for being the only white person. He would have plenty of time while waiting for the police to get done at the house, so he decided he might as well check out the beach, as well. The guys knew he was on probation in Cleveland, so James agreed to let him take the car and assured him they would take care of everything. It also made it easier to explain only one Mercedes in the garage, instead of two. Not to mention they wouldn't have to explain why a white guy was hanging out at their house, in the heart of South Central. James' dad and uncle were in business together and did fairly well, but they lived down the street and in this neighborhood, two Mercedes usually meant drug dealers, and a white guy would cement the deal for the police. There would be searches of the house and garage, and their new lifestyle would be over before it even got started.

In the end, James handled the police, but he had had a fleeting desire to tell the cops about Derrick breaking his parole. That would solve his problem of Derrick talking the guys into the illegal arms trade as a career, but it could also backfire. He would probably ruin his own rep in the neighborhood. Even turning over on a whiteboy was bad if it meant you were turning over on a business partner. Most importantly, the guys would never forgive him and he would definitely lose their respect.

The police had been thorough, as if they really wanted to find dirt on James. He explained about his dad to account for the car and his grandfather to explain owning the

house, and he even had to produce the documentation to prove his claims. Once he was established as the owner, there just wasn't anything suspicious enough about the situation to warrant a more complete search of the premises, so the death of the burglar was ruled self-defense, with a stern recommendation to call them first and leave the security to the police. *Yeah, that works so well for everyone else around here*, James thought.

The guys sat around the living room talking about how their life had changed since they met Derrick, when the man himself entered the house. P-Dawg had called him on the cell phone T-Bone lent him as soon as the police left, so he knew it was safe. He sat down and listened to the continuing conversation with great interest. This was a great opportunity to see how receptive the guys would be to continuing in the business of selling guns. They still did not know about the deal he had made, unless James had told them while he was gone. He looked at James, who was stone-faced during the conversation, which led him to believe he had not said anything and was not happy about the general excitement over the course of events. T-Bone looked at Derrick.

"Yo D, what happened when you went to the garage? When we came out the house, we saw the fool you killed go in the garage, but we were too far and too late to get a shot, so we ran after him, but we thought you were done, man."

Derrick found that statement rather odd, because one of them had made it to the garage to warn him the guy was behind him and he expressed as much. The guys all looked at each other to see who had warned him, but no one took the credit.

"C'mon, man, one of you warned me. After each, in turn, said, 'Wasn't me,'" Derrick took a minute to go through the events in his mind. "I had the other just about lined up, I could hear him trying guns, then I saw the side door to the garage open, but I thought it was one of you, so I turned back to other to make my move...then one of you warned me, I turned and unloaded."

Each of the guys looked to the other questioningly once again, no one took the credit.

"Me and P-Dawg were the only ones near the garage door, the others were searching the house and yard. None of us were in the garage D," James said.

"I was on the other side of the garage, outside the window. I didn't even know something was happening until I heard a gunshot," T-Bone said.

"So you jump through my damn window and scratch up my uncle's Benz?" James asked angrily.

"Sorry, James. I was worri..."

“I know, I know. It’s cool, I just...”

The guys continued talking, not realizing the possible implications of what had happened to Derrick. How could they? None of them knew about The Dream and if they did, they sure as hell wouldn’t trust him to lead them to riches. He thought back to the moment he had been warned. It could have been the guy he shot was over-confident, thinking he had Derrick and as a way of rubbing it in his face that he was about to kill him, he actually warned him, wanting him to turn around before shooting him so Derrick would see who took his life. He knew some guys back home who liked to do that, but he never did understand what good it did. The guy would be dead in an instant and then it wouldn’t matter anyway.

At any rate, it had been a warning, not a statement of fact. It was a warning that had alarm and fear as motivation. The more he tried to stay away from the possibilities of The Dream warning him, the more he knew it was true. Well, not The Dream itself, but the person in The Dream. The warning played over and over in his head and then he recognized that voice, it was Michael Deshay’s voice.

“How can that be,” he said aloud.

The guys looked over.

“How can what be?” James asked.

Derrick looked over to James, realizing he had forgotten the guys were there.

“Huh? Oh, nothing.”

He got up and started walking toward the stairs.

“I’ll be upstairs if anyone needs me.”

James watched him walk away. Derrick was acting a little weird and he couldn’t help but wonder if he was avoiding their impending talk about their future in dealing guns.

The other guys picked up their conversation again without missing a beat.

Derrick went to his bed and lay down. It was a little after one thirty in the afternoon, but he felt fatigued anyway. He knew Michael Deshay had warned him. How it was possible, he didn’t know. How could it be possible for a dream to warn you of something in real life?

True, his dreams didn’t seem like any dream he had ever had, and they were getting more and more real in his mind. They were too real and they were always about the same people, especially that “goodie asshole” Deshay. What was going on? He didn’t really believe in psychic connections, but maybe that was it. Somehow, they became

psychologically connected and so he sees what happens in this guy's life. It always happened when this guy was awake and Derrick was asleep. Whenever the guy goes to sleep, he wakes up, and when he goes to sleep that guy wakes up in his dream.

"That is crazy," Derrick thought as he started to drift off. He didn't want to fall asleep in the middle of the afternoon, but he had reached that point of just before sleep, realizing you were about to drift off and fall asleep, even though you don't want it to happen, but there's nothing you can do about it. He tried one last time to wake up, but it was a feeble effort.

Derrick did drift off to sleep...and dreamed.

Michael almost jumped out of his seat as the gun blasts nearly deafened him, and he struggled to get control of his faculties and establish his surroundings. He was seated at a dining table in his favorite Italian restaurant. He looked around quickly, and fortunately only a few people appeared to see him startle from his day dreaming, but unfortunately a waiter was one of them. He came up to Michael to make sure everything was all right. Michael could barely understand what he was saying because of the ringing in his ears, as he had never been so close to a gun shot before, especially not inside an enclosed space. He couldn't believe it barely affected Derrick, who must be used to the firing of guns, and then he realized the absurdity of this line of thinking, for he hadn't been there...but then why were his ears ringing? It just wasn't possible.

"Is everything alright Mr. Deshay?"

"What? Yes, everything is fine, thank you."

"Can I get you anything while you wait for your guest to arrive?"

"No, thank you, I'll wait until she gets here."

The waiter nodded and left. Realizing he had been speaking louder than he needed to, Michael was mildly embarrassed, but he was more worried about an explanation for what had just happened to him. He was thinking as if he had actually been inside the garage with Derrick at the time of the shooting, which he had not...yet his ears were still ringing a little. It was bad enough he was warning a person in his dreams of danger, but to be physically affected was absurd.

He thought of the doctor and her offer to help, to monitor and analyze The Dream

until it was understood, saying only then could something be done about it...but what? The doctor had no better idea about it than he did, but he did leave open the possibility that maybe he should go back.

He thought he could let it run its course, but now he wasn't so sure. The Dreams were strange and very life-like, but he was sure he could handle a dream...was sure. Now, he didn't know what to think, then another thought struck him. He had never had The Dream during the day before. Well, that's not true, he had it while being hypnotized, but that is a dream-like state. It was one thing to deal with a disturbing dream in the privacy of your own home...or doctor's office, but this time...in public, in one of his favorite restaurants, no less.

It would not be good for something like this to happen in public again. People could and would start talking. The trash magazine writers would have a field day. Nowadays, writers made careers for themselves by finding gossip about public figures. He would be the young billionaire businessman who could no longer take the pressure of big business and went crazy. His business associates could lose confidence in him. He already had Angelino Carmen trying to ruin him, he must not allow this dream to become something Carmen could use against him. If Angelino Carmen was going to defeat him, he would have to earn it.

"Fuck 'em, I'd probably be happier if I wasn't so rich anyway," Michael mused. He was immediately embarrassed by his language, even though he hadn't spoken out loud. Where did that come from, he never spoke like that. He used swear words occasionally for emphasis on a particular point to be made, but he viewed the habitual dependency on such words as an intellectual weakness due to an undisciplined mind. And he never used the "F" word. He looked around, ashamed, as if someone could read his thoughts and knew what he had said, and then he stopped, pausing in mid thought.

Read his thoughts...like ESP, or a psychic connection, perhaps. He vaguely remembered that thought entering Derrick's mind. Could it be possible that Derrick wasn't a figment of his imagination? Could Derrick be a real person that he had somehow become connected to through some sort of psychic connection? And if so, why? Derrick was a bad man. He would never associate with someone like him. In fact, he would rather spend his time trying to bring the man to justice for all of his crimes, as he was with Angelino Carmen.

"Mr. Deshay, Miss Johnson has arrived."

Michael casually meandered from his thoughts as he absentmindedly noticed the waiter's presence, but the mention of Lisa brought him to full attention. *Shit, I have to get a hold of myself*, he thought. Abashed once again by the bad language for no particular reason, in his mind, Michael made a major effort to stay in control of his actions. He didn't want to scare Lisa with this dream nightmare again. Although it was quickly becoming more than an annoyance, he and Lisa still had bigger fish to fry.

"Thank you, please show her in."

"Yes, sir."

He couldn't help but wonder at the absurdity of his previous thought of a psychic connection to a psychotic killer. He began to wonder whether he should share this new problem with Lisa. He didn't want to scare her, but he was determined to be completely honest with her and not keep any other secret from her. She was liable to think he was going crazy, but then, maybe he was. He would be risking losing her, but he would rather not be with her than try to live a dishonest life with her.

Lisa joined Michael with that wonderful, naturally pleasant look on her face. He could only hope she was as happy to see him as he was to see her. Neither truly realized just how dependant on each other they had become.

She jumped right into a conversation about the events that had happened at the office. As worried as he became by the bad news Lisa told him, he was truly grateful the subject of his dream was absent from the conversation.

"I have had time to think about this on the way over and I don't believe they are trying to hurt us physically in any way, and they have certainly had they're opportunities. Ever since they murdered Kenny, they have almost been protecting us. Is this some sick joke of theirs or are they just playing with us?" she asked.

"I wouldn't put either possibility past Carmen."

Michael had already opened up one of the envelopes Lisa brought with her from the office and was looking over the information as they talked.

"Angel," Michael said, disgusted.

"What?"

"That's the latest bit of info that has come in from my sources. Apparently his close friends and associates call him Angel. He thinks of himself as the 'Angel of Death,' having the power to take life, or allow life. It's just another example of his twisted sense of humor.

"I've never even met the man, but I hate him more than any person I have ever met."

"He has that kind of effect on most people."

"So, what do we do about your office?"

"Well, let's determine what we know first. We have established that the telephone repairman was the blond bodyguard. What was his name?" Michael asked.

"Jeffrey...something. Pat...Patter, Jeffrey Patter," she remembered.

"Good memory."

"Thank you." They shared smiles.

"Anyway," he continued, "Jeffrey Patter, Carmen's personal bodyguard was the telephone repairman, who was probably either looking for information or planting a bug, or both."

"Correct."

"Your so-called boss was none other than Joseph Trumaine, only considered the most dangerous hit-man in the world."

"Thanks for reminding me, I was feeling much too optimistic this morning."

Michael liked her sarcastic smile, the way her mouth drew up at the corner. "You're welcome," he said, equally sarcastic.

"So, what are they setting us up for?" she asked, as she easily made the transition back to business.

"That, my dear, is the million dollar question."

The food they ordered arrived. They quit their conversation and began to eat their gourmet Italian food. Michael was starving and gladly dug into his favorite meal, lasagna. The ordeal at the psychologists office had left him famished. Lisa picked at her fettuccini alfredo, not really hungry anymore. She looked over to Michael.

"How can you eat at a time like this, with everything that's happening? I can barely keep anything down."

He stopped in mid chew and looked over to her, then quickly finished chewing what was left in his mouth and swallowed the remains.

"Dear, with all that lies ahead of us, we're going to need all the strength and energy we can get, so I would advise you to find your appetite. You need to eat."

What he said made sense, as usual. "You're right."

"Besides, the chef here makes the best lasagna I have ever tasted," he added.

Lisa smiled back and began to try and eat, but she only managed to force down a little

more. Meanwhile, Michael had focused his attention back on his meal and routinely devoured it. Watching him eat made her smile. She was getting better at dealing with everything, but she still had her stressful moments from time to time. He always made her feel better, though.

They were silent for what seemed an eternity. She knew it had actually only been a few minutes, so she thought it might be a good time to figure out a way to politely ask what he had been up to all morning. She didn't want to sound accusing, or sound like she didn't trust him, because she did, well, more than she did this morning, anyway.

Michael felt the silence also, but didn't find it uncomfortable. Lisa was the type of woman he could be silent around, and he liked that. He didn't feel like they had to be talking all the time in order to have quality time together. He just liked it when she was around, whether they were talking or not, and he didn't have that with most of the women he had dated.

However, he did think about how he valued the relationship they had built, in addition to being lovers, and that gave him the confidence to tell her his most intimate secrets. Michael finished chewing his present mouthful of lasagna and looked up hesitantly.

"I went to the psychologist this morning."

Lisa was surprised, and relieved. Not just for where he had been, but because he had told her even though she knew it was something he did not want to do in the first place. It just occurred to her that if he had decided to go to the doctor on such abbreviated deliberation, even with all of his misgivings, then his dream must be bothering him a great deal.

"How did it go?"

"The doctor was able to stimulate The Dream into action," he said.

"You mean he hypnotized you?"

Michael smiled. "Yes, I suppose she did, but I came out of the hypnosis on my own."

"On your own? Is that normal?"

"She said she had heard cases of it, but it had never happened to her before."

Lisa didn't mean to get sidetracked but she did notice his reference to the doctor as a woman, and felt ridiculous for being jealous. She could not be jealous every time Michael spoke to a woman, which was a recipe for disaster. She had never realized how mistrustful her bad relationships of the past had made her. Well, she had to put them behind her now. She trusted him completely, she just had to learn how to believe in that

trust and not allow herself to be jealous.

“Michael, the...dream thing may be more serious than you originally thought. I mean, it sounds like you’ve given it a title. When are you going back?”

Michael and Lisa had inadvertently achieved the habit of looking each other in the eye when they spoke to each other, and he considered that a big reason for the building honesty between them, the goal being absolute trust. Looking a person in the eyes when you talk to them encourages honesty and intimacy. You are allowing a person to see who you truly are, and it is much more difficult to lie when you look a person in the eyes, especially someone you love. He always looked his clients and employees in the eyes to show them respect and to let them know they could trust him and he would treat them fairly. He wanted the same for Lisa and so much more.

“I’m not planning on going back.”

“You’re not? Why not?”

“It’s hard to explain. This isn’t just a dream, it’s something strangely different. I don’t exactly know how to explain it, but the fact that the doctor couldn’t control my dream or my reaction to it makes me believe it would be a waste of time to go back.”

She seemed to be uncertain about his decision and a little confused by his explanation. He couldn’t blame her, he felt much the same about the whole thing and he was the one living it.

“I don’t think the doctor knows what to do next. She wants me to come in for research and she wants to bring in a dream analysis team. Basically, they want to make a case study out of me.”

Lisa looked troubled, for she hadn’t realized it was this serious, but then she remembered the night Michael was talking in his sleep, with that evil look in his eyes. He had been someone different, in his eyes he didn’t look like himself. Those eyes were cold and calculating. They were mean, selfish and just plain scary and he was none of those things. It was like someone else was inside of him. Lisa brushed that thought aside, not wanting to consider the possibility of multiple personalities. Yes, it had become serious, but she wasn’t prepared to call in a priest for an exorcism. Not yet, anyway. Lisa found her private joking mildly funny, but absurd.

“Michael, maybe a research team is what’s needed to figure this out.”

“Maybe, but something inside me tells me that isn’t the answer. Like I said, it’s hard to explain and I’m not even sure this thing is just a dream anymore. We have been so

busy that I haven't had the time to reason it out yet, which is why I can't accurately explain everything that has happened within The Dream."

It was creeping her out a little that he continued to give his dream a title.

"O.K., then, we'll figure this out together. Tell me about your dream."

Michael took a moment to just look at Lisa, take in her beauty, her goodness, her honesty and loyalty...what an amazing woman. He truly felt lucky to be loved by her. "Well, it gets a little weird, and I don't want you to think I'm going crazy."

Lisa gazed deep into his eyes to make sure he understood her heart.

"I'm not going anywhere. I will be by your side through this, I don't care how weird or crazy it gets. Michael, I love you. I will not run at the first sign of trouble, you are there for me and I am there for you. That's how it works, right?"

"That's how it's supposed to work. You just don't see much of it going around these days. People tend to bail when things get tough in a relationship."

"I know, it's difficult to go through tough times, but in the end it just brings two people closer together."

"I agree." He reached over and picked up her hand.

"Thank you for being so amazing."

She smiled as he kissed the back of her hand. They shared a special moment with their eyes, and then Michael got a mischievous look in his eyes that he always got just before he tries to lighten a serious moment with a joke.

"Besides, we can always call in an exorcist if it gets too bad."

Lisa laughed more at how amazing it was that they had thought of the same joke than at the joke itself.

After a moment, he said, "I've been able to remember nearly every moment of The Dream these last couple of times. Until recently, I would just experience a feeling, or have an arbitrary thought about something I normally wouldn't think about when I awoke from The Dream. Lately, I have been remembering more and more, including his name, what kind of person he is, and specific things he was going through. Once I even saw The Dream through his eyes."

That caused Lisa to look up with more concern, but then Michael finished with an even more distressing statement.

"And now, they are officially not just night dreams anymore."

"What do you mean, you daydream it?"

“That’s right. Just before you arrived, I had a...I don’t know what to call it. Maybe a daydream, I don’t know, and I think I saved the man’s life.”

Lisa scrunched her eyebrows, thinking of the possibilities. “You mean, in your dream you saved a man’s life...I mean you didn’t really save someone’s life, right?”

“I don’t know. The guy was going to be shot and I warned him. He was able to shoot the other guy first.”

“But you were dreaming it, it wasn’t real.”

“I don’t know, Lisa. It didn’t feel the same as regular dreams, it felt like I was actually there. The man was in a small garage when he fired his gun and it was so loud in my ears that it jerked me out of The Dream. I was sitting here in the restaurant with my ears ringing. I could barely understand what the waiter was saying because of the ringing in my ears.”

She tried to think of a logical explanation. Her eyes moved around the restaurant, as if she would find the answer somewhere in there. What possible explanation was there? She couldn’t think of anything.

“You wanna know the strangest thing about The Dream?” he asked her.

Lisa wondered briefly if she really did want to know, especially if it was going to get stranger than his ears wringing from a gunshot in his dream.

“What?” she asked cautiously.

“Well, I know this guy’s thoughts when The Dream is happening. I have no idea what anyone else in The Dream is thinking, just him, and this guy is beginning to have the same misgivings about his dream, which is about me and my life, as I am about my dream of his life.”

Lisa was truly confused this time. “I don’t understand.”

“Exactly, neither do we, but, well, apparently he has been dreaming about my life and I have been dreaming about his.”

She was numb, and didn’t know what to think. He said “we,” as if he had been collaborating with this man in his dream that was not real. Then she had a thought that truly did scare her. Maybe he was losing touch with reality.

He continued, “In his thoughts, he worries that his dream about me is becoming too life-like. He even wondered the same thing as me, if maybe I wasn’t his dream, but a psychic connection to a real person.”

Lisa quickly jumped on that idea, for that could be a...“reasonable” explanation to this

whole situation.

“A psychic connection, yes, that is possible...isn’t it?” she asked rhetorically. That would explain a lot and it would mean he isn’t going crazy. Maybe he is psychic. She dared to be hopeful again.

“It’s not a bad idea, is it?” he asked.

“Well, I’m not an expert, of course, but it seems to me it would be within the realm of possibility. Maybe you have psychic abilities.”

“And it would mean I’m not going crazy,” he said smiling.

Lisa always appreciated the way he was able to make light of some of the most serious situations, but it didn’t help her relax this time.

“There is that,” she agreed with a forced smile.

CHAPTER 14

Lying on her back, relaxing on one of Michael's designer couches, staring up at the ceiling, Lisa giggled at the thought of them being married. Maybe she was being a little bit of a schoolgirl, playing fantasy. She was supposed to be working on details for their next move against Angelino Carmen, but her mind kept wandering, and always to wondering how happy her life could be with Michael.

She started thinking about living in Michael's house, which was still very much a guy's home. There was no womanly touch apparent anywhere and she was happy about that, for now. When he did allow the womanly touch into his household, she wanted it to be hers.

She also looked forward to the day when the ten bodyguards positioned around the outside of the house wouldn't be necessary...and mafia bosses and strange dreams didn't dominate their conversations.

She looked over to Michael, sitting casually in his favorite chair across from her. He appeared to be distracted, as well. She could only hope his thoughts were similar to hers, but she had a feeling, by his distracted look, that he was probably thinking about his dream. They had disagreed about whether he should return to the psychologist, but didn't pursue it further because they had to address the more serious problem of Angelino Carmen.

Lisa was surprised that she wasn't spending this time thinking about the trouble they were in and what to do about it. She wasn't thinking about her family, or her job, or even about Michael's dream. Her thoughts were pleasant thoughts of their future. Maybe it was her woman's intuition trying to tell her everything would work out for them. She could only hope that were true.

So here she was not working, her mind delighting in a schoolgirl's fantasy, just lounging away. She attempted, once again, to focus on a solution to their problem, but it wasn't long before her mind returned to the genuine bored bliss of fantasizing about a

future with Michael.

Lisa was snatched from her oasis of boredom, however, as Michael got up from his chair and slowly walked toward her. She watched him approach, appearing to walk upside down as she lay on her back, looking up.

He knelt down and gently kissed her on her lips. She took in the kiss and then moved sideways on the couch, inviting him with her eyes to more intimacy. Michael slowly and gently lay down beside her. He looked into her eyes; he could get lost in those beautiful brown eyes.

“Lisa, dear, you don’t appear to be working on a solution to our problem.”

“That’s because I’m not.”

“Neither have I, but I have been thinking about my dream.”

Appreciative he didn’t call it *The Dream*, she asked, “Are you going to go back to the doctor?”

“Yes, but not right away.”

“Michael...”

“Please, hear me out. We are in the middle of a very big, very real problem. I think it might be best if we take care of one problem at a time. We need each other now more than ever and cannot be divided on this. I need to know you hold no reservations about my judgment. If you really think *The Dream* is that important right now, I will go back to the doctor, but I think it can wait until we take care of your brother’s killers first.”

She really wanted him to go back to the doctor, but she also knew he was right about their current problem. Stretching themselves too thin between two problems could weaken their resolve with both and they must deal with Carmen first. She could only hope *The Dream* would not get any stranger until they could properly address it. She would never risk his life for her own selfishness and began to consider abandoning this whole vendetta fiasco so he could properly concentrate on his dream.

“Michael, maybe I could handle the rest of my problem by myself.”

“First of all, it is our problem,” he stated, offended she would think otherwise, “we are in this together.”

“I would never forgive myself if something happened to you while trying to help me. It was my brother they killed. I dragged you into this when you have problems of your own.”

Now he was officially hurt and Lisa regretted her words.

“I thought we had something special here, I thought we loved each other.”

“We do.”

“Then why are you splitting us up all of a sudden. Don’t you realize that your problems are my problems, and my problems are your problems? If you love someone, you don’t leave them when times get tough. Are you having second thoughts about our relationship because of my dream?”

“No,” she answered quickly with alarm, worried he had gotten the wrong impression of her meaning. She only meant she would do anything for him, only wanting what is best for him. “No, I’m not, I feel stronger about us everyday. I know we are meant for each other, I know this is right.”

Kindly, Michael said, “Then think of solutions to our problems where we work together. You will not handle your problems alone and I will not handle mine alone, we handle our problems together. The power of the two of us, bound by our love, can overcome anything.”

Tears came to her eyes. She had never heard more beautiful words spoken.

“I love you Michael.”

“I love you Lisa.”

They kissed gently. Their kissing grew passionate, and his hands moved along the contours of her curves. She breathed more deeply as she enjoyed his touch. Their clothes were mutually being separated from each others body as their passion continued to build.

Rrring...Rrrring...

They halted their advances, both with hands in delicate places belonging to the other. They looked from the ringing phone, back to each other. They wanted to ignore it, but the timing in their mini war with Angelino Carmen was critical at this point, and they couldn’t risk missing any information.

“Damn,” Michael said as he pulled away from her.

“Don’t worry,” Lisa comforted, “this is far from over.”

Michael smiled as he picked up the persistent phone. He didn’t say a word after his initial greeting and listened for about thirty seconds then hung up the phone. He sat down in his favorite chair, facing her. Their clothes were disheveled, but she had a feeling the moment was gone. She did not fret, there would be many others. She would fight with her entire being to make sure there were many other wonderful moments. Lisa

sat up to face her somber lover.

“Well, it appears the preliminaries are over.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing yet, but word has it there is a big drug deal tonight.” Michael’s look became grave.

“And this isn’t just any drug deal, I take it,” she added.

“No, my dear, it isn’t. This is it. Whatever is going to happen is going to happen tonight.”

“You’re positive about that?”

“As positive as I can be. Angelino Carmen himself is going to be there and he has asked his all-star hit man to tag along as extra security. I find it unlikely my connections would have discovered this information if he didn’t want them to, and add that to the events of the last day and a half and I would say we are being set up for disaster.”

Lisa felt a chill travel through her body, but then she had a thought.

“Is it normal for Carmen to show up to his drug deals?”

“No. That is the biggest reason why I believe this is it. He always was over-confident and it is just like him to want to be there to gloat in front of me when he wins. If he wanted to show up to an important deal of any kind, he would make sure nobody knew, which is why the police can never get him on anything. I think he has had a convenient leak, because he wanted us to find out about the deal and he wanted us to know he would be there. Whatever he has planned for us, it is happening tonight.”

“We could call the police and they could stake out where the deal will be held.”

“I’m sure he has a contingency plan for that. He would not let this information be leaked to us if he didn’t have a way to abort the plan if the police were to show up in any way. I think he may have someone in the police department.”

“So, this is it,” she said.

“I guess it is. It is up to us or he gets by unscathed, as usual.”

“I suppose we should formulate a plan,” she suggested.

“I suppose we should,” he agreed with intensity in his eyes that Lisa had never seen from him.

“There are a few things we need to piece together first, though. Between the unwelcome visits to my office and this information, I think we may be missing something that can help us plan better. We can finish a basic plan here, but then I think we should

go to my office and have a look around?”

“O.K.,” Lisa said, trying to figure out what was on his mind.

As they finished righting their clothing, he decided to try and put The Dream subject to rest for the time being and this new information would likely solidify the need to put it on the back-burner. He had to do it now, so Lisa would know that he didn’t want to leave anything unfinished between them. It had to be a decision they agreed upon.

“So, about our two problems...how about if I promise to go to the doctor as soon as we take care of Angelino Carmen? We will deal with the Carmen problem together now, and then we will deal with my dream problem together. Will that suffice?”

“Yes, of course, you’re right that we would be stronger handling one problem at a time and you’re sure your dream will hold?”

“Not sure, no, but so far it hasn’t been dangerous to me and whatever is going to happen with Carmen, is going to happen tonight. I don’t think we really have much of a choice but to deal with The Dream after we deal with him.”

“O.K., we deal with Carmen first.” She could only hope The Dream would wait its turn. Angelino Carmen was more than enough to deal with for now.

Derrick sat at the kitchen table and appeared to be eating a bowl of Lucky Charms. It was dinner time, but he hadn’t felt like cooking. He was only about half-way through his breakfast, but was no longer eating. In fact, he hadn’t been eating for a while now. He just sat there, staring forward. He was so enthralled by The Dream he forgot what he had been doing.

James came into the kitchen and saw Derrick with a bowl of cereal in front of him. It wasn’t exactly the dinner he had in mind, but they needed to talk. Derrick didn’t appear to notice his entrance as he continued to stare straight ahead. James went over to the cupboard, reached in and grabbed a bowl and then a spoon from the utensil drawer and turned toward the table.

Derrick was still staring straight ahead. James didn’t think much about it at first, everybody has those moments every once in a while when their eyes lock onto something and you just stare ahead for no reason. James laughed lightly as he sat across from Derrick.

“Got the stares, huh? I haven’t had one of those in a minute.”

Derrick appeared to ignore him, though he wasn’t doing it on purpose, and this was definitely more than a simple case of the stares. He watched with curiosity as he saw the interaction between Michael and Lisa. He had no idea James was sitting across from him and he didn’t care to know, he only cared about why he could see Michael and Lisa during the daytime...and he wasn’t asleep. Daydreaming yes, but come on, this was getting out of control. Yet, strangely enough, he couldn’t help but root for those two to work out their problems so they could be together. First they had to deal with that bastard Carmen. Strange...he would actually probably like Angelino Carmen, even look up to him as a mastermind criminal if he wasn’t trying to destroy the lives of these two people, who he had no idea why he cared about them.

“Derrick.”

He wondered if he could help in some way. No, he wasn’t going to get involved. Besides, he didn’t know if something bad could happen if he tried to interact with his dream. Michael had saved his life by warning him someone was behind him in the garage, but that didn’t mean his mind wouldn’t be affected at some point if he started communicating with his dream on a regular basis.

“Derrick! What’s up with you, man?”

What was he thinking? It was just a dream. To think he had seriously considered trying to communicate with The Dream. Was that even possible? But this was not just a dream, he knew that now. The Dream, was that his term or Michael’s? Anyway, the psychic connection idea came back to him again and both Michael and Lisa thought it was a viable idea, so he decided he should consider it a little more thoroughly.

“Derrick!”

He thought he was being called, so he looked over to Michael and Lisa, presuming it would be them wanting to talk to him. Could they see him? They continued to talk to each other as they worked together in Michael’s mansion, a place Derrick liked a lot and expected to have one of his own some day, but then he realized it wasn’t them calling him. They didn’t even seem to realize he could see them. Who was calling him, then? He suddenly wondered if he could get back to reality from his dream. He was having trouble remembering where he had been when this daydream started. He stopped thinking about The Dream and, for a moment, appeared to be in a dark space.

“Derrick, man, wake up!” James shook him on the shoulder as he yelled at him.

Derrick came bursting back into reality and jumped at the re-entry shock.

“Huh?” He looked around quickly, taking in his surroundings. He realized almost immediately he was back in the kitchen, eating a bowl of Lucky Charms, except that James stood before him shaking him by the shoulders.

“James.” He brushed The Dream from his mind, embarrassed that James had seen him like this and pretended nothing happened.

“Sorry man, I was spacing a little there.”

“A little? Man, I couldn’t snap you out of it. You alright?”

“Yeah, I’m cool. What’s up?”

“I’ve had the stares before, but damn. Derrick didn’t say anything, and still appeared distracted. “Anyway, we need to talk. We can’t let this sit any longer, man, it needs to be dealt with.”

“I know,” Derrick said absentmindedly as his thoughts went back to The Dream.

He had wanted to speak with James about the guys continuing to work for him, so he definitely wasn’t avoiding him. This was finally a good time to get things worked out, but he couldn’t stop thinking about The Dream.

James organized his thoughts quickly.

“Listen, man, it’s nothing against you. In fact, we all like you. Even me and Pee Wee have changed our minds about you.”

James stopped because it didn’t look like Derrick was paying attention.

“Derrick, are you even listening?”

“Huh, yeah. Yeah, I’m listening...and thank you, that was a nice thing to say.”

James looked at him with narrowed eyes; he was acting weird.

Derrick looked over to James suddenly, but had a distant look in his eyes that made him feel a little uncomfortable.

“Do you dream, James?”

“What? Derrick, we were talking about something seri...”

“Do you dream?” Derrick insisted.

“Do I dream? Yeah, D, of course I dream. What the hell are we taking about dreams for?”

“Anything besides the usual type dreams?”

James took a moment to analyze Derrick. He hadn’t known him long, but he had never acted this strange before and he wondered if something happened to him? Maybe

the

brush with death in the garage had affected him after all. James decided to play along and see what he was up to this time. He half expected Derrick was messing with him just to try and distract him or stall their talk until he came up with an angle that would get him to relent on joining him for more arms deals. James was determined not to give in on this. He had the money he needed to start a legitimate business with his friends, just like they had talked about before this whole mess got out of hand. He would not let it go any further. If Derrick wanted to play arms dealer, he would have to do it on his own. James was going legit and Derrick's games wouldn't change his resolve.

"Alright Derrick, I'll play your game. What's this about dreams?"

"Do you have anything besides the usual type dreams?"

"Usual type dreams, what do you mean?"

"Well, do you ever have what you would consider an unusual dream?"

"Yeah...sure, I've had a few strange ones, why?"

"Did you ever have a dream so real, that even when you wake up, you still felt...?"

James was beginning to be drawn in to Derrick's questioning. He didn't know where he was going with it, but it was interesting.

"What? What do you mean?"

"I don't know...connected to it."

Even though Derrick still appeared to be distracted, he did have better concentration on the conversation, now. When he looked at James he didn't have that glossed over looked he had when James first sat down. He was very serious about this conversation, so James became serious. He would let him have his turn, then he would have his own turn, as well, and Derrick would listen this time.

"Well, yeah, I guess I've had a few that seemed pretty real."

"Not just real...alive."

James stared at him a moment, and then looked away angry. Derrick had pushed it too far and now James knew he was messing with him. He could feel Derrick's gaze remain on him, so he determined he was not going to let Derrick get the best of him.

"Alive?" he asked sarcastically as he defiantly looked back into Derrick's eyes.

The weird thing was, Derrick didn't have that mischievous look in his eyes like he usually did when he's playing with someone; he was serious.

"Not just the people involved, The Dream itself. The Dream is so alive...you know it

has to be real.” Derrick emphasized the words “The Dream” every time he spoke them and James couldn’t help feeling a little spooked. Derrick was talking and acting a little too strange for his taste, and he no longer felt this had anything to do with Derrick trying to prevent their talk about future deals. He was way out there right now. James didn’t know what to say or do. He looked down into his bowl, noticing he hadn’t even poured any cereal yet. He shrugged off Derrick’s questions about dreams and finally poured some Lucky Charms into his bowl.

“D, you’re talking a little crazy, man.”

Derrick appeared not to hear him, but continued on with the strange questioning.

“James, do you believe in ESP?”

James didn’t answer at first, determined to ignore Derrick until he stopped acting weird. It wasn’t funny to him and he was beginning to get annoyed. Derrick just sat there, watching him pour the milk into his bowl and then take a bite of his cereal. Derrick’s staring was becoming unsettling to him, as well. He tried, but couldn’t figure out the man’s angle. Why was he doing this? One thing he had learned about Derrick in the short time he had known him, was that he did everything for a reason. It was always a means to an end, and he knew to what end Derrick wanted their conversation to go. Derrick was trying to scare him into joining him, but he had to know by now that wouldn’t work with him.

“Are you done acting weird?” he asked, “We need to talk about the guns. I think that’s a little more serious than strange dreams, don’t you?”

Derrick didn’t answer. He sat there for a moment, staring past James. He hadn’t gotten the answer he was looking for, not that he expected James to know, he just wanted to hear someone else say that they had experienced something similar. He wanted some indication that he wasn’t going crazy.

He didn’t need this now. He had just completed the kind of deal he had been looking for his entire criminal life, which had been a long time. He didn’t need any other complications. It was bad enough he had to deal with James trying to break up the team.

Thinking about the team breaking up brought Derrick back to reality and he finally seemed to be thinking clearly again. He looked back at James, remembering suddenly that he was there.

This time when he looked James in the eyes, James noticed he seemed to be completely there. “Yeah, it is,” Derrick said and returned to the half-eaten bowl of Lucky

Charms. They were soggy now, but he ate them anyway as he began to think about The Dream once again.

His answer had come about thirty seconds after the question, but James didn't say anything. Derrick's concentration to the subject had been short lived and now he was somewhere else, again. If the garage thing scared him bad enough, maybe he would be more reasonable to talk to about the guys quitting now while they were ahead. James was even prepared to invite him in on their plan to open a business, although he doubted very seriously that Derrick would leave his newly elevated status in the world of selling guns. It was time for them to talk serious, but he obviously didn't have his mind in it right now. Frustrated, James got up and left, and Derrick barely noticed.

Michael and Lisa spent the rest of the day piecing together information, so they would be fully prepared for anything that might happen. Through his contacts, Michael knew exactly where, when, how and by whom everything would happen in the drug deal that night. It was too easy, they had too much information.

"Michael, this really is a set-up, isn't it? They have been sloppy about everything. They are trying to get us to build up a false sense of security."

"I know. I just don't know what we can do about it, yet. I am fairly confident Carmen will not underestimate me again, since that mistake cost him control of one of his drug neighborhoods. He will be looking at all the angles. Worst of all, they are holding all the cards, so it probably doesn't even matter to them if we have figured out their plans. They found out, somehow, that we were planning on going after them and now they are daring us to go through with it."

"So, we just have to prepare for any scenario. We'll prepare for a real drug deal and a set-up," Lisa reasoned.

"Exactly."

"Besides, they don't hold all of the cards," she said with a gentle smile.

"No?"

"No, we have the power of the two of us," she answered as a matter-of-fact, with a big smile.

Michael returned her smile and reached out and placed his hand on hers.

“Yes, we do.”

Derrick had spent nearly an hour just sitting at the kitchen table, considering the possible explanations for The Dream. Fairly assured that he wasn't going crazy, but that there was a reasonable explanation he simply had not figured out yet, he was finally able to put the troublesome dream aside. James had already gone, but he only vaguely felt his leaving more than saw it, and he knew James was not happy. Even so, he did appreciate James giving him some time alone when it was obvious something was bothering him. He considered talking more in depth to James about The Dream, but it wasn't good timing. He should get them officially on his team before discussing any subjects that could cause them to question his sanity or at the very least his ability to lead.

He would stick to the subject at hand, the team staying together, and he would deal with The Dream as needed. He would be sure to approach James about their future in the arms business soon, as well, to show he wasn't trying to avoid him. First though, he needed to get cleaned up. After all, presentation was everything. He needed to look and feel like he was ready to be their leader.

After a nice, long, hot shower, Derrick felt much better. He started to put some clothes on and decided they needed to do something very important, as a group, so he finished dressing and went downstairs thinking the talk with James could wait just a few more hours. All the guys were watching television. “Alright fellas, let's go shopping,” he declared.

“Shopping? For what?” P-Dawg asked.

“I don't know, clothes, jewelry, whatever.”

“We haven't divided up the take yet,” James said, mildly less annoyed than the last time he had spoken with him.

Derrick pulled out a roll of cash.

“This ones on me.”

P-Dawg jumped up from the couch, “I'm in.”

“Me too,” T-Bone said as he stood up, smiling.

“Of course you're in, you over-grown cheap-ass Sasquatch, you haven't bought any new clothes since your mom took you to Goodwill back in high school.” Everyone

laughed at Pee Wee's joke.

"Yeah, and we'll be sure and stop by the junior section for you," T-Bone countered. Everyone laughed again. The joke was even funnier coming from the usually soft spoken T-Bone, who had really opened up since Derrick arrived. Derrick's personality was contagious, James knew, which would make his job of keeping the guy's from following him that much more difficult.

They all stood and made their way out the front door, and once again Derrick waited to make sure he was the last one out. He knew James would be waiting to make sure the door was locked, for James was always the responsible one.

As the crew made its way toward the garage, Pee Wee added an insult for P-Dawg, "Of course, we'll need to find the Mr. Bojangles section for P-Dawg." Derrick smiled as he reached the door. He was glad to see the guys having fun, then he stopped at the door to face James.

"I just want you to know, I'm not trying to buy their loyalty and I'm not avoiding you. They did a hell of a good job and I wanted to treat them, that's all, man."

"I know, it's cool, just don't forget about our talk Derrick. You've got a phone call to a certain arms dealer coming up and we have got to get straight before that happens."

"Your right and I'm sorry. I did mean to talk to you earlier...I was just dealing with something, that's all, no big deal."

"But it is a big deal, Derrick. This isn't a joke, man. These guys you're dealing with are big time. You know this isn't play time anymore and we've already had one close call. I know it wasn't your fault we were almost killed that first time, but, I don't know man, I just think maybe you've gotten in over your head a little."

"I can handle this James. I've dealt with big hitters before. Not quite this big and I was working for someone else, yeah, but I learned a lot about how these guys work. I'm telling you, man, I can do this...we can do this. We're a team and a damn good team that's getting better every time. We impressed those guys out there, you heard them. We got moved to the good list, just like that. Once you get under the protection of one of these big guys, it's all routine after that. You just do the deals and collect the dough."

"I have other things in mind for us, Derrick, and you are welcome to come along. Just know this, it won't be criminal in any way; we are going to set up a respectable business in this community. We have got to try and make this a better place to live. I'm tired of contributing to my neighborhoods destruction. I want to be part of seeing it

become something positive. That's what my pops and my uncle are trying to do and now I want to do my part. Pops and Uncle Ray are community leaders and I've seen how they have helped around here, but they can't do it all, and our neighborhood is still hurting. I know I have gone about it the wrong way, but fortunately it worked out and now I'm going to put the money to good use. We are going to start a business and help to get good money circulating throughout this neighborhood. We're going to help kids become something."

James motioned toward the Mercedes Benz backing out of the garage.

"And they're coming with me."

Derrick couldn't help respecting James, even though he didn't care much about his plan. He wasn't concerned about rebuilding neighborhoods, he was only concerned about becoming a big shot and he had found the opportunity to make it happen. He had been thinking that he and James were a lot alike in leadership qualities, but they were worlds apart in ambition. They both had it, but they differed in their desired theatre. James was a good man trying to make right his mistakes and Derrick was a bad man trying to become a powerful man.

The two Mercedes backed out of the drive way and pulled over to the curb in front of the house. P-Dawg called from the driver's seat, "C'mon fellas."

Derrick looked back over to James.

"I don't agree with you, James. It's cool that you look out for the guys, but they are grown men and have a right to make their own decisions. How do you think they'd feel toward you if you don't even respect them enough to let them make their own decisions?"

"They trust me to make decisions for the group."

"They do, yes, but do they always agree with your decisions and blindly follow everything you say, with no regret. I think they're really enjoying what we've done together, as a team."

"Do you think they enjoyed getting shot at and almost dying? I don't remember enjoying that D, and I don't remember any of them enjoying that."

"That won't happen anymore, man. You heard the man, we are protected and we are going to be rich."

P-Dawg honked the horn impatiently a couple of times.

"You hope we will be protected," James interjected, ignoring the horn.

Derrick looked at the cars and back to James.

“Why can’t we just ask them what they want to do?”

“It doesn’t matter D, they’ll stay with me.”

“If they want to go legit, then fine, I’ll walk out the door and hopefully we will all stay in touch and continue to be friends, but what if they want to continue on, even if it’s just for a few more jobs?”

“A few more jobs? It’s always just a few more jobs, except a few more jobs never ends.”

Derrick hesitated a moment, thinking maybe he had a chance with James if he asked his next question properly.

“Maybe, but either way, do you trust them enough to be given a choice?”

James didn’t answer at first, hating Derrick for cornering him like this. He could easily use the wrong answer against him with the guys and likely would. The burgeoning friendship they had recently been experiencing had just taken a turn for the worse.

“Yeah, Derrick, I trust them.”

“Great,” Derrick answered triumphantly, “then we’ll ask them when we get back. Now let’s go shopping,” and with that he slapped James on the back in a friendly manner and walked off toward P-Dawg’s Mercedes, as if nothing happened.

James worried a great deal about what he had just agreed to.

Michael looked at the clock on his office wall, which read 6:33 p.m. He leaned back in his desk chair, clasping his hands behind his head. He had one of those big black leather chairs, with a high back, so it would support all of his weight, even when he leaned

back. He had chosen the chair for this very purpose...thinking. He spent a lot of time in that chair and needed to be comfortable while he worked and needed it to support him when he was in his favorite brainstorming position. Except now, he couldn’t get comfortable. Lisa sat across the desk from him sifting through papers, triple checking information. She was a tireless worker with an eye for detail. He smiled as he thought that he could use someone like her on his management team.

“Lisa,” he said kindly.

She raised her eyebrows, as if they would answer for her and continued checking through the papers. He waited a couple seconds, but she did not stop her assault on the information.

“Lisa,” he said kindly again, but more firm.

She held up her right hand, her index finger pointing to the ceiling, indicating she needed just one minute. Michael waited at least two.

“Lisa,” he said even more firmly, but still with kindness.

She finally caught the meaning of him saying her name, stopped what she was doing and looked across the desk to him. Something in his voice told her he really needed her attention. He looked at her with love and admiration. She loved it when he looked at her like that.

“There’s nothing more we can do, we are as prepared as we can be.”

She took in a deep breath and sighed. “I know, but I guess I just want to be sure,” and she started her assault on the papers again.

They had worked for hours at his house to come up with a plan for their going after Angelino Carmen. They didn’t always agree, but they worked it out the best they could. Neither was completely comfortable with the plan they settled on, but there were so many unknown variables and dangers, that they eventually agreed it was the best they could do, while staying somewhat safe. There was just one more thing they needed to do for their plan to work, and that had to be done at Michael’s office.

He leaned forward, bringing his chair all the way from the back position to lean forward, then he reached out and put his hands on hers, stopping her progression toward that elusive paper that would miraculously hold all of the answers they needed to defeat Angelino Carmen.

“Lisa...it’s all correct, we are prepared. We have done all we can, now it’s time to put our plan into action...and hope it works.”

She grasped Michael’s hands tight and looked into his eyes.

“I’m scared, Michael.”

“I know...so am I.”

“What do we do now?”

“We go get the bastard.”

They each picked up they’re briefcases and coats and left. Neither said anything until they were completely outside the office and in the hallway. Lisa turned to Michael.

“Do you think they bought it?”

“Hard to tell. The bug they planted wasn’t very well hidden...then again, I was using sophisticated equipment to find it. Gotta love those spy stores, huh?”

“If you say so,” she said with a smirk on her face. She really was scared and didn’t have any problem faking that part in his office, but she appreciated him providing another light moment, as he had such a talent for doing.

“What about the real plan?” she asked.

They turned to walk to the elevator when Michael said, “I’ll call and have a late dinner waiting for us at home and we can go over it again, just to make sure we’re ready.”

“Good idea.” Lisa stopped dead in her tracks and smiled as she watched Michael continue on to the elevator. He turned to where he thought she would be walking beside him to say something as he pushed the button to retrieve the elevator, then he noticed she had stopped further back and now looked at him with a delightfully evil look on her face.

“What?”

“You know what.”

He did know what and smiled innocently.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She walked slowly down the hall, emphasizing her femininity, until she stood very close to him.

“Yes, you do.”

He smiled more broadly, unable to continue his ruse.

“Yes, I do.”

“And?”

“And, I want you to think of my house as your home.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I do. I can’t explain it, but it feels right when you’re there and just now, it sure felt right when I said it.”

“Thank you. It feels right to me, too. So, does this mean we’re living together?”

“It does if you want it to.”

“I want it to.”

Michael smiled with joy and a little relief that she had accepted him completely, The Dream and all. “Alright, then, I guess it’s settled, let’s go home and go over the real plan

again.” Lisa smiled. “Yes, let’s go home, I like the way that sounds.”

CHAPTER 15

Michael stared out over Lake Erie as he sat on an unloaded crate amongst many other unloaded crates, at one of the smaller shipping yards. These were the crates that had not yet been sorted for delivery to the particular warehouse that would store them until designated for pickup and delivery to whatever business they were destined. Far to the east he could just see the pro sports facilities, and the Rock ‘N’ Roll Hall of Fame. The football stadium and Hall of Fame were nestled right up next to the Great Lake, Erie.

Inland and south a mere half mile, his corporation’s office building stood tall, majestic amongst the surrounding smaller buildings, a pillar representation of all his hard work. He did not know if he would ever set foot again inside Deshay Enterprises again. Sometimes in life, however, something so momentous presents itself, which transcends the importance of your daily life. You could ignore it, hoping someone else will address the situation, or you could attack the problem and resolve it yourself. Angelino Carmen was the problem, a cancer to the good people of Cleveland, and Michael Deshay had now fully accepted the responsibility of ridding his beloved city of this malefactor.

The full moon was proudly sharing its pale illumination with the surface of the water. It was a beautiful sight, but easily surpassed by the form sitting on the crate beside him. Michael gazed at Lisa, enjoying the way her light brown skin seemed to be drawing in the glow from the moon and then returning it to the night through her own natural beauty. He smiled at the sight of her, as he often did. He thought back to their prodigious lovemaking before they left the house, hoping it wouldn’t be the last time they were so passionately intimate. The impending possibilities had been on both of their minds, but were left unsaid, and each found it very difficult to let the other go, trying to hold on to their visceral contact as long as possible. Then it was time to face reality.

Michael imagined Angelino was particularly proud of his own plans at this moment. He had Michael right where he wanted him and his revenge appeared imminent. That is, unless he and his love could pull off their own little plan. He wondered. It was risky and it relied on too many possibilities, too many unknowns. They had been fairly certain

Carmen had the office bugged, so he stopped by a spy shop and picked up a bug detection unit. They snuck into the office quietly and used the equipment to find the hidden listening device. It appeared to be hidden in an obvious place so it would be easy to find, under the lip of his desk, which was a little disconcerting. Was the bug put there on purpose, so as to be easy to find? Did Angelino send his personal bodyguard on purpose so he would be easily identified? Did Joseph Trumaine go by the office, impersonating Lisa's boss out of arrogance and did he get information he needed? The answer to all of these questions was likely to be, "Yes."

The question that wasn't obvious to them was, why? They didn't really expect Michael and Lisa to believe they were up against sloppy bad guys, did they? Were they encouraging over-confidence, believing they had outsmarted their foe? Or, were they just messing with their minds? Michael and Lisa tended to believe the latter. It appeared that Carmen wanted to make the situation as confusing as possible to keep them off-balance. Well, it had worked, just as Carmen probably knew it would.

However, there was a slight chance they could turn the dastardly plan back on their enemy. Carmen's group was presumptuous and may be underestimating the resolve of this desperate couple. Therefore, Michael and Lisa would present themselves as being overwhelmed, to encourage their adversaries' over-confidence and cause a mistake on their part. In fact, they were counting on it. It appeared Carmen was hoping to force them to be the aggressors and therefore he could control the setting and scenario of their showdown. Michael hoped they could use that to their advantage.

They needed evidence of Carmen involved in this drug deal to put him away for a long time, and Angelino Carmen was not a young man, so even ten years would be a major blow to him. Yes, he probably could still run his organization from inside prison, but not as easily and not as comfortably. Not to mention, any arrest of Carmen would have to lead to further investigations of all of his businesses and perhaps a windfall of charges against him and his fellow mafia employees would ensue. At this point, they would have to take any victory they could get.

So, if he was arrogant enough to use himself as the bait for Michael and Lisa, they might as well try and take advantage of it.

Now, they were on the docks, close to Import Goods, Inc. *Ironic*, Lisa considered dejectedly. It all started here when Kenny accidentally walked in on the two bodyguards beating Frank to death. Hopefully it would all end here, in their favor. It served to

remind her of Kenny and strengthened her resolve to make Carmen pay for her brother's death. She turned to Michael, but he was already looking at her. She liked that he enjoyed looking at her. They shared a silent moment and then he looked at his watch.

It was 11:30 p.m., close to the time the drug deal was to happen and he suddenly felt a little nervous. When he looked back to Lisa, she could see it in his eyes.

She didn't say anything for she was just as nervous, if not more. She had always been the type to stand up for her family, so this was, for her, a natural reaction to the evil done against them. She had once beaten up a bully for Kenny when they were kids and now she would kill one for him if she got the chance.

"According to my sources it should be anytime now."

Lisa nodded at the reality she knew was soon to happen. She didn't feel as tough now as when she first argued that they should go after Carmen more aggressively, but she could not be convinced that hanging back and hoping to get lucky with a video camera classified as revenge.

Michael reached up with his hand and caressed the side of her cheek.

"We're gonna be alright. We can do this."

"I know." She did know they could do it together, but she also knew that they could die together and she was at peace with either scenario, she just preferred they live together. If she were to die, she couldn't think of a better way than fighting for her family with the man she loved. She smiled for him.

Just then, Michael saw movement out of the corner of his eye and turned his head to see five cars driving down the entrance to the docks.

Michael and Lisa studied the cars, intent not to miss any detail. They were flying blind here and needed to identify Carmen's plan as soon as possible.

"Here we go," Michael declared.

Derrick, James, P-Dawg, T-Bone, Truth and Pee Wee sat around the living room, finally having the inevitable discussion about the future of the group.

James had the floor first, speaking of the importance of staying together and remaining focused on their original intentions of starting a legitimate business and what it would mean to the community. He tried not to preach or make them feel guilty for the

bad things they had done to this point, but instead concentrated on all of the good things they could do from this point on. As he spoke, he became so excited over the possibilities that he never even considered whether the others felt the same way, which they did not. At least, not with the same fervor that he felt, not even close. There was a time when P-Dawg and Truth did feel that way, but they had been swept up in the money and adventure of the last three months, especially the last two gun deals that Derrick had been a part of and those intentions of good now seemed like another life, or belonged to other people. James' speech was moving and stirred those feelings somewhat, but then it was Derrick's turn to take the floor. Even as he began to give his sales pitch, James realized he should have let Derrick go first. He had been confident it didn't matter, because the guys would follow him wherever he led them, but now he began to wonder if that were no longer true.

Derrick took the floor confidently, as he did with everything. He was speaking and everyone else was listening, just the way he liked it. It crossed each person's mind, however briefly, that he had become the undisputed leader of this group. It made sense, of course, he was undeniably more experienced in this sort of thing than anyone in the group and they weren't going to risk their necks because of a stupid feud over leadership.

Besides, this was their last one, at least, that's what they had thought until he told them about the unbelievable deal that he put together at their last gig. The mood went from uncertainty and frustration at having to go legit with James and becoming responsible businessmen, to through the roof excitement at the money they would make by just continuing to do what they felt they had become pretty good...buying and selling illegal guns.

He saw their eyes light up when they had opened up the two briefcases of money containing two hundred and fifty thousand in cash. He explained to them it was actually a small payment for the guns they sold, but since the guns were only "booty" from the Iranian deal gone bad, it was the best they could do. It was all bonus money anyway.

The money was tempting, but James would not let this become their life. He was willing to admit it was cool how they had worked together and everything had gone so smoothly, which is why he had explained to Derrick that they could have the same thing from a legitimate business. He had told Derrick it would feel even better to do it with a legitimate business because they would be doing something good, but Derrick didn't care much about doing good, he cared about power. Granted, having your own business, even

a legitimate business, does carry some weight, but nothing like what he was about to experience. These gun deals gave him the power he desired. James speculated about their new friendship. Would Derrick sell them out if it would grant him more power? The man seemed to have loyalties only if it was convenient for him.

“Alright fellas, I’ve told you the plusses and the minuses to this deal. Bottom line is, you’ll be rich, crazy rich, but you’ll be living on the edge and each deal could be your last. Our take on that last job was good, but it takes a hell of a lot of money to make it out there in the real world,” Derrick lectured as he pointed elaborately toward the front door of the house, “Especially if you go legit. If you stay with me, you can know, I’ll take care of you. If you go legit, you can know, James will take care of you...and I’ll always be your friend. James and I have different paths and I respect him, therefore I respect his path, as well. I’m not asking you to choose between me and him because if that were the case, we all know it would be James, hands down, and rightfully so. I’m just asking you to decide what you want your career to be.”

James had a natural instinct for seeing people as they truly are, and therefore he knew Derrick differently than the others in their group. He knew about his selfishness and ambition and greed. The others didn’t see his bad qualities that could cost them their lives, all they knew was Derrick made being a criminal look good. But dead was dead and most guys like Derrick went to the grave early and often; the others ended up in jail. He had explained his position to the guys and that was all he could do. They had both presented their case and now it came down to this, the final decision of what each one would do from this point on.

The room was silent. He surveyed his friends as they contemplated their futures. He hadn’t really expected it to take them even this long to decide. He knew them all so well that most of the guy’s faces were usually pretty easy to read, but as he looked from face to face he was surprised to see that he didn’t know what they were thinking. Most of them almost looked guilty, which could be a bad sign. Did they feel bad that they had to tell Derrick they couldn’t go with him? They were all friends now, but Derrick was still new to their group, so he didn’t expect them to feel this bad. He looked at Pee Wee and knew immediately he had already lost him. He didn’t even have the decency to feel bad about it. James made a mental note to try one last time when the meeting was over, but he doubted it would matter.

Needing reassurance that this meeting would turn out a success, he looked to his best

friend. James and P-Dawg had known each other for as long as he could remember. P-Dawg knew more than anyone how he felt about these gun deals and what he wanted for their future, but he was shocked by what he saw.

P-Dawg felt terrible. He felt like he had betrayed his best friend, but he also felt he was doing what was best for their group. The guys had met separately from James and Derrick to discuss the situation. Not to mutiny, but to discuss a perspective of their options without them present. They were certain that James and Derrick would both agree to go the way they chose as a group. If they went legit, then James would lead and if they went for the gun deals, then Derrick would lead. At first, their private meeting swayed to James' favor, but Pee Wee pointed out they were already criminals and no one in the neighborhood would take them serious as businessmen because they were all known to be on the wrong side of the law.

P-Dawg and Truth took the longest to turn, but in the end, fast money won out. After all, they could become a legitimate businessmen anytime. Truth couldn't help thinking that if you try hard enough, you could compromise anything.

P-Dawg didn't really care what he did for a living, as long as he made a lot of money and was with his posse, but he felt terrible for going against James. They were best friends. They had always been best friends.

James saw it in P-Dawg's eyes. All they could see was the promise of riches. They couldn't see the realization of their life as hardened criminals and that is what they would become. He had wanted them out before they no longer cared whether they did good or bad, but apparently he had waited too long.

James looked down at the ground, not knowing what to do or say. He hadn't counted on this, never even considered it as a possibility. He had only been worried about Pee Wee turning against him, but he had lost them all. What would he do now? Why couldn't he get them to see there was no such thing as easy money? One way or another there was a price to pay, there always was, and this was the price that James had to pay.

Perhaps he could start the business on his own. Maybe, once they saw that he could be successful in a legitimate business, they would follow him. If he did that, Derrick alone would be responsible for their lives while he worked to make his business successful enough to bring the fellas back his way. Derrick liked them, but his only loyalty was to money and the power it gave him, and money had a way of bringing about the worst in people. That was the same in all business, legal or otherwise. Not to

mention, the longer the fellas were with Derrick, especially if their first few deals went well, the harder it would be to get them out.

James sighed, resigned to what he must do, and convinced he had no other choice. He had to stay with them and protect them until he could come up with a plan to induce them to get out. Otherwise, he knew how this would end up. Everybody seemed to think the gangster life was so fun with all of the money involved, and rappers making videos glamorizing it, but they refused to look at the realities of a gangster's life. James knew, though. He had lost more than one friend or family member to that life. That was why his dad and uncle worked so hard to break the trend in his family and community, and he wanted, more than anything, to be a part of that work.

He quickly surveyed the faces in the room and could see that the emotion had quickly changed from guilt to hope. Hope? Then he understood...they were hoping he would join them. Well, at least they hadn't completely abandoned him, but he also knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt that if he didn't join them, they would do it without him. He looked at P-Dawg again.

"P, you're my dawg, always have been. Man, we've been to hell and back together." James looked around at the others.

"Ya'll are my boys, you know this, so, I've gotta let you know this is the wrong thing to do."

All of the guys lowered their heads, even Pee Wee. They knew he was right, but still they chose to work for Derrick. James was deeply saddened. He didn't know how, but he would find a way to make it right, or die trying.

He glanced over to Derrick, and the bastard wore a knowing smirk on his face as he looked at the guys. Derrick noticed James looking at him out of the corner of his eye, so he looked over to him and shrugged his shoulders.

"Wrong is a relative term, man. We're a team and that's the right thing."

James shook his head. "Wrong is not a relative term Derrick. It is very specific, it is the opposite of right." He turned to his friends, "This is wrong and it is my fault you are all here. I cannot let you do this without me."

Everyone's head quickly looked up with surprise. They listened intently for confirmation of what they thought they had just heard.

"Somebody's gotta look out for ya'll."

The guys all stood up and went over to James and happily hugged one another, except

James couldn't return the joy. He seemed to be the only one who knew they were all in over they're heads.

"So, the team is back together," Derrick said.

After a few voiced agreements, James once more decided to relay his feelings about the situation.

"I'm glad that we're all staying together, but I'm not happy why we're staying together. I can only hope we all live long enough to realize we should get out of this damn business."

The small proximity of the living room added to the intensity of his last plea for sanity. There was no answer. The deal was sealed...their fate was sealed.

"And if that time never comes, we will be a team to the end."

"A team to the end," Derrick resounded more emphatically, almost believing the words he repeated.

"A team to the end," everyone said together.

Michael and Lisa set up shop behind a group of crates that provided cover from all sides. From this vantage point they were able to see the major portion of the main docking area, and the west corner, which appeared to have been pretty much abandoned. Either a big shipping company had gone out of business or a few smaller ones. Most importantly, the hiding place provided the best view of where the drug deal was supposed to happen, while maintaining a safe distance. It wasn't as close as they wanted to be, but it provided the best cover. Carmen had chosen an out of the way alley between two of the shut-down warehouses on the west end, so there was no foot traffic in the immediate area to worry about.

Their fake plan, the one Mr. Carmen "overheard" on the bug he planted, called for them to try and get close enough to video the drug deal and when they had what they wanted they would shoot one of the drug dealers in the leg, from close range, in the hope the drug dealers would think the deal went bad and a gun fight would break out between the drug dealers and Carmen's men. If they got lucky, Carmen would either end up dead in the melee, or they would catch him and his men on tape killing people in a drug deal gone bad.

Their real plan called for them hanging back and using long range video equipment to tape him in a drug deal, and that was it. The idea was to have Carmen go through the drug deal, while his men kept their eyes out for the arrival of Michael and Lisa. The hope was that he would figure they got scared and backed out, so Carmen would just finish the drug deal and leave. They would have evidence on tape and that alone would be enough for the police to arrest him, which would allow the police to get search warrants for every property he owns and then hopefully a snowball effect of charges would follow.

Lisa didn't want to rely on luck, though. She had told Michael that she liked the first plan better, because she thought they would have a better chance of getting Carmen if they were more aggressive. Michael reminded her they also had a better chance of dying if they were more aggressive. Kenny had been devastating for her and her momma. She had to stay alive, for momma, and for her life with Michael.

She couldn't help thinking that her life would be perfect now, with Michael, if Kenny was alive and they were not in trouble.

Derrick was lounging on the couch and watching T.V. when he noticed he wasn't feeling very good. His stomach felt weird, almost like...like he had nervous butterflies. He always felt like this just before a deal or if he was about to commit a crime. He knew the reason he felt this way, and it wasn't for the job he was going to do, which he hadn't even received the details on, yet. It was because of The Dream. Michael Deshay was up to something and it was affecting him...again.

He wasn't seeing anything about The Dream in his mind, but he still had a strange feeling that he was a part of it. Even more surprising, he knew he could connect to The Dream, he just wasn't sure how to do it. Maybe if he thought about Michael Deshay he could make contact? Derrick had no recollection of what the man looked like in his dream, so that wouldn't help, so he began to concentrate on the basic idea of what he remembered about him. That is, he was a fairly big guy, about his size actually, with short dark hair.

Before long, he began to feel the connection doing something, so he focused even more completely on Michael Deshay, his business, his hot girlfriend. It appeared to be working, for he felt a building intensity, or pressure, that seemed to fill his veins with too

much blood. He was nearly there...and then he was there.

Easier than expected, he could now see Michael in his mind's eye. How bizarre this whole situation had become. His body was sitting on the couch in front of the T.V. in James' house, and all of a sudden he got a feeling from The Dream, so he connects to it as if he were watching this guy's life, in his mind, like it's a movie or something. What the hell was going on?

He needed to know why this overpowering dream was happening, or if it was some kind of psychic connection between him and Michael, and if so, why? And, why now? It was time for him to get answers.

Michael felt a strange presence suddenly, almost as if a ghost stood beside him. The area around him didn't get any colder and there was no apparition, just a presence, and he knew who was responsible. *Can he connect to me at will?* He couldn't help but be a little jealous of his psychic counterpart's ability to control The Dream, and then he felt ridiculous for being jealous of something when he still didn't even know if it was real.

Not at will, at least, this is the first time to connect to you at will, and yes, I am real, Derrick answered. Once again, Michael was immediately intrigued at their connection. Would a psychic connection allow them to not just communicate, but read each other's minds?

I don't know, man. I'm trying to figure this thing out just like you.

As often would happen lately, Michael became oblivious to the situation around him when confronted by The Dream, even despite his current danger.

How are you able to communicate with me? I have tried and cannot communicate with you, except by accident...or maybe fear?

I told you, I don't know. I...felt your nervousness and somehow knew you were in danger. I was just checking in to see if you needed help.

Uhm...thanks.

Nothing personal, man, but I'm not really the caring type. I just prefer we both stay alive until I know what the hell is going on. I mean, whatever the reason for the connection, the big question remains...if you die, do I die, too?

I'm touched, and I don't know, either. In fact, I seem to know less than you. Tell me,

is your main connection to me through your dreams?

It was, but not anymore. I'm sitting here fully awake right now, we are both fully awake and communicating through our minds, man.

You started off as just a dream for me, too, and now you are a separate reality.

What the hell, huh? Who are you, anyway?

My name is Michael Deshay and I'm a businessman in Cleveland, Ohio.

Cleveland? I live in Los Angeles. Although, I did just move here a couple weeks ago from Cleveland.

You lived in Cleveland?

Yeah, but, although my dreams say you're some sort of big shot, I've never heard of you.

Michael tried to think, but it was difficult to concentrate on both of his problems at the same time. The Dream had instantly become a very intriguing problem, but didn't appear to be dangerous, yet. Angelino Carmen was immediately very dangerous. This would have to wait until he had dealt with Carmen.

Listen, Derrick, it appears we will be able to communicate more easily now and I don't exactly know what that means, in terms of The Dream, but we should work together to try and figure this thing out.

Hey, man, I'm all for that. I've got big stuff happening for me and I can't have this dream ruining my life.

O.K., so we're in agreement. Unfortunately, I have a serious matter here that needs to be taken care of first.

I know, that's why I'm here. Look, man, I have a lot of experience in tough situations, so I can help you get through this, but you gotta trust me.

What kind of tough situations? Michael asked through his thoughts.

Tougher than this, was all Derrick said and Michael was hit with the remembrance of the shootout he dreamt about, with Derrick at the forefront.

Right, Michael agreed, not happy that he was forced to trust a criminal who had invaded his dreams and now his every thought. His dreams had become reality.

Hey, man, I hate this, too, Derrick answered.

Perhaps I could trust you more if you didn't say 'man' all the time.

Is that an attempt at humor?

Something like that.

“Michael! What’s wrong?”

Michael looked around quickly, noticing he was still behind the crates with Lisa.

“What?” Michael asked worriedly, thinking something must be wrong from the tone of Lisa’s voice.

“Michael, are you alright?” she asked.

“I’m fine, what happened?”

He turned and focused his attention on the deal that should be about ready to start.

“Look, Mr. Carmen and his two bodyguards have gotten out of the limo,” he observed.

Lisa’s focus lingered on him for only a moment, turning sharply back to the supposed drug deal, no longer able to afford the time to reflect on Michael’s vacuous expression. The deal hadn’t quite started, so she returned her gaze to Michael, for reassurance he was fine, but he already had the video camera up to his eye taping Carmen and his drug buy. She continued to watch him and thought about the look on his face a minute ago. She had made several attempts to get his attention, but he had been oblivious to her. He appeared to be back in control of his faculties. She steeled her nerves for whatever may happen and turned to observe the drug deal.

“So, is it really them?” she asked.

“It definitely looks like them, but I can’t get a good shot of the front of their faces. From the sides and back it looks like them.”

“Michael, if we’re going to take this to the police, it’s going to have to be concrete evidence. We have to have definite video proof it is them and the drug deal is real.”

“I know. They have to move sometime. Either that or I’m going to have to get a better angle.”

“I don’t know if that is such a good idea.” She surprised herself at her sudden conservative opinion, which told her that her initial reaction, without her need for revenge added in, was trying to tell her they should play it safe.

She’s right, it’s not, Derrick said in Michael’s mind, *but you don’t have a choice, you gotta to move.*

What do you mean we have no choice? Michael asked in his thoughts, with quick

acceptance to the surprising reality that the two dreamers were both fully functional in their real lives and communicating at the same time. As weird and confusing as The Dream had become, it was welcome at the moment.

While you were video taping, three goons slipped out of site. This is a set-up, man, and they're looking for you.

Michael stopped video taping and quickly counted their guns.

We kind of expected that because we fed them false information, but they will be looking for us close to the deal, not way back here.

Remember, I have been dreaming your life so I know all about your plan. The basis of the plan isn't bad, but you left too many holes and that means too many things can go wrong.

Like what?

Well, for one, when they look around close to the deal and you two aren't around, you are expecting them to believe you just gave up and left and then they would go ahead with they're drug deal, perfectly setting themselves up for your video. As long as that Carmen dude has been the leader of a criminal organization and with everything he has at stake, do you really think they won't search the entire docks to make sure you two are not around before completing their drug deal?

"Damn," Michael said aloud.

"What's wrong," Lisa asked.

"Three of their men have slipped out of sight...we could be in trouble."

"What?" She quickly counted their men, but then she remembered the plan. "Didn't we count on that happening?"

"Yeah, but...something tells me we miscalculated their plans. They are likely not to limit their search according to our false information. They will probably search the entire docks for us."

"You're right, how did we miss that?"

"I'm afraid our inexperience with staking out drug deals is working against us, but we can't dwell on that now. We have to get moving."

RRRRRRiiiiinnnnnggg.

"What the..." Michael raised his hands to his ears as if they had been boxed, then the sound disappeared.

He no longer felt Derrick's presence. *Don't leave now*, he thought. Criminal or not,

he needed Derrick's help now more than ever.

"Yeah, that would be me. Ahah, yeah, sure, yeah, cool."

Derrick hung up the phone and noticed all of the guys had joined him in the living room. He had been so wrapped up in The Dream, he didn't even notice their arrival until the phone rang, and then only vaguely. Derrick walked to the center of the room.

"Alright, fellas, a large shipment of guns came into our area last night, so our new partners decided to call us. Arrangements have been made for us to go make a purchase for our employer. They're expecting us in an hour. We need to prepare...quickly."

"An hour, that's all the warning we get, an hour? How are we supposed to prepare in an hour?" James asked angrily.

"No problem, we'll do everything just like we did the last time, except we don't have the van this time. We'll park the cars back to back about ten feet apart with the suitcases in James' car with me. If something goes bad and we need to escape, we go in opposite directions, separating their forces. All we have to do is get our fire power together and we're out the door. We need to get to the buy location as early as possible to set-up. Let's move."

"I don't know D, couldn't you have asked for more time?" James insisted.

"I could have and then we could have been dumped for not being prepared to go at any time. We're just not big enough to make any demands. We do what we're told until we build a reputation, and then we can make...suggestions."

"But..."

"It's cool, James. We can do this, man," P-Dawg said.

James did not like it, not only had he lost the guys to D, but now they were taking too many chances.

"I hope you're right," he said.

"Alright, so, we do everything the same, except this time we're the buyers. Everyone has the same responsibilities. Any questions?" Derrick asked.

No response meant they were confident and ready.

Within twenty minutes everyone was changed and the back-up guns and the money, which was still in the briefcases, were collected and loaded into the cars. Derrick walked

out of the garage and took a minute to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. Just as he began to walk to the Mercedes Benz he would be riding in, he remembered Michael Deshay and the trouble he was in.

Sorry, man, I've got business of my own to deal with, stay alive if you can.

Michael and Lisa moved quickly, but carefully behind and around the big storage crates. They would back away from the action, hoping the gunmen wouldn't expect that and they could slip away. After all of the preparation and planning, and now they would have to abort their plan before even really getting started. The few minutes of video that they had were useless, but Michael thought it best to play it safe. He would not gamble with Lisa's life, even with her willing. The key was, could they get away in time? Three bodyguards against the two of them were not good odds, unless they had split up and then maybe he could take one out, if need be, as they tried to get away. He hoped it didn't come to that, because he didn't know if he could protect Lisa. He had played sports all his life and trained in the Martial Arts for the last five years, but that didn't stop bullets. They're best bet was to get away alive and formulate a new plan.

"Michael, we're going to miss the drug deal playing hide and seek with these guys, then we won't have anything on Carmen."

"I know, but if we're dead, we aren't going to get anything on him either."

"Forget about them, by the time they find us, we'll have what we need and be out of here."

Maybe she was right. Not to mention, if they had starting looking for him and Lisa by the drug deal and branched out from there, then they would no longer be looking for them over by the drug deal. If they went toward the criminal gathering, they may actually be safer. He decided to check in with Derrick, real quick, and see what he thought. Derrick had said something about how he had concentrated on him and that helped to make the contact happen, so Michael concentrated on Derrick. He still couldn't recollect his appearance, other than general size and hair color. It would have to do. He concentrated. Nothing. He tried again...nothing. He couldn't help wishing he had gotten a look at Derrick's face when he was hypnotized at the doctor's office.

"Why could Derrick contact him, but he couldn't contact Derrick?" he thought. He

had to make a decision and now.

“You may be right, Lisa, but we must be careful...”

Then he heard something. Michael put his index finger to his lips and motioned for Lisa to get behind him. He leaned against the nearest crate and slowly backed Lisa around to the other side. He leaned out just enough to see what had caused the noise and saw one of the bodyguards making his way toward the area where they had been hiding just a few minutes earlier. *Derrick was right*. Well, it looked like the decision had been made for them and he would have to deal with it, without Derrick’s help. He had to protect Lisa.

“Stay here,” he whispered to her and then he disappeared around a crate. She didn’t even get a chance to disapprove, and Michael was gone. When did he learn to move like that? Movement out of the corner of her eye brought her attention to what he must have heard, a very big man searching for clues of their whereabouts and he had worked his way to their original hiding place.

If she had blinked she would have missed Michael quickly step out from behind a crate and stealthily grab the man and pull him back behind the crate. What should she do now? What if he overestimated his abilities and needed her help?

“Alright, bitch, you’re coming with me.”

Lisa wheeled around and saw a man in a suit and dark glasses holding a gun that was pointed at her chest. He wasn’t more than two steps away from her when Michael arrived, smiling proudly from his apparent triumph. The gunman and Michael were equally surprised by each others appearance. The man swung his gun toward Michael, who began to reach for his own gun. The brute would win this battle, as his gun was already drawn. That is, he would have won the battle if Lisa had not directed a vicious kick to his groin. Michael quickly ran over to the man and with apparent expertise applied some kind of karate-type hold on the man’s head and snapped his neck.

Lisa looked at him with great surprise.

“I love karate movies and they always use that move. It really works.”

“Uh, baby, do you really think now is the time to try karate moves you’ve seen in the movies?”

“Well, I’ve been taking karate classes for five years now and I happen to be a second degree black belt, so I do know a little bit about what I’m doing.”

She couldn’t believe her ears. Her Michael was a second degree black belt? Her

kind, caring, brilliant businessman was a second degree black belt? They still had so much to learn about each other.

“Wow, perhaps some private instruction later?”

Michael smiled, amazed at her resiliency.

“Sure, as long as you never use the word ‘private’ directly before or after using that devastating kick.”

They shared a cautious smile for their small triumphs, then they remembered there was one more gunman looking for them and he was likely nearby. After a quick kiss, Michael had them circling away from their original spot. They moved in half circles through the maze of crates until they finally came upon the last gunman. Michael whispered a brief plan into her ear and she nodded her head in understanding.

Within a matter of moments they had become the hunters instead of the hunted. Lisa walked into a small clearing opposite where the gunman stood, with a newfound confidence in their situation and in the new love of her life. The gunman turned to face her and smiled, raising his gun. This man wore no sunglasses, so it was easy for Lisa to see the frightened and then distant look that entered his eyes in the brief instant following the twisting of his head and thus the breaking of his neck. The man collapsed to the ground and Michael was left standing in his place.

She walked over to Michael and said, “You are getting scary good at that.”

“My thoughts exactly,” he said with some trepidation.

“I feel much more confident knowing I have Bruce Lee on my side.”

He smiled slightly. “I just hope I know enough to keep us alive.”

She smiled and looked up into his eyes.

“No matter what, you’re my hero.”

He kissed her as if it could be their last and then turned them in the direction of the drug deal. Without looking at her he said, “Let’s go finish this.”

“Michael, they know we’re here.”

“Yes, they do.”

The identical twin Mercedes Benz’s sped along the freeway at upwards of 100 mph. Derrick wanted to try and be at least fifteen minutes early to set up the deal his way, but

they were being hard pressed because of the late notify by the arms dealer, a coincidence?

There wasn't much conversation between the guys on the way over, due to everyone wanting to take the time to run through their own personal responsibilities. Derrick already knew everyone's responsibilities, so he decided to check in on Michael Deshay.

He couldn't have this guy getting himself killed just yet, not without knowing the answer to the dilemma, if one died, did the other die, as well. Besides, it was quite evident that Michael had saved his life in the garage. This could be tricky, though, since he had a limited time before arriving at the arms deal.

Derrick concentrated...nothing. He didn't have time for any delay, he needed to get through now. He concentrated again and slowly began to feel that strange, unearthly feeling of moving through a very dark, heavy, almost thick space, until he began to connect with Michael. Everything was still unclear though and he concentrated even harder to try and focus on his target.

Michael and Lisa managed to circle around the main warehouse and ended up on the opposite side of the deal from where they had started. It was obvious Carmen had been expecting them, explained by the three gunmen's attempt to eliminate them, which was confirmation of all they had suspected. Knowing the arrogance of Carmen, he probably was rather satisfied at this point, believing he had eliminated Michael already. That is, until the absence of his now dead assassins become suspicious. So, they should have a window, a small window, but a window nonetheless, to make their move without Carmen knowing of their presence. Perhaps it was time they switched things up on him.

They worked their way behind a group of dumpsters about 30 feet from the deal. Lisa, for all her previous bravado, looked worriedly at Michael. He attempted to appear as confident as possible as a way of reassuring her everything would work out, and as an attempt to curb his own doubts. He returned his gaze to the drug deal and realized he was in perfect position to get the footage they needed.

The bodyguards on both sides of the drug deal had formed a circle around Angelino and his drug dealer counterpart, so despite the good positioning for video taping, the positioning of the people still didn't provide ideal coverage. It did appear to be Carmen, though, standing within the circle of thugs.

Michael hated that man for everything he stood for, everything he had done to hurt people he cared about, and everything he would do to ruin other peoples lives.

Lisa whispered, “Michael, are you going to tape this?”

He put his anger aside before his brief moment of considering vigilante justice could take any firmer root into his thoughts.

“Yeah.”

He raised the video camera to his eye and began recording. A briefcase was soon produced from the limousine window on Carmen’s side of the deal. Mr. Carmen’s personal bodyguard, Jeffrey, grabbed the briefcase and walked to the front of the limousine, setting it down on the hood. Carmen walked over to the briefcase and opened it. The briefcase was full of money. Even though this whole thing was a set-up to get Michael, it was just like the arrogant man to go through with a real drug deal.

The drug dealer who had been standing within the circle of bodyguards with Mr. Carmen walked over to observe the money. He then turned and signaled for his personal bodyguard to bring the briefcase he was carrying, forward.

The bodyguard transported the briefcase to the front of the limousine and set it beside the briefcase with the money, and then the bodyguard stepped aside. The drug dealer opened the briefcase, exposing a case full of packaged cocaine.

Michael knew this was a drug deal from the beginning, but he had never seen so much cocaine before and the actual site of all that death powder infuriated him. He had seen the drug in small quantities, as well as other drugs when he was working with the neighborhoods on the eastside of Cleveland. Carmen had continued pumping drugs into the neighborhood, refusing to lose his grip on their very souls, making it that much more difficult for that community to rid themselves of their drug and gang problems. Michael saw firsthand, the affects of drugs and violence on the kids.

He couldn’t fix the drug and gang violence in every city in America, but he could do something about Cleveland, his home, and he could do something about it right here, right now. He could rid Cleveland of Angelino Carmen, one way or another. And it all started with the video camera in his hands, it was the key to everything. Now, if he could just get the angle he needed to reveal their faces. Maybe he needed to get closer. They must establish, beyond a shadow of a doubt, this really was Angelino Carmen on video.

He surveyed the area to his left and slowly moved around the dumpster to see if there was anything closer to the action that he could hide behind. Lisa stayed right behind him,

worrying at his new found bravado

“We’ve got to get closer,” he answered her unasked question.

“You still can’t recognize him on the video?”

“No, not good enough and we’re going to miss our chance if we don’t hurry...if this whole thing is even for real.”

“Oh, I can assure you...” began the voice from behind Michael and Lisa. Michael didn’t even have to turn to know who it was, because his skin began to crawl. Lisa turned around quickly as she reached for her hidden gun, only to find two semi-automatic weapons already aimed at her. She froze at the evil grin Joseph Trumaine wore on his face; the assassin enjoyed his work way too much, “...this is definitely for real,” Carmen finished after his dramatic pause.

Michael turned slowly to face his nemesis.

“Always a pleasure, Mr. Deshay.”

“Too bad I can’t say the same about you.”

Angelino smiled and even chuckled.

“I had no idea you had a sense of humor, I had always heard you were quite boring.

Michael didn’t respond.

“You can give your guns to Joseph and Jeffrey, of course.”

Angelino watched Michael remove his 9mm and smiled again.

“You really do have a gun. First a sense of humor and now a gun. Mr. Deshay, you are full of surprises today. I think I’m actually beginning to like you.”

Michael put his gun on the ground and stood up. He placed his foot on the gun with the intention to slide it over to Joseph...

Damn, I leave you for one minute and look at the trouble you get yourself into.

Where the hell have you been? Michael yelled at Derrick in his thoughts.

I told you I have business and I don’t have much time now, either.

Well, consider this, he began, *You know how strange our connection has been and how intense it has become. Can you really know for sure what happens to you if I die?*

Don’t threaten me Michael. You should know by now, death doesn’t scare me, Derrick said with no feeling. Michael felt a chill, knowing his words to be true, as only he could sense them. Their connection had become so strong, at this point, that they not only knew each others thoughts, but now they could discern each others feelings and he had never met someone so apathetic toward life. The only thing that kept Derrick going

was his desire for power and his belief that he would soon achieve that power.

Yes, I do, but then, of course, I also know how close you are to acquiring the power you desire. It would be a shame to get so close and then lose it all...because of a dream.

Ahh, yes, power, my one weakness. You know, it's hard to bluff when someone can read your thoughts and know all your hopes and dreams.

I'm not trying to pry into your thoughts, Derrick, but I do need your help. I obviously don't know what I'm doing here.

Alright, I know. Now, listen and listen good because I only have time to tell you the plan one time and then it's up to you.

What if I need help again?

Then use your damn brains.

You do know how to inspire people.

Listen, man, because you don't seem to be hearing me. I am moments away from the biggest dea of my life and these guys make Angelino Carmen look like a choir boy. I can end up just as dead there as you can here. So, you are going to have to pull this off, man, or we may both be dead without the help of this damn dream.

O.K., you're right, I'm sorry. What's the plan?

Alright, man, you and baby doll over there have already given up your 9's, right?

Yeah, and I suppose that was a mistake?

No, you had no choice or they would have shot you where you stand. I was going to tell you to give them up anyway. It doesn't matter anyway, my plan involves that little surprise in your coat pocket and the AK's you and baby have strapped across your backs. I'm impressed businessman, clever way to conceal extra fire power.

Michael moved his elbow till it bumped against the AK-47 hidden beneath his jacket. He had forgotten all about it, which defeated the purpose of hiding it there in the first place. It had been the only way he could think of to carry the weapon without it getting in the way.

The way the straps of the AK fit across your shoulder, you can swing it forward pretty easily, did you know that?

Yes, I tried it when I was putting it on.

Good, did you show baby how to do it?

Her name is Lisa.

What?

Her name isn't baby, its Lisa and yes I explained it to her, go on with your plan,"

Michael responded, slightly more confident.

Whatever, man. Now, I'm sure you didn't get where you are in business without being able to talk a good game, so use your best sales pitch to get yourself into position, then use the surprise on the men at the drug deal and the AK's on these clowns. Got it?

Those two men beside Angelino Carmen are the most dangerous assassin in the world and his protégé...not exactly clowns, Derrick.

I don't care who they are, when you throw the grenade, they will react defensively to the explosion. Trust me, it will work.

Alright, I guess I have no choice.

No, you don't. Good luck, man, I gotta do my thing now.

Good luck, Derrick.

And Derrick was gone. Michael took a deep breath, not knowing yet what word would come out when he exhaled.

"Today, Mr. Deshay, I have money to make, people to kill, places to escape to."

Michael noticed that Lisa had already slid her gun over to Jeffrey.

"Funny, Angelino. You know, all these years and I never knew you had a sense of humor, either. I had always heard you were an asshole."

Michael slid his gun over to Joseph. Lisa looked at Michael with hope that he had some sort of a plan. Angelino ignored his comment.

"Well, Mr. Deshay...Michael, we have quite a situation here. I mean, a young, beautiful street-wise black girl, whose brother was presumably killed by drug dealers, is out looking for revenge, vigilante style. And her lover, the golden boy of business, the man who can do no wrong, is helping her. It is almost poetic how he would ruin his meteoric rise in the business world...for her."

"So what happens to them?" Michael asked sarcastically.

Mr. Carmen smiled as he raised his own video camera to his eye and said, "Gentleman."

Joseph and Jeffrey turned and unloaded their semi-automatic weapons into the drug dealers and their bodyguards. The initial explosion of bullets caused both Michael and Lisa to jump. Michael recovered quickly, and with everyone's attention on the drug deal, he reached over and patted Lisa in the middle of her back, she turned and looked at him.

He patted her in the middle of the back again, where her hidden AK-47 was and he

whispered, "Be ready."

"What's your game, Carmen?" he yelled as the bullets stopped flying.

Angelino lowered the video camera from his eye, having finished taping the shooting of the drug dealers. "These cameras are great, aren't they?" he asked facetiously.

Michael didn't respond, so Carmen pressed on.

"You see, ironically, I got the idea from you two shutterbugs. If you look closely at the pile of bloody flesh over yonder," and he turned toward the supposed drug deal, "you'll see there are a bunch of dead bodies and two men who are only injured. I'm going to give you two and those two a chance to dual to the death. If you two win, I'll take off the disguises of the men who look like Joseph, Jeffrey, and myself, and have footage of you two lovers gunning down those bastards who killed her brother. Then I will anonymously send the tape to the police.

If those two win, then you are dead and out of my life forever. Either way, I win. And just so you know, I am rooting for you two to win...I would much rather ruin your life, golden boy, by embarrassing you in front of all of Cleveland, and the United States for that matter. It's much more fun that way. However, there's just one problem that we have to fix first.

"Yeah, what might that be?" Michael asked with pure hatred in his voice.

"Well, the two of you surprisingly came in here with a great deal of fire power and although I didn't really believe you capable of using any of it, Joseph here insists we confiscate the machine guns strapped to your backs."

Michael flinched. How could they know? Then he looked over to Joseph Trumaine, the man who was supposedly the most dangerous assassin in the world. *Yeah, no kidding*, he thought.

"Very sly, Mr. Deshay, but nothing gets by Joseph. We will provide each of you with a gun just before your battle with the drug dealers."

Lisa looked desperately at Michael. They tried and failed. They were caught and their last hope had been discovered. She had wanted to live the rest of her life with the man she loved, but now, at least she would die with him.

Michael had never been so angry in his life. Angelino would win and continue to destroy people's lives. He was about to take away the happy life Michael was going to have with Lisa and he would probably go back to the eastside of Cleveland and take back the neighborhood he lost. Michael hated Carmen with such disdain that he was close to

losing control and doing something stupid.

Doing something stupid? Stupid may be just what was needed. He thought about the surprise in his jacket pocket, which was the grenade that Derrick had originally wanted him to use on the drug dealers. *Well, they were already taken care of, so it was time for a change of plans,* he reasoned.

“It’s interesting, Carmen.”

“Yeah? What is that?” Carmen asked, only partially interested. He had Michael Deshay and there was nothing he could do about it, and that was all he cared about.

“You underestimated me once and lost a whole community of drug business.”

Michael could see that had made an impression and Carmen’s arrogance began to turn to anger.

“Now, it appears you have underestimated me again.”

“Oh, and how is that?”

“We’re here D,” T-Bone announced.

“Yeah, and so are they,” James added.

Derrick looked to the meeting site and saw their counterparts already completely setup. He looked at his watch and saw they were fifteen minutes early.

“Somehow, I’m not surprised.”

Derrick had hoped to get set up for the deal and go back one more time to check on Michael. There was something about him that suddenly bothered Derrick. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but a vague recollection in one of his dreams brought forth a strange feeling, or maybe an important connection that was lost. That’s it, a loss. They both had lost they’re parents when they were young, could that be the connection?

He had considered several possibilities. Were he and Michael the same person and one of their dreams was just that, a dream? But wouldn’t the psychic connection eliminate that possibility? Unless the psychic connection was part of one of their dreams...the one that belongs to the real person. Derrick shook his head, unwilling to even deal with that possibility. He still felt like he should know Michael. Unfortunately, he couldn’t deal with it now. His counterpart in the arms deal brought a great deal of fire power with him. Derrick began calculating the best way to counter what the buyer had

set up for him.

Michael looked Carmen straight in the eyes and could see the reciprocal hatred that he felt for this man. He looked over at the two drug dealers dressed like Joseph and Jeffrey, who were beginning to recover enough from their injuries to try and stand up.

He tossed his own video camera to the ground in the direction of Carmen and began to take off his jacket. He nodded for Lisa to do the same, which she did cautiously. She didn't know how she knew it, but somehow she knew Michael was planning one last attempt to save them and she wanted to be ready to help in any way she could.

Michael looked at Carmen. "I have slowly built such a hatred for you and everything you represent. I could never understand how someone could bring about so much destruction and pain without a guilty bone in their body."

"Well, Michael, it is an imperfect world, with imperfect people. What can I say, I didn't have the business know how you did, so I had to get my fortune my own way. I do not have a conscience simply because in my line of work, it will get you dead or in jail.

Michael reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the grenade. He used the jacket to keep it hidden from view.

"Perhaps you should change your line of work."

Angelino began to laugh. "I'm afraid I enjoy it too much. Now, you will relinquish your guns."

Michael whispered to Lisa, "No matter what happens next, shoot at Carmen's bodyguards."

"O.K."

"And, I love you."

Lisa smiled and gladly returned, "I love you."

Michael was just about to make his move when Angelino decided to put in one last barbed comment.

"Ahh, isn't that cute, the star-crossed lovers say their final good-byes." Looking at Lisa, he said, "You know, it's no wonder the two of you ended up together, being from similar backgrounds. Did you know that Michael was once very poor, just like you?"

With true hatred in her eyes she proudly answered, "Yes, I do know, because we are

honest with each other about everything.”

Michael knew Angelino was purposefully goading Lisa, so he tried to make eye contact with her to keep her focused and ready. Angelino, however, pressed onward.

“That is good, my dear, honesty is very important in a relationship. I’m sure you are very proud of the way Michael has ascended to such heights from such meager beginnings, and tragedy.” Angelino wickedly looked over to Michael at the end of his last statement and noticed he had achieved the desired effect. Michael now looked at him with severe acrimony.

Angelino was daring him to try and use the AK-47 he had yet to relinquish. It was all well and good to destroy the man in public, but it wouldn’t be bad to kill him in cold blood either. *He makes a move, Joseph and Jeffrey cuts him down...could be fun*, he reasoned and pressed Michael even further.

“It was bad enough that his mother and father were mistakenly murdered for something they didn’t do, right there in front of him, but then he was separated from his twin brother, each going to a different foster home. In fact, according to my sources,” Angelino glanced toward Joseph as he said that, then finished, “I don’t think anyone ever told you about him, did they Michael?”

Michael’s knees buckled and the world began to spin in his mind, and he was barely able to maintain his balance. The temperature of his body seemed to raise twenty degrees as he struggled to comprehend what Angelino Carmen had just revealed. Shocked, Lisa turned to Michael and nearly wept at the painful and disconcerted look on his face.

“What did you say?” Michael barely managed.

Angelino was truly enjoying himself now. “What, you didn’t know? Huh. Surprise! You have a twin brother. In fact, it is a very interesting story. When the police finally arrived to your little apartment, they found your murdered parents covering you in protection, and they found your twin brother hidden in the closet. That’s what was in the police report, anyway. Social services couldn’t find anyone to take both of you, so they had to divide you up. You got adopted by a middle class family who taught you the importance of hard work and look what you have become. Your twin, however, apparently was adopted by a family whose father turned out to be a drunk and an abusive husband and father, and as a result your twin slowly but surely became a very mean kid and a progressively dangerous criminal.

“You lie,” Michael said weakly, trying to grasp at the possibility. A twin brother?

Surely he would remember a brother, especially a twin. He was only nine years old when his parents were murdered, but that was old enough to remember a brother.

“No, Michael, I’m afraid it is all true. You see, your twin brothers’ step-parents died in a car crash when he was twelve and he bounced from juvenile hall to group homes several times until he was sixteen, and then Derrick took to the streets and never looked back. He actually has a rather impressive institutional record from juvi all the way up to the big house, and he was tried but never convicted for several others. He is a man after my own heart.”

For the second time in less than five minutes, Michael’s world threatened to collapse in on itself.

“Derrick?”

“Yes, I’m sorry, I forgot you didn’t know, his name is Derrick.” The feigned concern mixed with pure evil sarcasm made Angelino Carmen as close to being the devil as Michael ever cared to know.

Lisa looked to Michael in pure horror at this news, and he reluctantly returned her gaze. She obviously had recognized Derrick’s name, as well. Michael couldn’t tell if the fear in her eyes were more for their current situation or for the implications that he was somehow having psychic connections with a man who could very well be his long lost twin brother.

The shock surprisingly subsided quickly within him. After the initial impact of Carmen’s words, when he could take a second to search his memory and find within himself the possibility...somehow he knew it was true. His mind had blocked most of what happened that horrifying day when his parents were killed, and nearly everything before that, except for a few happy memories. In fact, the majority of what he knew about their murders was told to him by the social workers and his step-parents when he was old enough to be told. Apparently his mind would not let him face the realities of the murders and most of his life before his parent’s death. And for some reason no one had ever told him about his twin, and because of these things, he grew up not knowing he had a brother.

Derrick said he had a big gun deal and it was going to be dangerous. The promise of a wonderful life with Lisa and the possibility of having a twin brother made him more determined than ever to survive this nearly impossible situation.

“Well, I tried,” Angelino said as he threw his hands up in the air.

Michael looked over to Carmen, while once again preparing a throwing grip, like a baseball, on the grenade as he kept it hidden from view under his jacket.

“What?”

“I tried to get you riled up, so you would try to shoot me and then I could watch as Joseph and Jeffrey cut you in half when you went for your oozie, but you are the party pooper I had always known you to be. Always so calm and level headed. It is very boring Mr. Deshay.” Angelino looked over to the drug dealers. “Oh well, it looks like the drug dealers are feeling a little better, so I guess we’ll go back to the original plan of an old fashioned cowboy shootout. That could be fun, too.”

Michael looked over to the two drug dealers who were both leaning up against one of the cars, guns drawn, looking over to Carmen, confused and obviously not knowing what to do or who to shoot. Enough was enough, and now Michael worried that there wasn’t much time to deal with Carmen because his brother could be in trouble.

He let his jacket drop to the ground and raised the grenade high in the air, with the pin pulled.

“I have a better idea.”

Carmen looked at the raised grenade and immediately became serious. Michael reached back with his other hand and swung the AK-47 on his back around to his front. Lisa did the same.

“We’re not even within range, shoot them Joseph,” Carmen said vehemently.

Joseph studied Michael a moment, trying to determine what the unexpectedly resilient businessman planned to do next. He looked over to Angelino, “We are well within range.” Angelino studied Joseph and realized his prized assassin was very serious. Angelino looked around and saw the two injured bodyguards fully standing now, with weapons drawn and pointing at him.

Michael turned his head in the direction Angelino was looking and laughed.

“Do you pick up enemies everywhere you go?”

Angelino ignored Michael to focus his attention on the injured drug dealers.

“I will give you both briefcases, the money and the drugs, if you kill these two,” Angelino yelled, flicking his head toward Michael and Lisa.

“You tried to kill us,” answered one of the drug dealers.

“Look around you, if I had wanted you dead, you would be dead.”

“Small consolation, standing here with a bullet in my gut.”

“I’ll make it up to you...” Angelino suddenly had an idea. It was risky, but he didn’t have much of a choice. If he timed it right, he just might get out of there alive.

“How are you going to make up for this?” the other drug dealer asked as he raised a hand covered with his own blood.

“We had to set these two fools up, but Joseph new exactly what he was doing when he shot you. Neither wound is fatal if we get you medical attention soon and I promise you will get you the best doctor money can buy. It is your only chance of surviving.”

The two men looked at each other and silently agreed to listen to Carmen, knowing their wounds would not hold their mortality for long.

“Go on.”

Angelino smiled arrogantly, having his confidence restored that his plan would work.

“Kill these two and I will save your lives and give you both briefcases, and an honored place in my organization.”

Michael had been listening carefully to the negotiations and immediately changed back to the original plan Derrick had set for him. As soon as the two drug dealers looked toward him and Lisa, he knew they would fulfill Carmen’s instructions. He let go of the safety trigger on the grenade and threw it toward the drug dealers. Lisa reacted immediately, emptying round after round toward Carmen. His death her priority.

Jeffrey, not even close to being fully trained as an assassin, could not help but watch the flight of the grenade and was quickly cut down by Lisa’s bullets. Joseph was more experienced, however, and quickly tossed Mr. Carmen to the ground and let his own body fall on top of him, back first, so he could fire at the enemy on the way down.

Two of his bullets hit pay dirt, one in Michael’s thigh and the other in Lisa’s right arm. Lisa was knocked backward onto the ground and Michael buckled under the force of the hit to his leg. He saw Lisa go down out of the corner of his eye and yelled, “Lisa!” as he squeezed the trigger of his AK-47, pointing at Carmen and the assassin. Then the grenade exploded, just as bullets had begun flying from the drug dealers. They would have to be identified in parts.

Michael crawled over to Lisa.

“Lisa, are you alright?”

“I’m fine, what about them?”

Michael looked over to the three bodies he had emptied his clip into.

“I think we got them.”

“Baby, you know who we’re dealing with, you better go make sure.”

He looked at her hesitantly.

“It’s only my arm, I’m fine. Please, you have to make sure.”

“O.K.”

He forced himself to stand. The pain in his leg was excruciating, but he finally made it to his feet. He turned to check on the bodies only to discover Angelino Carmen, and his 9 mm, facing him. Carmen had his arrogant smile back, but it was crooked and Michael could tell it was from the strain of trying to hold in the pain he was feeling. He had wrapped his overcoat around himself, obviously hiding a wound. Joseph, having protected Carmen with his own body, had taken the brunt of the attack, effectively dismissing himself from the title of the world’s most dangerous assassin. Fortunately, at least one bullet apparently made it through to Carmen.

At this point, it didn’t really matter, though. Carmen had his gun pointed at Michael’s chest and he had no choice but to relinquish his weapon. So, he dropped his gun and moved into an open space away from Lisa.

“Okay, Angelino, it’s just you and me now.”

“I’m afraid I must correct you, Michael. It appears to be you, me...and the girl,” Carmen said, pointing his gun at Lisa as he spoke.

“Forget about the girl, Carmen, this is between you and me. It has always been about you and me.”

Angelino pointed the gun at Michael again.

“Yes it has, hasn’t it?”

Angelino pointed the gun at Lisa again.

“And I believe this would hurt you the most.”

“Leave the girl alone, Carmen. I’m right here. Take your best shot.”

Angelino smiled and almost laughed, but the pain from his wound was too great to allow it.

“Oh, I intend to, but whether the girl stays or goes has nothing to do with me shooting you dead.” The pain came greater this time and Angelino winced and reflexively reached with his hand toward his gut area. The hand he used had been holding his overcoat closed, so when he reached for his wound, the coat opened a little. The overcoat didn’t open all the way, so Michael only saw a little blood on Carmen’s shirt. The telltale sign to the extent of his injury was the blood puddle that quickly started to accumulate on the

ground at his feet.

Michael was looking at the blood when he began, “The question is,” and then he looked up into Carmen’s eyes, “will you live long enough to finish the job?”

Angelino looked down at the puddle and then back up at Michael.

“Oh, now, don’t you worry about me, Michael.” Then he looked Michael square in the eyes, “I have plenty of life left in me to see the agony in your face when I finish off the bitch, and then put you out of your misery.”

“The bitch disagrees.”

Angelino turned his head as quickly as he could, with his gun following, but it was too late. Lisa had taken advantage of Michael’s diversion and recovered her AK-47.

Now, she stood strong, ignoring the pain in her arm as she held the gun, pointing it at Angelino Carmen’s chest. She waited just long enough to see the fear in his eyes, and then pulled the trigger. Carmen fell backward, dead before he hit the ground.

Lisa’s arm went limp and she fell to her knees, almost passing out from the pain. She let go of the gun and looked over at Carmen. “That’s for you, little brother.”

Michael limped over and carefully hugged her. “Are you alright?”

“I am now.”

He looked around at the destruction of the night. “At least that bastard will never hurt another person.”

Lisa thought for a moment. “Justice is served, but there is little satisfaction.”

Michael kissed her on the forehead. Sirens blared in the night.

CHAPTER 16

“What should we do?” James asked.

Derrick thought a moment, then picked up his new cell phone and called P-Dawg. “Everything goes according to plan, park your car on the side of the road ten yards down from the grey sedan, facing east and stay inside until you hear from me.”

He hung up and replaced the phone back in its holder on his hip and said, “We’ll park facing west about ten yards from P-Dawg’s car.”

Derrick took another moment to solidify his resolve, then faced forward as James directed the car to its designated spot and said to no one in particular, “Welcome to the big time.”

That statement alone would have worried James, but the look of excitement he saw on T-Bone’s face in the rearview mirror made him realize Derrick had somehow managed to pass his attitude of being indestructible over to the guys. If they got through this unscathed, he had no doubt he had lost the guys to this lifestyle forever. He could only wish it didn’t hold true for them, but inside he knew that was an unrealistic dream.

Once the cars were parked the way Derrick wanted them and everyone was in position to his liking, he took one last look-over to make sure he hadn’t missed anything. The two Mercedes were parked along the side of the road, each facing a separate group of cars from the arms dealers in such a way to give Derrick’s little gang, at the least, a chance of escape, if needed.

Each Mercedes would have to ram its way through two cars and however many gunmen that were inside each of those cars, splitting their forces, but it was possible. There was a very large ditch on the closest side of the road to the two Mercedes, making an attack from the uncovered side impossible, but also giving them less room to

maneuver. T-Bone, P-Dawg, Truth and Pee Wee were positioned at the corners of each Mercedes to offer the most support to Derrick and James as they went through the deal, while still being able to see the parameters of the group of cars and the gunmen associated with those cars.

Derrick turned his attention to the men he would be making the arms buy from. A single man stood in front of three large men with no guns in sight. He knew they were packing heat, probably a 9 mm in a shoulder holster; most professionals did. Behind that group was an additional six men, armed with semi-automatics. He could only hope those six men remained neatly aligned as they were, straight across, if a shootout began. Their alignment would allow for quick and easy disposal.

This was supposed to be a slam dunk, but his experience told him to trust no one. Mindful to stay ever vigilant, he stepped forward to initiate the meeting, this time with James just off his right shoulder. There was no longer any reason for the intimidation factor of T-Bone, they had been accepted, but he would keep James close just in case, James was a cool customer under pressure.

The arms dealer stepped forward and his three personal bodyguards followed. They managed to look menacing, even with their guns hidden. The six gunmen then dispersed, strategically placing themselves in between Derrick's men.

Professionals, of course. If he didn't know better, he would say their alignment was not just out of distrust, but possibly of...warning? He didn't know, except that they were in big trouble if this went bad, so he better make it go right, which was probably the reason for their alignment in the first place. He was the new guy, he was the one who was to not be trusted.

As Derrick and James came to a stop in front of the gun dealers group, Derrick found himself face to face with possibly the ugliest human being he had ever seen. So much so, it was hard to look at the man, but he must not back down and forced his gaze back to the ugly man's eyes. This man was dangerous, very dangerous, of that there was no doubt.

"My name is Derrick, and this is my gang. I understand you have some merchandise for me to look at."

The arms dealer could hear the respect in Derrick's voice, but could not detect the slightest bit of fear. He was impressed. Mr. Smith, as the man was known in the business world of guns, knew he wasn't the easiest man to look at and he had learned to

use it to his advantage over the past ten years. He used to be a handsome man with a good job at a bank and a pretty wife at home. Then one day, when the police tried to stop a robbery at his bank, he had ended up with a bullet through one side of his cheek and out the other side of his jaw. Aside from being lucky to be alive, reconstructive surgery had only been able to do so much.

Because of his extensive time in the hospital, he lost his job and even though he lined up job interview after job interview do to his impressive resume, they all ended up the same way...they just didn't have a spot for him at that time. Bottom line, his face was hideous and he would scare away the customers, and by that time his pretty wife had already been scared off. Out of anger and disdain for society, he became a recluse, and a dangerous one at that. He was able to channel his anger, scary looks, and intelligence into a being lead negotiator in illegal arms deals. Jason Granger no longer existed, now he was simply known as Mr. Smith; a plain name for an unusually ugly face.

He was used to people fearing him without him even saying a word, but now he faced a man who had no fear. Whether that was due to stupidity, arrogance, or skill, Mr. Smith did not yet know, but he had been warned to be very careful with him. This was a dangerous young man, yes, but also very interesting.

Unfortunately, he had business to take care of, so his curiosity about Derrick would have to be forfeit to duty. The Iranians were still fuming over the battle they lost to Derrick and his gang, and they wanted revenge. However, they didn't want to openly take them out, because then they wouldn't be trusted, which they weren't trusted by anyone in the gun market anyway, but apparently they didn't realize their own reputation for dishonesty. They had plenty of money, so there was always someone willing to chance a deal with them. Even so, they discreetly hired him to dispose of the upstarts and blame a bad deal on them. No one would question Mr. Smith's reputation when he made it known that he had no choice eliminating Derrick and his small gang because one of the kid's inexperienced guys got nervous over a disagreement in prices and his itchy trigger finger started a gun fight that he was unable to stop and ultimately led to the small gangs demise. He would even probably lose a few of his own men during the shootout, but it was a sacrifice he must make.

Mr. Smith was known to clean up other peoples' garbage, without letting it be known whose garbage he was cleaning up. He didn't do it often, but when he did, he commanded a large price. This one may not be as discreet as usual, since everyone in the

business knew the Iranians had a beef with this gang, but they were paying top dollar for the cleanup and he was confident his reputation would hold up. They're only upstarts and would soon be forgotten.

He finished his quick evaluation of Derrick by thinking, *What a waste, something tells me this kid could be good.*

"Yes, I have some very good merchandise," he answered Derrick.

Mr. Smith turned and motioned with his hand for Derrick and James to lead the way to the group of cars they obviously wanted him to go to.

"I'll follow you," Derrick announced.

"As you wish."

Mr. Smith walked forward with one bodyguard at his side and the other two placing themselves between him, and Derrick and James.

He led them to a dark blue van that looked like a brand new, modern, family van. When the bodyguard opened the side door, Derrick almost expected a bunch of kids to jump out screaming and playing. Instead, he saw that the van had been completely renovated inside. There were no seats and the inside consisted of four large crates neatly fitted into their own storage rack for safe travel.

"That's a lot of guns," Derrick observed.

"Your credit has been established, so all you have to do is decide what weapons you prefer and I will ship it to our mutual friend. He mentioned to me that you were to choose whatever you like, as much as you like, and he would pay for them later. Mr. Smith had considered the possibility of problems if the "mutual friend" found out he had taken this job to erase Derrick for the Iranians, or if the "mutual friend," who was known in the business as The Invisible Man, because no one ever sees him, would put a price on his head. He shook off the thought, since it was too late to go back now. You don't accept a job from the Iranians and then double cross them. If you pissed them off, they would come after you with an army. They had small groups off by themselves trying to do their own business, like this group did with Derrick's gang, but when push came to shove they would ban together to help their own.

"Our mutual friend must have a great deal of confidence in you Mr. Dent, he only gives blind credit for his top buyers."

Derrick looked over his shoulder to James and then back to Mr. Smith. He needed the moment to hide his surprise and did his best to remain stone-faced.

“I would like to think his trust is well-placed.”

James was in shock. How could the big boss put so much responsibility on Derrick after one meeting? He remembered back to the last deal and how impressed the representative said his boss had been with how Derrick handled himself under tough circumstances...but this? James couldn't help wondering if he was wrong about Derrick's ability to protect the guys. If he was moving up this fast under such an important figure, maybe he could keep them safe. He looked around at all of the men with guns. Or as safe as safe can be in this line of business.

“Indeed,” Mr. Smith said with a small smile and signaled the bodyguard to begin opening the crates. The bodyguards systematically pulled each crate from the van, released the heavy duty snap levers, opened the lids, and put the crates in a horizontal line in front of Derrick.

Mr. Smith's idea was to put the confident young dealer and his men at ease before springing his trap. The man's escape from the Iranians had been very impressive, so Mr. Smith would not underestimate him. Besides, he might as well go through with the buy and make his money, and then he would express his regrets to The Invisible Man for having to kill Derrick and his gang.

Derrick felt like a kid in a candy store. He had never been around so many large weapons before, but he had always been interested in them. There were a lot of weapons in their previous deal, but they were mostly mid size and a few larger weapons.

He spent much of his time in prison reading books about guns, especially the big guns, so he was fairly well-educated about the weapons before him. In fact, he would have entered the military, but he couldn't stay out of trouble. He couldn't suppress the big smile that happened across his face. He turned to look at James, who eyes were nearly as big as saucers, and laughed.

“Shall we test the weapons?”

James couldn't help smiling back, despite himself. “Yeah.”

Derrick and James spent an hour or so testing weapons and asking a lot of questions about each one. Derrick thought it too much fun to be considered work, but he was here as a representative for The Big Guy. He still didn't know the man's name, and he had not yet been introduced to the man's only known identity of The Invisible Man. Fun or not, he must take this very serious and always be professional.

“Mr. Smith, you've got some incredible stuff here.”

“I take it you are pleased.”

“Yeah, I’m pleased, I’m very pleased.”

“Good. Have you decided what you would like to purchase?”

Derrick thought for a moment. He had no idea what to purchase because he didn’t know for what purpose he was buying the weapons. “I don’t even know what I’m purchasing them for, so it’s not like I’m choosing anything for a specific purpose...so, I guess I’ll take the whole load. I’m sure he’ll find a use for them somewhere.”

Mr. Smith smiled and briefly considered letting him live...he liked the kid. He just didn’t like him enough to back out of the deal with the Iranians.

“A wise choice, I can understand his confidence in you.”

Derrick noticed how Mr. Smith never used The Big Guy’s name, either. Did anyone know the man’s name?

“So, what now? Do we load all of this back into the van?” Derrick wondered.

“It is not necessary, all you do is represent the buyer. You show up and choose his weapons, and then you can depart.”

“That’s it? I like this job.”

“I’m sure he will deliver your fee soon. He has a reputation of being someone you can trust, which is rare in this business.” Mr. Smith thought, *Ironic that I would say such a thing to this man.*

Derrick couldn’t help wondering what his fee was and thought it funny that his fee would be determined by someone else, not that he was complaining. He had done it. Derrick Dent had hit the big time.

“Oh, just so you know, Mr. Dent, it is also known that his representatives are very well compensated.”

“I have no doubt,” Derrick said as he offered to shake hands with Mr. Smith to seal the deal. After the deal, both men stood their ground.

“I’ll just hang out here for a while, if you don’t mind, but you go ahead,” Derrick said casually.

Mr. Smith didn’t say or do anything for a moment. Once again he thought, “Damn shame about this kid,” then he turned to go. “Good day, Mr. Dent,” and he was off toward his limo, with all three bodyguards walking behind him.

And that was that. Derrick was feeling pretty good as he began to watch the dealer’s exit, then one of his funny feelings began to creep in and his skin started to tingle.

Michael put his arm around Lisa and the two slowly began to walk away from what appeared to be the after affects of a minor war. They didn't speak, they just walked. The gunshot wound in his leg and subsequent limp prevented him from anything more than a slow gait. They could hear the sirens slowly closing the distance and both of them knew their lives would never be the same.

Michael stopped abruptly.

"Are you alright?" Lisa asked, directing her attention to his leg. Michael stared straight ahead, as if he could almost, but not quite see something in the distance. His brow furrowed in worry.

"Something's wrong."

Lisa looked up and saw Michael's eyes.

"What's wrong, baby?"

He looked at her and said, "I think Derrick's in trouble."

"Who?"

"Derrick...my twin brother." Saying the words felt so strange, yet exciting. To have found the woman of his dreams and the long lost twin brother he never knew he had, all in the same week...was beyond words."

Lisa did not share the same excitement.

"Michael, Carmen was just messing with your mind, don't you see that?"

"I know, but he wasn't lying about this. Somehow, I know it's true, with every fiber of my being. Derrick is my twin brother."

"O.K., it's possible you have a long lost twin brother, especially the tragic way your parents died, and it is even possible Carmen's assassin found out about him when he was researching your background, but this Derrick guy is not him, he is not real. He was part of a dream you had, that's it. Even if Carmen wasn't lying, and I believe he was, it's not the same guy."

Michael could hear her frustration and couldn't blame her. He was frustrated by the situation, as well, but somehow he knew Derrick was real and that he was his twin brother, and now something didn't feel right. He was sure Derrick was in trouble. He became desperate to find a way to make her understand.

“This is very difficult to explain, especially because I don’t understand it all myself. Maybe it’s because we were both going through a very dangerous situation at the same time, and that caused our minds to reach out to each other. Who knows, maybe this has been going on since we were separated as kids and just recently we were able to connect for some reason, I don’t know, I’ll have to ask the shrink and it will probably blow her mind like it is blowing my mind. But, right now I have a very strong feeling that my brother is in trouble and I have to help him.”

“Michael, I know this dream seems realistic for you while you’re dreaming, but...”

“It’s not just in my dreams anymore, not even my daydreams like I was telling you at the restaurant. Derrick and I have been communicating through our minds, like some kind of ESP. He was the reason I knew the three bodyguards had left the drug deal back at the docks. He literally told me, in my mind about the bodyguards and probably saved our lives. ”

“What?”

“That’s right, he has the ability to contact me whenever he wants. I haven’t been able to do it yet, it seems my ability only comes through when he is in trouble, like when I saved him from being shot in his garage.”

“What? You don’t even know if that really happened, and if he is your twin, why didn’t you recognize him in your dream?”

“I don’t know. It was only recently I could even remember any part of my dreams and even then it was more of an impression than anything specific, and it wasn’t something I would have been looking for anyway. I don’t even remember having a clear view of Derrick at anytime since The Dream started. There is much about The Dream, the connection, which neither of us understands completely, but we are trying to keep each other alive right now, until we can figure out what’s going on. Except now that I know we are twin brothers, I know a lot more about our connection and why this is happening. How it is happening, no, but at least I know why and that means a hell of a lot right now. And now I’m not just trying to keep the guy from my dream alive, I’m trying to keep my brother alive.”

“So, what, you are supposed to just reach out with your mind and warn this guy from your dream that he’s in trouble?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I have to do and I have to do it now.”

“No, you don’t. It just isn’t possible. This can’t be real.”

“Lisa, it’s more complicated than that, it’s more than what can and can’t be real.”

“Is it?” Lisa tried to fight off her building emotions, but they had been through so much, barely escaping with their lives in a battle with the biggest mob boss in Cleveland. She wasn’t about to let the man she loved lose his mind because of a dream, but the implications of her accusations hit home and she could see it on Michael’s face. She regretted her words, even though she believed there was probably some truth in what she said.

“I’m sorry, Michael, I didn’t mean it like that, but we just barely escaped with our lives and now you want to risk your life again to help someone who...”

“May not even exist?”

She didn’t know what to say, but she managed to whisper through her tears, “I don’t want to lose you.”

Michael was hurt by her lack of faith, but touched by her concern. They had a lot to talk about, but it couldn’t be done now. His feeling that Derrick was in trouble began to build stronger, his brother needed his help and whether this whole scenario was possible or not, he wouldn’t abandon him.

“I can’t explain to you what is happening right now, because I don’t know for sure myself, but I do know that Derrick needs my help and he needs it now. Whether it makes sense for him to be real or not doesn’t matter, because he is real to me and I am the only one who can help him. You know me well enough by now to know that I must help him, I have to do this.”

“No, you don’t. Michael, you don’t know what could happen. What if this is some type of reality, some ESP type of connection, and he dies, what will happen to you?”

“Derrick and I have already discussed that and we don’t know, to be honest. I do know this needs to be dealt with and I need to help him for that to happen, and if he dies...well, I guess we’ll find out just how real this whole thing is.”

“Don’t say that.”

Michael reached up and gently touched Lisa’s face.

“Please, trust me.”

“I love you, Michael.”

“And I love you.”

Michael stepped back from Lisa and began concentrating on Derrick. Whatever he was being warned about was about to happen. He hoped he wasn’t too late. He quickly

put those thoughts aside and began to clear his mind, since that was the way Derrick told him he did it. Nothing. *Damn it, this was supposed to work.* He decided to try and remember how he had warned Derrick in the garage, but he couldn't remember anything special he had done. He had the same anxious feelings that something bad was going to happen, and then out of fear for Derrick's life, who he dreamed was in immediate danger, allowed him to make the connection and warn him, but that was the same thing he felt now, so why wouldn't it work?

He was thinking too much, he was sure that was the problem. When he had warned Derrick before he didn't have time to think, he just did it. Also, Derrick said he cleared his mind of all thought before he began to think of him.

Michael relaxed the best he could, and cleared his mind of everything except Derrick being in trouble, and he didn't worry about not feeling the connection yet, but continued to concentrate on Derrick being in trouble...and then he began to see a foggy darkness in his mind, which was better than the other times he tried to make the connection, then he lost it and his mind went blank again.

Derrick couldn't ignore the strange feeling he had that something wasn't right, so he looked around at everyone and everything. Was there anyone out of place, or looking suspicious? Was he missing something he should not be missing?

Mr. Smith was walking toward his limousine with his three personal bodyguards in tow and the other six bodyguards remained at their station, still interspersed between his four bodyguards, waiting until Mr. Smith was safely in his limousine, or were they waiting for a signal to attack? Was Mr. Smith walking faster than normal? Slower? Were his bodyguards cheating toward their guns to prepare for an attack?

No, everything looked normal.

Wait, something else. Something tugged at the back of Derrick's mind...then he knew what it was, Michael was trying to contact him.

Dammit, Michael, I've got my own shit to take care of here, you gotta handle your own business, Derrick thought emphatically.

Michael heard Derrick's thoughts, so he knew he was close, but just as it appeared he would make the connection, he could feel Derrick resisting his efforts.

What are you doing?

Handle your business, Michael, I can't help you now.

My business is handled, I'm here to save you."

Derrick stopped fighting him.

You felt it too?

Yeah, I came to see if I could help you find it, because this feels bad.

My feelings exactly, Derrick answered as he looked at Mr. Smith, then added, *You survived, huh?*

Barely, but yes, I survived.

Carmen dead?

Yes.

Damn, nicely done, businessman.

It doesn't feel like nicely done, but it is done, and I have some very important information to tell you that will likely blow your mind, I know it did mine.

Mr. Smith had just arrived at the limo and as he opened the limo door, he turned to look at Derrick, almost as if to say, "Sorry."

It's about to happen, Michael said quickly.

Derrick had noticed a split second earlier and was already reaching for his 9 mm in the shoulder strap, and charged at Mr. Smith as he yelled, "Mother Fucker!"

P-Dawg, T-Bone, Pee Wee, Truth, and James reacted quickly to Derrick's move and turned their guns on their apparent new enemies. Mr. Smith ducked into the limousine as bullets from Derrick's gun began to ricochet off the car door. The bodyguard just managed to get the door closed as he took a bullet and dropped to the ground outside the car. Inside the limo, Mr. Smith announced to no one in particular, "Damn, that kid is good."

The attack was to take place as soon as he got safely into the limousine, but his little dramatic send off that inadvertently tipped off Derrick could keep it from being a success. Fortunately for him, they had the numbers and positioning on their side. Mr. Smith couldn't help thinking he would hate to have to go up against Derrick in a fair fight.

The split second head start Derrick gave his troops by recognizing Mr. Smith's last look of pity kept the battle from being a complete slaughter, but there were just too many professional guns. A couple of his crew might even have made it, were it not for the six

additional bodyguards that appeared from the cars and made the heroic efforts of the small gang only that, heroic, tragically heroic.

Derrick was charging the limousine where Mr. Smith sat comfortably and didn't notice Truth and Pee Wee go down as he unloaded his clip into the two bodyguards at the front of the limo, their feeble attempt to grasp the guns from their shoulder straps stopped in mid reach.

The third bodyguard, who had just secured Mr. Smith and taken a bullet in his gut, recovered enough to catch Derrick in his side. He stumbled, lost his footing, and fell and bled in the dirt.

The bodyguard took aim to finish the job, but was interrupted by the flash of metal against the sun. He looked up to see the barrel of a 9mm pointing at him, then the flash of fire in the barrel propelled the bullet savagely through his skull.

James then wheeled around to see Truth, Pee Wee, and P-Dawg lying on the ground. One man already faced him with a semi-automatic and another with a bloody shoulder was in the process of turning to face him.

James took everything in within the fraction of a second and pulled the trigger. The one already facing him had pulled the trigger to his death machine simultaneously and they both went down. Death came quickly to the man who dared square up with James, but he was mortally wounded, as well, and he knew it. He lay on the ground, halfway on his side, facing Derrick. Derrick lay still. *Was he dead?* James wondered. He can't be, that is D, who always finds his way out of trouble, but there he lay, still. Even in death, James admired him. He had been so care free, afraid of nothing. "I wished you would have listened to me," James whispered on the wind. Even now he couldn't hate Derrick, as much as he wanted to.

There was a twitch in Derrick's eyelids. *Could he still be alive?* James wondered. *What am I thinking, of course he is.* There was another twitch and Derrick opened his eyes. *Of course he is.* James was losing a lot of blood fast and regretted not being able to live longer for the guys. Dying was nothing like he imagined it would be, quick and painless. No, it hurt and took way too long.

Derrick took a moment to blink his eyes a few times, to help him focus on...anything around him. He looked around and saw T-Bone with his mouth open, teeth bared, probably yelling at the top of his lungs as he emptied his ooze on the enemy, but Derrick couldn't hear anything for some reason, so he didn't know for sure if T-Bone was really

yelling. T-Bone had blood dripping out of him from two different places on his stomach, then he received multiple shots, one after another and fell to the ground, unmoving. Had it happened in slow motion? T-bone went out strong, he thought, but then realized, does it matter? He's dead, my friend is dead.

His ability to hear came back, cruelly in time to hear T-Bone's death cry, and then all was quiet. There was no more shooting. He could vaguely hear men yelling instructions to each other, but no gunfire. Was it over? He moved his head around as much as he could and saw bodies littered across the ground. They were all dead, his friends were all dead. *Even James?* He couldn't imagine James being dead. He moved his head in the other direction and saw him lying on the ground about fifteen feet away, facing him, looking at him. They had a moment of recognition then Derrick's eyes drifted down to see that James had blood flowing from a wound in the gut and another in the shoulder. He looked back up to James' eyes and could see that death was approaching quickly.

James saw sorrow in Derrick's eyes. *That bad, huh*, he thought. The gut shot hurt so much he didn't even realize there was a shoulder wound. He didn't want Derrick to feel guilty, blaming himself for their impending death. He was just being Derrick and the rest of them went along for the ride. As Derrick had told them before, we all make our own choices and their choices put them in this hell. He wished he could tell Derrick it was all right, they were still boys and they all went out together. He was getting very tired and wondered if he could give up now and sleep.

"Get down!" Michael yelled as he fell to the ground, as if he were the one getting shot at. In his mind's eye he saw Derrick's friends falling to their death, and then Derrick went down.

"Derrick, no!"

Lisa kneeled down beside Michael and tried to comfort him. "Michael, what's wrong?" She wanted to help him, but didn't know what to do. He squeezed his eyes shut so hard, she feared he was in pain. She checked the wound in his leg, worried it could be getting to the point of very serious, but she knew that was not the source of his pain. Something very terrible was happening in his mind...or to his mind.

Tears dropped from her face to Michael's as she began sobbing.

“Michael, please come back to me.”

“Noooo!” The scream that tore loose from him nearly rent Lisa’s heart in two. The pain and agony she heard emanate deep in his body scared her more than she had ever been scared. What was happening to him and why couldn’t she bring him out of it?

Then his entire body went limp and still, and silent. Lisa looked him over and could see no indication as to whether or not he was back from his nightmare. Instinctively, though, she could almost feel whatever had been torturing him, was now over.

Derrick, can you hear me? You’ve got to wake up.

Michael, is that you, man.

Yeah, it’s me. You’re unconscious right now, but you need to wake up.

I’m tired, man. It’s over.

Listen, there’s still a chance you could live through this, but you have to wake up before they come to finish you.

Derrick struggled to remember what he was talking about. *Oh yeah, the shootout. Not a fair fight and I lost.*

But if it’s over, they may be gone and you can still get to a hospital. I need you to open your eyes to determine the situation, I can only see if your eyes are open.

Well, I guess if I could open my eyes, you could see all of my friends are dead because of me.

I’m sorry about your friends, but you can’t dwell on that now, you may still be in danger.

That would probably be because of the blood flowing out of my gut. Derrick was feeling very weak and didn’t feel like continuing this argument. It reminded him of a time, once, when he had gotten so sick, his entire body ached down to the bones and it took every effort just to roll over. He was more tired now.

Derrick, you can do this. Your brain is still capable of rational thought...I know. Although I don’t feel your pain directly, I can feel through your mind what kind of pain you are dealing with, if that makes any sense.

None of this makes any sense.

No, it doesn’t, but that doesn’t mean you give up. You have to try and live.

Why, I've got nothing to live for anymore, I can accept death. I finally put together a great crew and now they're all dead. Besides, with my life, I knew it was coming sooner or later...and always expected sooner.

Michael considered telling him the reason for the connection was that they were twin brothers, but he feared the surprise would not be good for him under the circumstances and then realized he may have already told him just by thinking about it. There was no reaction from Derrick, so he knew his injuries were bad. He had to figure out a way to get Derrick motivated enough to at least attempt to get to a hospital. He had one last idea.

There's no way for you to tell if you have something to live for, unless you live. You don't even know for sure if your friends are all dead. I told you, all of you battled admirably, even outnumbered against professionals, and when you went down the numbers were nearly even. Some of your friends may be hurt, but still alive, they may still need you.

There was a brief moment of silence, and then Derrick said, *Alright, I'll try.*

As if he were pulling himself from a very real nightmare, Derrick worked harder and harder, until finally, by sheer will he managed to open his eyes. Once he got them open, it actually wasn't that hard to keep them open. Maybe he wasn't as bad as he originally thought. His vision was a little blurry, so he blinked a few times to help his eyes focus.

The first thing he saw was James lying on the ground with blood barely dripping from his wounds. There probably wasn't much left. He was still looking at Derrick and had begun to close his eyes, but then they opened again and Derrick could tell he was struggling mightily to hold onto life. He wanted to tell James he was sorry.

Derrick, James is still alive. Oh no, someone is going over to finish him off.

Derrick looked over to see a bodyguard, untouched from the melee, walking toward James, gun at ready.

There is one coming for you, too.

How do you know?

Apparently I can use your peripheral vision to see what you could see if you were using it.

Whatever, man, Derrick thought as he turned his head even further to see a man with a bloody shoulder, coming his way, with his gun lazily hanging at his side. The man was extremely weak from his injury, but all he needed was enough strength to pull the trigger of his gun and it was over for Derrick.

First things first, he turned his concentration back to the man nearing James. He tried to move so he could pick up his gun lying beside him. He had been aware of the pain in his wound during his recent stupor, but attempted movement brought the pain to a whole new level. The pain was excruciating, but he had to try and save James. The bodyguard was just approaching James and began to raise his gun as he walked toward him.

Come on Derrick, you can do this, Michael encouraged him.

The pain was going to be there no matter what he did, so he decided to stop fighting it and relaxed.

The bodyguard stopped beside James with his gun raised. James' sleepy eyes had just become aware of the man above him and then he looked to Derrick for help. That brief look gave him all the strength he needed.

All in one complete effort of determination Derrick picked up his 9mm, aimed, and squeezed off three rounds with his normal marksman-like precision that blew out the back of the bodyguards head. Death came with the first bullet.

His arm fell in complete exhaustion from the effort. He managed enough effort to look over to the injured gunman who was coming for him, and the man's eyes fearfully shifted from Derrick, to his fallen comrade, and back to Derrick. He hesitated a moment to see if his death was imminent, but instead he realized that Derrick had used all of his energy to save his friend and had nothing left for his own salvation. Comprehension of this fact infused the bodyguard with energy as he covered the last few strides over to Derrick, believing he would not only live, but get all the glory associated with the actual kill of Derrick.

"You ain't shit anymore, are you Mr. Dent."

"Never was," Derrick managed, barely above a whisper.

The man laughed, "Famous last words," and brought his semi-automatic around from his side.

Derrick heard the shot, but didn't feel the bullet penetrate and the bodyguard was now lying dead next to him, as he realized the gunfire he heard was 9mm, not semi-automatic. He looked over and saw James clutching the responsible munition with both hands and a look of determination on his face that humbled his own. James let the gun fall from his hands, unable to bare its weight any longer as he collapsed in exhaustion. He looked over to Derrick and half-smiled. Derrick smiled back in awe of the fortitude of effort it took for James to save his life. James' injuries were just too serious for that to have been

possible, but then he looked at James' eyes and realized his friend was no longer there. His soul had passed on to another existence as his body went limp.

He was a good friend, Michael offered.

I think he was my best friend.

After a moment, Michael asked, *How do you feel Derrick, can you drive?*

Drive? I doubt I can even stand.

The engine of the limousine roared to life. Seated in its back seat, Mr. Smith was very impressed by all he had seen and half-considered on saving Derrick's life and becoming partners with him. Unfortunately, that would not make the Iranians happy and he was a businessman, and with that he instructed the driver to run over Derrick.

Derrick managed to turn his body around to face the limousine and had surprisingly made it to one knee, realizing he just might be able to stand after all. "Alright Mr. Smith, what now?" he said out loud, even though there was no longer anyone around to hear but Michael, who could read his thoughts anyway. He didn't care, speaking out loud reminded him he was still alive, as did the speeding car racing straight at him.

Not sure how he did it, Derrick now found himself standing, facing the elongated automobile, with the semi-automatic that he took from the nearest dead man in his hands. He didn't really remember doing these actions and could only hope his adrenaline would continue to animate his actions. In fact, he realized his instincts had kicked in and he was relieved his body was able to obey, even if barely. This gave him confidence in his survival and his arrogance came back with that confidence.

"I've about had it with you, Mr. Smith."

Derrick squeezed the trigger and bullets from the semi-automatic in his grip speckled across the driver's side of the windshield. The car was no more than twenty yards from Derrick and coming fast, when one of the metallic projectiles from his weapon found its mark, dealing death to the driver and sending the limousine in a new, uninspired direction. The limousine careened off P-Dawg's Mercedes and flew over the embankment, landing on its side halfway down the downhill barrier. Its momentum caused it to roll over and over sideways until it came to a stop at the bottom of the twenty foot drop-off, resting upside down. There was no movement from the car.

Derrick didn't even bother to check on Mr. Smith. He was likely dead, but if not, more power to him, there was no way in hell he could make it down there to find out.

Everything was quiet now. He looked around at the battlefield and felt great remorse

for what he had caused, and then his vision blurred for a moment and he felt light headed.

Whoa, steady Derrick.

For a moment he had forgotten about Michael. He ignored the comment and managed to stumble over to James. With great effort he knelt beside him and then realized his mistake. He would never get back up again.

Don't think that way, Michael said. You got up once, you can do it again. Get in James' Mercedes, there's got to be a hospital reasonably close.

C'mon Michael, there's not a hospital reasonably close and even if there was...you're in my brain, you know what I feel, you know what's happening to me.

On cue, an intense wave of pain hit him and he nearly collapsed as he struggled to hold on to consciousness.

Michael didn't answer immediately, but Derrick knew. *You forget, I know what you're thinking, and your thoughts tell me you know I'm right.*

I didn't forget. I just can't help wondering what happens now.

You mean, now that I'm about to die, you wonder whether you will wake up realizing this...dream of yours is finally over, or that you were my dream and it all dies with me.

No, I know it's not a dream now, and we do have a connection, but, yes, I'm sorry, I did wonder what would happen to me. I meant no disrespect to you.

I know, man. Hell, I would be thinking the same thing. Well, Mr. Deshay, it's not exactly the way we had hoped it would go, but we will know one way or the other very soon.

Another wave of pain hit him hard, this time causing him to collapse and roll on the ground into the fetal position. When the wave of pain had subsided, he slowly maneuvered onto his back, to what he thought was a more dignified dying position.

I'm not going out in the fetal position.

Michael couldn't help smiling, if only in his mind, at the man's pride and courage. The reality that Derrick would die soon sobered Michael and he wondered if he should tell him why their connection was happening, or if he should just let him die in peace.

You know?

Damn this ability to read each others thoughts.

I want to know. How could I possibly die in peace not knowing?

All right, I don't know how else to tell you, except just say it. Derrick, we are brothers, twin brothers.

So it is that?

You figured it out?

It was more of a feeling than anything. Just before my gun deal started I had a vague memory of dreaming of myself in your position, but yet I knew it wasn't me. I don't know why it didn't register until now, but in the end, this end I am about to face, I realized it could only be one of two possibilities, we are either the same person, or we are twins.

I never noticed what you looked like either, although, it had recently become important to find out, for reasons I did not know.

I can't believe neither of us knew we had a twin brother, Derrick mused.

When we were nine years old our parents were brutally murdered by drug dealers and apparently our brains closed themselves off from those memories. Our parents were dead and we ended up with two different families, being raised apart, and neither of our new families told us the truth. Maybe it's not so unusual.

Maybe.

I'm sorry, Derrick, I wish I had known about you. I wish we could have had a chance to be brothers.

Yeah, too bad.

I just wish one of us had been able to remember, but I guess the shock of our parents death kept us from remembering most of our childhood.

I think I remembered at the end, Derrick said hesitantly, even now trying to concentrate enough to finish his thought. Thinking was becoming very difficult.

What do you mean?

They say your life flashes in front of your eyes before you die. Well, it wasn't exactly that, but just before you woke me, after I went down, I was dreaming about the good times from when I was little, with mom and dad. Then, I remembered playing hide and seek with another boy who looked just like me. I don't know if it was because I was shot and couldn't think straight or if it was because my mind was still struggling with memories I must have locked away, but I couldn't figure out who I had been playing with. I remember hiding in the closet and hearing...well, you, I guess, looking for me. Then there was a loud, jarring crash that was probably those men breaking through the front door. There was a lot of yelling and then you saw me hiding in the closet. I started to move, so I could go to you, but you shook your head, as if to say, 'No' and I knew what you meant, so I stayed in the closet.

Derrick was quiet, emotions building. *I thank God you showed up in my mind and woke me up before I had to see their murder happen again.*

Michael wanted to be strong for Derrick, so he fought off very powerful emotions he had never had to contend with involving his lost family. Derrick's body had already given up and he was simply lying on the ground at the battle zone, only his brain now working. If anyone had been walking through the carnage at that moment, they would think him just as dead as all the others...and his mind didn't have much longer, either. Even though it would have been a very sad memory, Michael wished he could remember what Derrick had just described to him. He wished he could remember Derrick from when they were kids.

I just had a funny thought, Derrick said.

What's that?

I guess I won't need to worry about Maddog anymore.

Maddog?

Do you remember that crazy little guy that wanted to hurt old Fred? Remember he threatened to kill me?

Vaguely. That was when I had trouble remembering my dreams about you, but yeah, I kind of remember.

Well, I don't have to worry about him trying to kill me anymore. That's funny.

Michael could feel Derrick's consciousness begin to fade.

Derrick, is there anything I can do for you?

The silence stretched on for several seconds and under the circumstances Michael worried he had lost him. *Derrick?*

If you wake up from all of this...don't forget me.

I don't think I could ever forget you, even if I wanted to.

Derrick managed a small smile, at least, he thought he did.

Since you now know that I am your brother you will probably want to remember me in a good way, but I think you should...

Derrick's breathing had stopped, causing a lack of oxygen to his brain. He struggled to keep his train of thought.

Maybe I can be a reminder of the bad inside you that you do not want to become and that will help you continue to be good. I wish I could have been more like James, but I wasn't. So, if any of this makes sense, remember me in a way that helps you. It's the best

I can do on short notice, bro'.

I can do that, and it makes more sense than you know.

Derrick's brain felt very heavy and he struggled to think of words, *Peace, bro'.*

Michael felt his consciousness sinking into the darkness with Derrick and began to panic as he struggled to disengage from Derrick's mind, and therefore, Derrick's apparent death. Michael felt extremely tired and had great difficulty keeping his thoughts coherent. He made every effort to concentrate on where he was before he joined Derrick at the gun deal turned shootout.

Shootout...he had an indistinct recollection of another shootout, but the darkness continued to draw him in and he wasn't sure if he was just remembering his brother's gun battle or...what? As tired as he was, he still had enough presence of mind to know that he was running out of time to depart from his twin's journey to the world of the dead or he would join him there.

The darkness was cool and soothing. It would be so much easier to let go, to rest in peaceful slumber and join his newfound sibling in eternity. What did he have to live for, anyway? He had lost his team in the shootout, and his new best friend, James. Wait, that wasn't him, that was Derrick. He was not the bad person his brother had become. He was a good person with a successful business and people who loved him.

Lisa. He had Lisa.

Michael concentrated on his new love with every bit of strength left to him with a desperation for life that he had never before experienced. He wanted to live. He wanted to live with Lisa for a hundred more years and know the ultimate that life had to offer...love. Only Lisa could provide him that type of love.

Michael gave all he had to return to Lisa, even as he felt himself being drawn down into the forever darkness he knew his twin brother had just welcomed.

The darkness became complete, for both of them. A darkness that was deep and dense, but serene and restful. The twin brothers let themselves rest, slip into oblivion, and neither dreamed.

CHAPTER 17

Michael opened his eyes. He was groggy and felt a great deal of discomfort when he moved, or tried to move, which would be more accurate.

“Don’t move, baby, just rest.”

He turned his head, with great effort, toward that beautiful voice that he loved so much and discovered that Lisa truly was there with him. She was real. He was real. But what about Derrick? He opened his mind for a moment, but there was nothing. Absolutely nothing. The Dream was over.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Like hell.”

She smiled lovingly. “There were times when it seemed like you might have actually been in hell. You went through so much, baby.”

“Thank you for being there for me.”

“Where else would I be?”

He smiled and even that hurt. He noticed Lisa’s arm in a sling and worriedly asked, “Are you O.K.?”

She nodded her head, “I’m fine. How are you?”

He could tell by the tone of her question she didn’t just mean the gunshot to his leg. Michael took a moment to decide. The Dream was over, but could he, without a doubt, know that Derrick had been real...or just a dream.

He thought about Derrick and his promise to remember him. There was much to be learned from such an experience, dreamed or real.

Once he was recovered, he would take time to think about what it all meant and how he could use this experience to improve himself. After all, what good are the struggles in life if you don’t learn from them? He would do the needed research to learn about his childhood and find out once and for all if Derrick did exist, which something deep inside him told him he did. Then, he would mourn his twin brother. That was for later. Now he would concentrate on being happy with Lisa. Michael came out of his reverie and

noticed Lisa looking at him, worriedly.

He smiled reassuringly, “Don’t worry, it’s over.”

With tears in here eyes she moved forward, close to him, and looked in his eyes for more assurance, “Yeah?”

He lifted his hand and touched her face. “Yeah. It’s just you and me now.”

She looked deep into his eyes and received the confirmation she needed that The Dream was truly over. He brought her head to his chest and she carefully maneuvered her body up onto his hospital bed, lying beside him. She snuggled into him until she was comfortable and knew he was not in pain, and then she relaxed and thought about how happy they would be together. Her exhaustion from the last few days took over and she fell asleep.

Michael was very weary and tried to stay awake to enjoy this moment with Lisa, but fatigued claimed him, as well, and he fell asleep.

Michael Deshay slept, and dreamed...about his life to come with Lisa.

THE END

Look for Daniel Forrer's next book:

The Mist

A myth only becomes legend when someone experiences it.

Daniel Forrer was born in Canton, Ohio and happily grew up in the buckeye state. However, life changes, and Daniel eventually moved to California. He has been living in southern California for thirteen years now and currently resides in Huntington Beach. While Daniel still considers himself to be an Ohio boy at heart and closely follows his Cleveland sports teams, he is happy for his time in California, most notably the birth of his son, which is still the favorite day of his highly interesting life.