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Boxed Set

by

J.R. RAIN

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Six Books Boxed Set

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MOON DANCE

by

J.R. RAIN

Vampire for Hire #1

MOON DANCE

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to mothers everywhere:
Our amazing, selfless, unsung heroes.
Love you, ma.

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Sandy Johnston for their generous assistance with
this book.

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## **MOON DANCE**



I was folding laundry in the dark and watching Judge Judy rip this guy a new asshole when the doorbell rang.

I flipped down a pair of Oakley wrap-around sunglasses and, still holding a pair of little Anthony's cotton briefs in one hand, opened the front door.

The light, still painfully bright, poured in from outside. I squinted behind my shades and could just made out the image of a UPS deliveryman.

And, oh, what an image it was.

As my eyes adjusted to the light, a hunky guy with tan legs and beefy arms materialized through the screen door before me. He grinned at me easily, showing off a perfect row of white teeth. Spiky yellow hair protruded from under his brown cap. The guy should have been a model, or at least my new best friend.

"Mrs. Moon?" he asked. His eyes seemed particularly searching and hungry, and I wondered if I had stepped onto the set of a porno movie. Interestingly, a sort of warning bell sounded in my head. Warning bells are tricky to discern, and I automatically assumed this one was telling me to



stay away from Mr. Beefy, or risk damaging my already rocky marriage.

"You got her," I said easily, ignoring the warning bells.

"I've got a package here for you."

"You don't say."

"I'll need for you to sign the delivery log." He held up an electronic gizmo-thingy that must have been the aforementioned delivery log.

"I'm sure you do," I said, and opened the screen door and stuck a hand out. He looked at my very pale hand, paused, and then placed the electronic thing-a-majig in it. As I signed it, using a plastic-tipped pen, my signature appeared in the display box as an arthritic mess. The deliveryman watched me intently through the screen door. I don't like to be watched intently. In fact, I prefer to be ignored and forgotten.

"Do you always wear sunglasses indoors?" he asked casually, but I sensed his hidden question: *And what sort of freak are you?*

"Only during the day. I find them redundant at night." I opened the screen door again and exchanged the log doohickey for a small square



package. "Thank you," I said. "Have a good day."

He nodded and left, and I watched his cute little buns for a moment longer, and then shut the solid oak door completely. Sweet darkness returned to my home. I pulled up the sunglasses and sat down in a particularly worn dining room chair. Someday I was going to get these things re-upholstered.

The package was heavily taped, but a few deft strokes of my painted red nail took care of all that. I opened the lid and peered inside. Shining inside was an ancient golden medallion. An intricate Celtic cross was engraved across the face of it, and embedded within the cross, formed by precisely cut rubies, were three red roses.

In the living room, Judge Judy was calmly explaining to the defendant what an idiot he was. Although I agreed, I turned the TV off, deciding that this medallion needed my full concentration.

After all, it was the same medallion worn by my attacker six years earlier.



There was no return address and no note. Other than the medallion, the box was empty. I left the gleaming artifact in the box and shut the lid. Seeing it again brought back some horrible memories. Memories I have been doing my best to forget.

I put the box in a cabinet beneath the china hutch, and then went back to Judge Judy and putting away the laundry. At 3:30 p.m., I lathered my skin with heaping amounts of sun block, donned a wide gardening hat and carefully stepped outside.

The pain, as always, was intense and searing. Hell, I could have been cooking over an open fire pit. Truly, I had no business being out in the sun, but I had my kids to pick up, dammit.

So I hurried from the front steps and crossed the driveway and into the open garage. My dream was to have a home with an attached garage. But, for now, I had to make the daily sprint.

Once in the garage and out of the direct glare of the spring sun, I could breathe again. I could also



smell my burning flesh.

*Blech!*

Luckily, the Ford Windstar minivan was heavily tinted, and so when I backed up and put the thing into drive, I was doing okay again. Granted, not great, but okay.

I picked up my son and daughter from school, got some cheeseburgers from Burger King and headed home. Yes, I know, bad mom, but after doing chores all day, I definitely was *not* going to cook.

Once at home, the kids went straight to their room and I went straight to the bathroom where I removed my hat and sunglasses, and used a washcloth to remove the extra sunscreen. Hell, I ought to buy stock in Coppertone. Soon the kids were hard at work saving our world from Haloes and had lapsed into a rare and unsettling silence. Perhaps it was the quiet before the storm.

My only appointment for the day was right on time, and since I work from home, I showed him to my office in the back. His name was Kingsley Fulcrum and he sat across from me in a client chair, filling it to capacity. He was tall and broad shouldered and wore his tailored suit well. His thick



black hair, speckled with gray, was jauntily disheveled and worn long over his collar. Kingsley was a striking man and would have been the poster boy for dashing rogues if not for the two scars on his face. Then again, maybe poster boys for rogue did have scars on their faces. Anyway, one was on his left cheek and the other was on his forehead, just above his left eye. Both were round and puffy. And both were recent.

He caught me staring at the scars. I looked away, embarrassed. "How can I help you, Mr. Fulcrum?"

"How long have you been a private investigator, Mrs. Moon?" he asked.

"Six years," I said.

"What did you do before that?"

"I was a federal agent."

He didn't say anything, and I could feel his eyes on me. God, I hate when I can feel eyes on me. The silence hung for longer than I was comfortable with and I answered his unspoken question. "I had an accident and was forced to work at home."

"May I ask what kind of accident?"

"No."

He raised his eyebrows and nodded. He might



have turned a pale shade of red. "Do you have a list of references?"

"Of course."

I turned to my computer, brought up the reference file and printed him out the list. He took it and scanned the names briefly. "Mayor Hartley?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"He hired you?"

"He did. I believe that's the direct line to his personal assistant."

"Can I ask what sort of help you gave the mayor?"

"No."

"I understand. Of course you can't divulge that kind of information."

"How exactly can I help you, Mr. Fulcrum?" I asked again.

"I need you to find someone."

"Who?"

"The man who shot me," he said. "Five times."



The furious sounds of my kids erupting into an argument suddenly came through my closed office door. In particular, Anthony's high-pitched shriek. Sigh. The storm broke.

I gave Kingsley an embarrassed smile. "Could you please hold on?"

"Duty calls," he said, smiling. Nice smile.

I marched through my single story home and into the small bedroom my children shared. Anthony was on top of Tammy. Tammy was holding the remote control away from her body with one hand and fending off her little brother with the other. I came in just in time to witness him sinking his teeth into her hand. She yelped and bopped him over the ear with the remote control. He had just gathered himself to make a full-scale leap onto her back, when I stepped into the room and grabbed each by their collar and separated them. I felt as if I had separated two ravenous wolverines. Anthony's fingers clawed for his sister's throat. I wondered if they realized they



were both hovering a few inches off the floor. When they had both calmed down, I set them down on their feet. Their collars were ruined.

“Anthony, we do not bite in this household. Tammy, give me the remote control.”

“But Mom,” said Anthony, in that shriekingly high-pitched voice that he used to irritate me. “I was watching ‘Pokemon’ and she turned the channel.”

“We each get one half hour after school,” Tammy said smugly. “And you were well into *my* half hour.”

“But you were on the phone talking to *Richaaard*.”

“Tammy, give your brother the remote control. He gets to finish his TV show. You lost your dibs by talking to *Richaaard*.” They both laughed. “I have a client in my office. If I hear any more loud voices, you will both be auctioned off on eBay. I could use the extra money.”

I left them and headed back to the office. Kingsley was perusing my bookshelves. He looked at me before I had a chance to say anything and raised his eyebrows.

“You have an interest in the occult,” he said, fingering a hardback book. “In particular, vampirism.”



"Yeah, well, we all need a hobby," I said.

"An interesting hobby, that," he said.

I sat behind my desk. It was time to change the subject. "So you want me to find the man who shot you five times. Anything else?"

He moved away from my book shelves and sat across from me again. He raised a fairly bushy eyebrow. On him, the bushy eyebrow somehow worked.

"Anything else?" he asked, grinning. "No, I think that will be quite enough."

And then it hit me. I *thought* I recognized the name and face. "You were on the news a few months back," I said suddenly.

He nodded once. "Aye, that was me. Shot five times in the head for all the world to see. Not my proudest moment."

Did he just say aye? I had a strange sense that I had suddenly gone back in time. How far back, I didn't know, but further enough back where men said *aye*.

"You were ambushed and shot. I can't imagine it would have been anyone's proudest moment. But you survived, and that's all that matters, right?"



“For now,” he said. “Next on the list would be to find the man who shot me.” He sat forward. “Everything you need is at your disposal. Nothing of mine is off limits. Speak to anyone you need to, although I ask you to be discreet.”

“Discretion is sometimes not possible.”

“Then I trust you to use your best judgment.”

Good answer. He took out a business card and wrote something on the back. “That’s my cell number. Please call me if you need anything.” He wrote something under his number. “And that’s the name and number of the acting homicide detective working my case. His name is Sherbet, and although I found him to be forthcoming and professional, I didn’t like his conclusions.”

“Which were?”

“He tends to think my attack was nothing but a random shooting.”

“And you disagree?”

“Wholeheartedly.”

We discussed my retainer and he wrote me a check. The check was bigger than we discussed.

“I don’t mean to be rude,” said Kingsley as he stood and tucked his expensive fountain pen inside



his expensive jacket, “but are you ill?”

I’ve heard the question a thousand times.

“No, why?” I asked brightly.

“You seem pale.”

“Oh, that’s my Irish complexion, lad,” I said, and winked.

He stared at me a moment longer, and then returned my wink and left.

#### 4.

When Kingsley was gone I punched his name into my web browser.

Dozens of online newspaper articles came up, and from these I garnered that Kingsley was a rather successful defense attorney, known for doing whatever it took to get his clients off the hook, often on seemingly inane technicalities. He was apparently worth his weight in gold.

I thought of his beefy shoulders.



A lot of weight. Muscular weight.

*Down girl.*

I continued scanning the headlines until I found the one I wanted. It was on a web page for a local LA TV station. I clicked on a video link. Thank God for high speed internet. A small media window appeared on my screen, and shortly thereafter I watched a clip that had first appeared on local TV news. The clip had gone national, due to its sensationally horrific visuals.

A reporter appeared first in the screen, a young Hispanic woman looking quite grave. Over her shoulder was a picture of the Fullerton Municipal Courthouse. The next shot was a grainy image from the courthouse security camera itself. In the frame were two men and two women, all dressed impeccably, all looking important. They were crossing in front of the courthouse itself. In football terms, they formed a sort of *moving huddle*, although I rarely think of things in football terms and understand little of the stupid sport.

I immediately recognized the tall one with the wavy black hair as Kingsley Fulcrum, looking rugged and dashing.



*Down girl.*

As the group approaches the courthouse steps, a smallish man steps out from behind the trunk of a white birch. Three of the four great defenders pay the man little mind. The one who does, a blond-haired woman with glasses and big hips, looks up and frowns. She probably frowns because the little man is reaching rather menacingly inside his coat pocket. His thick mane of black hair is disheveled, and somehow even his thick mustache looks disheveled, too. The woman, still frowning, turns back to the group.

And what happens next *still* sends shivers down my spine.

From inside his tweed jacket, the little man removes a short pistol. We now know it's a .22. At the time, no one sees him remove the pistol. The short man, perhaps ten feet away from the group of four, takes careful aim, and fires.

Kingsley's head snaps back. The bullet enters over his left eye.

I lean forward, staring at my computer screen, rapt, suddenly wishing I had a bowl of popcorn, or at least a bag of peanut M&Ms. That is, until I



remembered that I can no longer eat either.

Anyway, Kingsley's cohorts immediately scatter like chickens before a hawk. The shorter man even ducks and rolls dramatically as if he's recently seen duty in the Middle East and his military instincts are kicking in.

Kingsley is shot again. This time in the neck, where a small red dot appears above his collar. Blood quickly flows down his shirt. Instead of collapsing, instead of *dying* after being shot point blank in the head and neck, Kingsley actually turns and looks at the man.

As if the man had simply called his name.

As if the man had *not* shot him twice.

What transpires next would be comical if it wasn't so heinous. Kingsley proceeds to duck behind a nearby tree. The shooter, intent on killing Kingsley, bypasses going around a park bench and instead jumps over it. Smoothly. Landing squarely on his feet while squeezing off a few more rounds that appear to hit Kingsley in the neck and face. Meanwhile, the big attorney ducks and weaves behind the tree. This goes on for seemingly an eternity, but in reality just a few seconds. A sick game of tag, except Kingsley's



getting tagged with real bullets.

And still the attorney does not go down.

Doesn't even collapse.

The shooter seemingly realizes he's wasting his time and dashes away from the tree, disappearing from the screen. No one has come to Kingsley's rescue. The other attorneys are long gone. Kingsley is left to fend for himself, his only protection the tree, which has been torn and shredded by the impacting stray bullets.

Witnesses would later report that the shooter left in a Ford pickup. No one tried to stop him, and I really didn't blame them.

I paused the picture on Kingsley. Blood is frozen on his cheeks and forehead, even on his open, outstretched palms. His face is a picture of confusion and horror and shock. In just twenty-three seconds, his life had been utterly turned upside down. Of course, in those very same twenty-three seconds most people would have died.

But not Kingsley. I wondered why.



## 5.

I was at the Fullerton police station, sitting across from a homicide detective named Sherbet. It was the late evening, and most of the staff had left for the day.

“You’re keeping me from my kid,” he said. Sherbet was wearing a long-sleeved shirt folded up at the elbows, revealing heavily muscled forearms covered in dark hair. The dark hair was mixed with a smattering of gray. I thought it looked sexy as hell. His tie was loosened, and he looked irritable, to say the least.

“I apologize,” I said. “This was the only time I could make it today.”

“I’m glad I can work around your busy schedule, Mrs. Moon. I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you in any way.”

His office was simple and uncluttered. No pictures on the wall. Just a desk, a computer, a filing cabinet and some visitor’s chairs. His desk had a few picture frames, but they were turned toward him.



From my angle, I could only see the price tags.

I gave him my most winning smile. "I certainly appreciate your time, detective." I had on plenty of blush, so that my cheeks appeared human.

The smile worked. He blushed himself. "Yeah, well, let's make this quick. My kid's playing a basketball game tonight, and I wouldn't want to miss him running up and down the court with no clue what the hell is going on around him."

"Sounds like a natural."

"A natural dolt. Wife says I should just leave him alone. The trouble is, if I leave him alone, he tends to want to play Barbies with the neighborhood girls."

"That worries you?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"You think he could turn out gay?"

He shrugged uncomfortably, and said nothing. It was a touchy subject for him, obviously.

"How old is your son?" I asked.

"Eight."

"Perhaps he's a little Casanova. Perhaps he sees the benefits of playing with girls, rather than boys."



"Perhaps," said Sherbet. "For now, he plays basketball."

"Even though he's clueless."

"Where there's a will there's a way."

"Even if it's your will and your way?" I asked.

"For now, it's the only way." He paused, then looked a little confused. He shook his head like a man realizing he had been mumbling out loud. "How the hell did we get on the subject of my kid's sexuality?"

"I forget," I said, shrugging.

He reached over and straightened the folder in front of him. The folder hadn't been crooked, now it was less uncrooked. "Yeah, well, let's get down to business. Here's the file. I made a copy of it for you. It's against procedures to give you a copy, but you check out okay. Hell, you worked for the federal government. And why the hell you've gone private is your own damn business."

I reached for the file, but he placed a big hand on it. "This is just between you and me. I don't normally give police files to private dicks."

"Luckily I'm not your average private dick."

"A dick with no dick," he said.



"Clever, detective," I said.

"Not really."

"No, not really," I admitted. "I just really want the file."

He nodded and lifted his palm, and I promptly stuffed the file into my handbag. "Is there anything you can tell me that's perhaps not in the file?"

He shook his head, but it was just a knee-jerk reaction. In the process of shaking his head, he was actually deep in thought. "It should all be in there." He rubbed the dark stubble at his chin. The dark stubble was also mixed with some gray. "You know I always suspected the guy doing the shooting was a client of his. I dunno, call it a hunch. But this attorney's been around a while, and he's pissed off a lot of people. Trouble is: who's got the time to go through all of his past files?"

"Not a busy homicide detective," I said, playing along.

"Damn straight," he said.

"Any chance it was just a random shooting?" I asked.

"Sure. Of course. Those happen all the time."

"But you don't think so."



"No," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

The detective was used to this kind of exchange. He worked in a business where if you didn't ask questions, you didn't find answers. If my questions bothered him, he didn't show it, other than he seemed to be impatient to get this show on the road.

"Seemed premeditative. And no robbery attempt. Also seemed to be making a statement, as well."

"By shooting him in the face?"

"And by shooting him outside the courthouse. His place of work. Makes you think it was business related."

I nodded. Good point. I decided not to tell the detective he had a good point. Men tend to think all of their points were good, and they sure as hell didn't need me to boost their already inflated egos.

I'm cynical that way.

He stood from his desk and retrieved a sport jacket from a coat rack. He was a fit man with a cop's build. He also had a cop's mustache. He would have looked better without the mustache, but it wasn't was my place to suggest so. Besides, who better to wear a cop mustache than a cop?



"Now it's time to go watch my son screw up the game of basketball," he said.

"Maybe basketball's not his game."

"And playing with girls is?"

"It's not a bad alternative," I said, then added. "You think there's a chance you're reading a little too much into all of this with your son?"

"I'm a cop. I read too much into everything." He paused and locked his office door, which I found oddly amusing and ironic since his office was located in the heart of a police station. "Take you, for instance."

I didn't want to take me for instance. I changed the subject. "I'm sure you're a very good officer. How long have you been on the force?"

He ignored my question. "I wondered why you insisted on meeting me in the evening." As he spoke, he placed his hand lightly at the small of my back and steered me through the row of cluttered desks. His hand was unwavering and firm. "When I asked you on the phone the reason behind the late meeting you had mentioned something about being busy with other clients. But when I called your office



later that day to tell you that I was going to be delayed, you picked up the phone immediately.” He paused and opened a clear glass door. On the door was etched FPD. “Perhaps you were meeting your clients in the office. Or perhaps you were in-between clients. But when I asked if you had a few minutes you sounded unharried and pleasant. *Sure*, you said, *how can I help you?*”

“Well, I pride myself on customer service,” I said.

He was behind me, and I didn’t see him smile. But I sensed that he had done so. In fact, I *knew* he had smiled. Call it a side effect.

He said, “Now that I see you, I see you have a skin disorder of some type.”

“Why, lieutenant, you certainly know how to make a girl feel warm and fuzzy.”

“And that’s the other thing. When I shook your hand, it felt anything but warm and fuzzy,” he said.

“So what are you getting at?” I asked. We had reached the front offices. We were standing behind the main reception desk. The room was quiet for the time being. Outside the smoky gray doors, I could see Commonwealth Avenue, and across that, Amerige City Park, which sported a nice little league



field.

He shrugged and smirked at me. "If I had two guesses, I would say that you were either a vampire, or, like I said, you had a skin condition."

"What does your heart tell you?" I asked.

He studied me closely. Outside, commuters were working their way through downtown Fullerton. Red taillights burned through the smoky glass. Something passed across his gaze. An understanding of some sort. Or perhaps wonder. Something. But then he grinned and his cop mustache rose like a referee signaling a touchdown.

"A skin disease, of course," he said. "You need to stay out of the sun."

"Bingo," I said. "You're a hell of a detective."

And with that I left. Outside, I saw that my hands were shaking. The son-of-a-bitch had me rattled. He was one hell of an intuitive cop.

I hate that.



I was boxing at a sparring club in Fullerton called Jacky's. The club was geared towards women, but there were always a few men hanging around the club. These men often dressed better than the women. I suspected homosexuality. The club gave kick-boxing and traditional boxing lessons. I preferred the traditional boxing lessons, and always figured that if the time came in a fight that I had to kick, there was only one place my foot was going.

### *Crotch City.*

I come here three times a week after picking the kids up from school and taking them to their grandmother's home in Brea. Boxing is perhaps one of the most exhausting exercises ever invented, especially when you box in three-minute drills, as I was currently doing, which simulated actual boxing rounds.

My trainer was an Irishman named Jacky. Jacky wore a green bandanna over a full head of graying hair. He was a powerfully built man of medium height, a little fat now, but not soft. He must have been sixty, but looked forty. He was an ex-



professional boxer in Ireland, where he had been something of a legend, or that's what he tells me. His crooked nose had been broken countless times, which might or might not have been the result of boxing matches. Maybe he was just clumsy. Amazingly enough, the man rarely sweat, which was something I could not claim. As my personal trainer, his sole responsibility was to hold out his padded palms and to yell at me. He did both well. All with a thick Irish accent.

"C'mon, push yourself. You're dropping your fists, lass!"

Dropping one's fists was a big no-no in Jacky's world, on par with his hatred for anything un-Irish.

So I raised my fists. Again.

During these forty-five minute workouts with Jacky, I hated that little Irish bastard with all my heart.

"You're dropping your hands!" he screamed again.

"Screw you."

"In your dreams, lass. Get them hands up!"

It went on like this for some time. Occasionally the kickboxers would glance over at us. Once I slipped on my own sweat, and Jacky thankfully



paused and called for one of his towel boys who hustled over and wiped down the mat.

"You sweat like a man," said Jacky, as we waited. "I like that."

"Oh?" I said, patting myself down with my own towel. "You like the sweat of men?"

He glared at me. "My wife sweats. It's exciting."

"Probably because you don't. She has to make up for the two of you."

"I don't know why I open up to you," he said.

"You call this opening up?" I asked. "Talking about sweat and boffing your wife?"

"Consider yourself privileged," he said.

We went back to boxing. We did two more three-minute rounds. Near the end of the last round, I was having a hell of a time keeping my gloved fists up, and Jacky didn't let me hear the end of it.

When we were done, Jacky leaned his bulk against the taut ropes. He removed the padded gloves from his hands. The gloves were frayed and beaten.

"Second pair of gloves in a month," he said, looking at them with something close to astonishment.



"I'll buy you some more," I said.

"You're a freak," he said. He studied his hands. They were red and appeared to be swelling before our very eyes. "You hit harder than any man I've ever coached or faced. Your hand speed is off the charts. Good Christ, your form and accuracy is perfect."

"Except that I drop my hands."

"Not always," he said sheepishly. "I've got to tell you *something* so that you think I'm earning my keep."

I reached over and kissed his smooth forehead. "I know," I said.

"You're a freak," he said again, blushing.

"You have no idea."

"I pity any poor bastard who crosses your path."

"So do I."

He held out his hands. "Now, I need to soak these in ice."

"Sorry about that."

"You kidding? It's an honor working with you. I tell everyone about you. No one believes me. I tell them I've got a woman here that could take on their best male contenders. They never believe me."



Around us the sparring gym was a beehive of activity. Both boxing rings were now being used by kick boxers. Women and men were pounding the hell out of the half dozen punching bags, and the rhythmic rattling of the speed bags sounded from everywhere.

"You know I don't like you talking about me, Jacky."

"I know. I know. They don't believe me anyway. You could box professionally with one hand behind your back."

"I don't like attention."

"I know you don't. I'll quit bragging about you."

"Thank you, Jacky."

"The last thing I want is you pissed-off at me."

I box for self-defense. I box for exercise. Sometimes I box because it's nice to have a man care so vehemently whether or not my fists were up.

I kissed his forehead again and walked out.



I drove north along Harbor Blvd, through downtown Fullerton and made a left onto Berkeley Street. I parked in the visitor parking in front of the Fullerton Municipal Courthouse, turned off my car, and sat there.

While I sat there, I drank water from a bottle. Water is one of the few drinks my body will accept. That and wine, although the alcohol in wine has no effect on me.

Yeah, I know. Bummer.

My hands were still feeling heavy from the boxing workout. I flexed my fingers. I couldn't help but notice my forearms rippling with taut muscle. I like that. I worked hard for that, and it was something I didn't take for granted.

I sat in the minivan and watched the entrance to the courthouse. There was little activity at this late hour. I wasn't sure what I was hoping to find here but I like to get a look and feel for all aspects of a case. Makes me feel involved and informed.

And, hell, you never know what might turn up.

Two security guards patrolled the front of the



building. So where had they been at the time of Kingsley's shooting? Probably patrolling the *back* of the building.

Behind me was a wooded area; above that were condominiums. A bluejay swooped low over my hood and disappeared into the branches of a pine tree. A squirrel suddenly dashed along the pine tree's limb. The jay appeared again, and dove down after the squirrel.

*Can't we all just get along?*

When the guards disappeared around a corner, I got out of the van and made my way to the court's main entrance. My legs were still shaky from the workout; my hands heavy and useless, like twin balloons filled with sand.

The courthouses consisted of two massive edifices that faced each other. Between them was a sort of grassy knoll, full of trees and stone benches. The benches were empty. The sun was low in a darkening sky.

I like darkening skies.

Shortly, I found the infamous birch tree. The tree was smallish, barely wide enough to conceal even me, let alone a big man with broad shoulders. As a



shield, it was useless, as the additional bullets in Kingsley's head attested. To have relied on it for one's sole protection of a gun-wielding madman was horrifying to contemplate. So I did contemplate it. I felt Kingsley's fear, recalled his desperate attempts to dodge the flying bullets. Comical and horrific. Ghastly and amusing. Like a kid's game of cowboys and Indians gone horribly wrong.

I circled the tree and found four fairly fresh holes in the trunk. The bullets had, of course, been dug out and added to the evidence. Now the holes were nothing more than dark splotches within the white bark. The tree and Kingsley had one thing in common: both were forever scarred by bullets from the same gun.

The attack had been brazen. The fact that the shooter had gotten away clean was probably a fluke. The shooter himself probably expected to get caught, or gunned down himself. But instead he walked away, and disappeared in a truck that no one seemed to remember the license plate of. The shooter was still out there, his job left unfinished. Probably wondering what more he had to do to kill Kingsley.



A hell of a good question.

According to the doctor's reports cited in a supplementary draft within the police report, all bullets had missed vital parts of Kingsley's brain. In fact, the defense attorney's only side effect was a minor loss in creativity. Of course, for a defense attorney, a lack of creativity could prove disastrous.

Someone wanted Kingsley dead, and someone wanted it done outside the courthouse, a place where many criminals had walked free because of Kingsley's ability to manipulate the law. This fact was not lost on me.

Detective Sherbet had only made a cursory investigation into the possibility that the shooting was related to one of Kingsley's current or past cases. Sherbet had not dug very deeply.

It was my job to dig. Which was why I make the big bucks.

I turned and left the way I had come.



“So how often do you, like, feed?” asked Mary Lou.

Mary Lou was my sister. Only recently had she discovered that I was, like, a creature of the night. Although I come from a big family, she was the only one I had confided in, mostly because we were the closest in age and had grown up best friends. We were sitting side-by-side at a brass-topped counter in a bar called Hero's in downtown Fullerton.

I said, “Often. Especially when I see a particular fine sweep of milky white neck. Like yours for instance.”

“Ha ha,” she said. Mary Lou was drinking a lemon drop martini. I was drinking house Chardonnay. Since I couldn't taste the Chardonnay, why order the good stuff? And Chardonnay rarely had a reaction on my system, and it made me feel normal, sort of, to drink something in public with my sister.

Mary Lou was wearing a blue sweater and jeans. Today was casual day at the insurance office. This was apparently something that was viewed as good.



She often talked about casual day; in fact, often days before the actual casual event.

"Seriously, Sam. How often?" she asked again.

I didn't say anything. I swallowed some wine. It tasted like water. My tastebuds were dead, my tongue good for only talking and kissing, and lately not even kissing. I looked over at Mary Lou. She was six years older than me, a little heavier, but then again she ate a normal diet of food.

"Once a day," I said, shrugging. "I get hungry like you. My stomach growls and I get light headed. Typical hunger symptoms."

"But you can only drink blood."

"You mind saying that a little louder?" I said. "I don't think the guy in the booth behind us quite heard."

"Sorry," she said sheepishly.

"We're supposed to keep this quiet, remember?"

"I know."

"You haven't told anyone?" I asked her again.

"No. I swear. You know I won't tell."

"I know."

The bartender came by and looked at my nearly finished glass of wine. I nodded, shrugging. What the



hell, might as well spend my well-earned money on something useless, like wine.

"Have you tried eating other food?" asked Mary Lou.

"Yes."

"What happens?" she asked.

"Stomach cramps. Extreme symptoms of food poisoning. I throw it back up within minutes. Not a pretty picture."

"But you can drink wine," she said.

"It's the only thing I've found so far that I can drink," I said. "And sometimes not even that. Needs to be relatively pure."

"So no red wine."

"No red wine," I said.

My sister, with her healthy tan, put her hand on my hand. As she did so, she flinched imperceptively from the cold of my own flesh. She squeezed my fingers. "I'm sorry this happened to you, Sis."

"I am, too," I said.

"Can I ask you some more questions?" she asked.

"Were you just warming me up?"

"Yes and no."



"Fine," I said. "What else you got for me?"

"Does the blood, you know, have to be human blood?"

"Any mammalian blood will do," I said.

"Where do you get the blood?"

"I buy it."

"From where?" she asked.

"I have a contract with a butchery in Norco. I buy it by the month-load. It's in my freezer in the garage."

"The one with the padlock?" she asked. I think her own blood drained from her face.

"Yes," I answered.

"What happens if you don't drink blood?"

"Probably shrivel up and die."

"Do you want to change the subject?" she asked gently.

She knew my moods better than anyone, even my husband. "Please."

Mary Lou grinned. She caught the attention of the bartender and pointed to her martini. He nodded. The bartender was cute, a fact not lost on Mary Lou.

"So what case are you currently working on?" she asked, stealing glances at the man's posterior.



"You done checking out the bartender?"

She reddened. "Yes."

So I told her about my case. She remembered seeing it on TV.

"Any leads yet?" she asked, breathless. Mary Lou tended to think that what I did for a living was more exciting than it actually was. Her drink came but she ignored it.

"No," I said. "Just hunches."

"But your hunches are better than most anyone's."

"Yes," I said. "It's a side effect."

"A good side effect."

I nodded. "Hey, if I have to give up raspberry cheesecakes, I might as well get something out of the deal."

"Like highly attuned hunches."

"That's one of them," I said.

"What else?" she asked.

"I thought we were changing the subject."

"C'mon, I've never known...someone like you."

"Don't you mean *something*?"

"No," she said. "That's not what I mean. You're a good mother, a good wife, and a good sister. You



are much more than a *thing*. So tell me, what are the other side effects?"

"You saying all that just to butter me up?"

"Yes and no," she said, grinning. "So tell me. Now."

I laughed. "Okay, you win. I have enhanced strength and speed."

She nodded. "What else?"

"I seem to be disease and sickness free."

"What about shape-changing?"

"Shape-changing?"

"Yes."

Having my sister ask if I could *shape-change* struck me as so ridiculous that I burst out laughing. Mary Lou watched me briefly, then caught on because she always catches on. Soon we were both giggling hysterically, and we had the attention of everyone in the bar. I hate having people's attention, but I needed the laugh. Needed it bad.

"No," I said finally, wiping the tears from my eyes. "I can't shape-change. Then again, I've never tried."

"Then maybe you *can*," she said finally, after catching her own breath.

"Honestly, I've never thought about it. There's just



been too much other crap to deal with, and this...*condition* of mine doesn't exactly come with a handbook."

"So you learn as you go," said Mary Lou.

"Yes," I said. "Sort of like *The Greatest American Hero*."

"Yeah, like him."

We drank some more. My stomach was beginning to hurt. I pushed the wine aside.

"You ever going to tell me what happened to you?" Mary Lou's words were forming slower. The martinis had something to do with that. "How you became, you know, what you are?"

I looked away. "Someday, Mary Lou."

"But not today."

"No," I said. "Not today."

Mary Lou turned in her stool and faced me. Her big, round eyes were glassy. Her nose was more slender than mine, but we resembled each other in every other way. We were sisters through and through.

"So how do you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"Look so normal. Act so normal. Be so normal."



Hell, life's hard enough as it is without something like this coming out of left field and knocking you upside your ass. How do you do it?"

"I do it because I have to," I said. "I don't have a choice."

"Because you love your kids."

"Sometimes it's the only reason," I said.

"What about Danny?"

I didn't tell her about Danny. Not yet. I didn't tell her that my husband seemed revolted by the sight of me, that he turned his lips away lately when we kissed, that he seemed to avoid touching me at all costs. I didn't tell her that I was sure he was cheating on me and my marriage was all but over.

"Yeah," I said, looking away. "I do it for Danny, too."

## 9.

The shower was as hot as I could stand it, which



would have been too hot for most people. Some of my sensitivity had left my skin, and as a result I needed hotter and hotter showers. My husband, long ago, gave up taking showers with me. Apparently he had an aversion to the smell of his own cooking flesh.

My muscles were sore and the water helped. I was thirty-seven years old, but I looked twenty-seven, or perhaps even younger. There wasn't a wrinkle on my pallid face. My skin was taut. Usually ice cold, but taut. My muscles were hard, but that could have been because I never stopped working out. After all, there is only so much one can lose of one's self, and so I was determined to maintain some normalcy. Working out reminded me of who I was and what I was trying to be.

My body was still sore from boxing, but the soreness was almost gone. I heal fast nowadays, amazingly fast. Just your average, run-of-the-mill freak show.

I stood with my back to the spray and let my mind go blank. I stood there for God knew how long until an image of Kingsley and his bloody and confused face drifted into my thoughts. It had been such an



*angry* attack. Full of pent-up rage. Kingsley had pissed off someone badly. Very badly. At one point in the shooting, the shooter had actually paused and looked at Kingsley with what had been thunderstruck awe, at least that's how I interpreted the grainy image. The look seemed to say: *How many times do I have to shoot you before you die?*

I had already soaped up and washed and conditioned my hair. There was nothing left to do, and now I was only wasting water. Sighing, I turned off the shower. Rare heat rose from my skin, a pleasant change for once. My skin was raw and red, and I was in my own little piece of heaven. The kids were with their sitter, and tonight I was going out with my husband. We tried to do that more and more lately. Or, rather, *I* tried to do that more and more lately. He reluctantly agreed.

Early on, after my transformation, Danny had been a saint. Someone he loved (me) was hurting and confused, and he had come to my rescue like no other.

Together we had devised schemes to let the world know I was different. It was his idea to tell the world I had developed *xeroderma pigmentosum*, a



rare, and usually fatal, skin condition. With xeroderma pigmentosum, even brief exposure to sunlight can cause irreparable damage that could lead to blindness and fatal skin cancers. People eventually accepted this about me—even my own family. Yes, I hated lying, but the way I saw it, I had little choice.

Danny helped me change careers, and helped me set up my home-based private investigation business. He also explained to the kids that mommy would often be sleeping during the day and to not bother me. Finally, he helped set me up with my feed supply with the local butchery.

Danny had been a dream. But that had been then; this was now.

So tonight we were going to dinner. I would order my steak raw and do my best to participate with him. He would avert his eyes, as usual. Not a typical relationship by any means. But a relationship, nonetheless.

I found myself looking forward to tonight. I had recently read a book about how to be a better wife, how to understand your man, how to show your love in the little ways. It's amazing how we all forget



what's necessary to keep a loving relationship intact. Well, I was determined to show him my appreciation.

Of course, most marriages didn't deal with the issues I have, but we would make it through, somehow.

I was still dripping and toweling off when the phone rang. I dashed out of the connecting bathroom and into the bedroom and picked up the phone on the bedside table.

"Hello," I said.

"Hi, doll."

"Danny!"

There was a pause, and I knew instinctively that I was going to get bad news. Call it my enhanced intuition, or call it whatever you want.

"I can't make it tonight," he said.

"But Danny...."

"We're backed-up at the office. I have a court case later this week, and we're not ready. I hope you understand."

"Yes," I said. "Of course."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."



"I've got to get going. Don't wait up."

That was our little joke now. Of course, being a creature of the night, all I could do lately was wait up.

He hung up the phone.

## 10.

It was evening.

I was pacing inside the foyer of my house. The muscles along my neck were tense and stiff. Outside, through the partly open curtain, I could see the upper curve of the setting sun.

I continued to pace. Breathing was always difficult at this time of day. I was making a conscious effort to inhale and exhale, to fill my lungs as completely as I could.

In and out.

Slowly.

*Keep calm, Samantha Moon. You'll be all right.*

Nevertheless, a sense of panic threatened to overcome me. The source of the panic was the sun.



Or, rather, the *presence* of the sun. Because I did not, and could not, feel fully alive until that son-of-a-bitch disappeared behind the horizon.

I checked the curtain again. The sun was still burning away in all its glory.

*Crap! Had the earth stopped in mid-orbit? Was I doomed to feel half-alive for the rest of my life?*

Panic. Pure unabated panic.

I breathed.

Deeply.

Consciously.

I leaned against the door frame and closed my eyes, willing myself to relax. I reached up and rubbed my neck muscles. I continued to breathe, continued to fight the panic.

And then, after seemingly an eternity, it happened. A sense of peace and joy began in my solar plexus and spread slowly in a wave of warmth to all my extremities. My mind buzzed with happiness, pure unabated happiness, and with it the unbridled potential of the coming night. It was a natural high. Or perhaps an *unnatural* high. I opened my eyes and looked out the window. The sun was



gone.

As I knew it would be.

\* \* \*

The kids were with Mary Lou and her family at Chuck E. Cheese's. I owed Mary Lou big. Danny was working late, preparing for his big court date. So what else was new?

I had not yet realized just how much my life was unraveling. It occurred to me then, as I was driving south along the 57 Freeway, that I might have to give up detecting if Danny was going to continue working so late. In the past, he would be home with the kids. Now, he rarely got home in time to see them off to bed.

The thought of not working horrified me. Like they say, idle hands are the devil's tools. By keeping myself busy, I was able to forget some of what I had become, and to keep the nightmare of my reality at bay.

But something had to give here, and it wasn't going to be Danny. He had made it clear long ago that this was *my* problem.



My windows were down. The spring evening was warm and dry. I couldn't remember the last time we had rain. I liked the rain. Perhaps I liked the rain because I lived in Southern California. Rain here was like the elusive lover who keeps you begging for more. Perhaps if I lived up north I would not like the rain so much. I didn't know. I'd never lived anywhere else.

I took the 22 East and headed toward the city of Orange. At Main Street I exited and drove past the big mall, and turned left onto Parker Avenue and into the parking lot of the biggest building in the area.

I took the elevator to the seventh floor. In the lobby, I was greeted by a pretty brunette receptionist. *Greeted* might have been too generous. Frankly, she didn't look very much like a happy camper. She was a young girl of about twenty-five, with straight brown hair that seemed to shine like silk. My hair once shone like silk; now it hung limply. Her pink sweater knit dress was snug and form-fitting, highlighting unnaturally large breasts. Did nothing for me, but then again, I am not a man. I sensed much animosity coming from her. Waves of it. I think I knew why. She was working late, and I was part of the reason she



was working late.

I gave her my most winning smile. Easy on the teeth. The nameplate on her desk read: Sara Benson.

"Hi, Sara. I'm Samantha Moon, here to see Mr. Fulcrum."

"Mr. Fulcrum is waiting for you, Mrs. Moon. I'll show you to his office."

As she did so, I said, "I understand you're going to help me tonight?"

"You understand correctly."

"I would just like to express my gratitude. I'm sure you would rather be anywhere else but here."

"You have no idea," she said, and stopped before a door. "He's in here."

## 11.

Kingsley occupied a spacious corner suite, filled with lots of dark wood shelving and legal reference



books. Had the blinds not been shut he would have had a grand panoramic view of Santa Ana and Orange. Thick stacks of rubberbanded folders were piled everywhere, and in one corner was a discreet wet bar. A bottle of Jack Daniel's was sitting not-so-discreetly on the counter.

"Generally, the Jack Daniel's stays *behind* the bar during office hours," said Kingsley, moving around from behind his desk and shaking my hand, which he might have held a bit longer than protocol required. Then added, "You keep strange hours, Mrs. Moon."

I removed my hand from his grip. "And you heal surprisingly well."

The scar above his eye was almost gone. Indeed, it even appeared to have *moved* a little—to the left, perhaps—but then again Mom always told me I had an overactive imagination. He saw me looking at it and promptly turned his head.

"Touché," he said. "A drink to the freaks?"

"This freak is working. No drinking." Drinking didn't effect me, but he didn't need to know that.

"Do you mind if I have one?"

"You mean *another* one?" I asked. I could it smell



it on his breath.

"You are quite the detective," he said.

"Oh yeah, *that* was a hard one."

He grinned and swept past me toward the bar. "Please, make yourself comfortable."

The closest place to make myself comfortable was a client chair that was currently occupied by a giant box. "Would you prefer I sit on a pile of folders or on top of this box?" I asked, perhaps a little snottily.

Behind me, at the bar, Kingsley had started to pour himself another drink. "Forgive me. We've been so busy lately; the place is a mess. Let me get that for you."

"Don't bother," I said, setting the heavy box on the floor.

Now back behind his desk, drink in hand, Kingsley watched me carefully. He took a sip from the highball glass. The bourbon sparkled amber in the half-light. I love half-light. I watched him watching me. Something was up. Finally, he said, "That box is filled with four fifty-pound plates," he said. "Two hundred pounds. And if you throw in the other crap in the box, that's well over two hundred pounds."



"I'm not following," I said, although I suspected I knew what he was getting at.

"It was a test," he said smugly. "And you passed. Or failed. Depending how you look at it."

I said nothing. I couldn't say anything. Instead, I found myself looking at his fading scars. Not too long ago I had stepped on a thick piece of glass; the wound had healed completely in a few hours. Unlike mine, Kingsley's face had a healthy rosy glow. And he had arrived at my home in the middle of the day and had not worn extra protection from the sun. He was not like me, and yet he had survived five bullet shots to the head.

"Well," I said, "I would have been in trouble had it been too much over two hundred pounds."

He pounced. "You only work nights, Mrs. Moon. You wear an exorbitant amount of sunscreen. Your windows, I noticed, were all completely covered. You lift two hundred pounds without a moment's hesitation. Your skin is icy to the touch. And you have the complexion of an avalanche victim."

"Okay, that last one was just mean," I said.

"Sorry, but true."

"So what are you getting at?"



He leaned back and folded his hands over his flat stomach. "You're a vampire, Mrs. Moon."

I laughed. So did he. Mine was a nervous laugh; his not so much. As I gathered my thoughts for a firm rebuttal, I found myself taking a second glance around his office. Behind his desk on the wall, was a beautiful picture of the full moon taken by a high-powered telescopic lens. There was a silver moon globe next to his monitor. Half moon bookends, which, if placed together, would form a full moon. On his desk was a picture of a woman, a very beautiful woman, with a full moon rising over her shoulder.

"You're obsessed with moons," I said.

"Which is why I picked you out of the phone book," he said, grinning. "Couldn't help myself, Mrs. Moon."

We were both silent. I watched him carefully. His mouth was open slightly. He was breathing heavily, his wet tongue pushed up against his incisors. His face looked healthy, vigorous and...feral.

"You're a werewolf," I said finally.

He grinned, wolf-like.



## 12.

Kingsley moved over to the window, pulled aside the blinds, and peered out into the night. With his back to me, I could appreciate the breadth and width of his shoulders.

“Could you imagine in your wildest dream,” he said finally, “of ever having this conversation?”

“Never.”

“And yet neither one of us has denied the other’s accusations.”

“Nor have we admitted to them,” I added.

We were silent again, and I listened to the faint hum of traffic outside the window. I spied some of the reassuring darkness through the open slats. I was in uncharted territory here, and so I decided to roll with the situation.

“For simplicity’s sake,” he said, his back still to me, “let’s assume we are vampires and werewolves. Where does that leave us?”

“Obviously I must kill you,” I said.



"I hope you're kidding."

"I am."

"Good, because I don't die easily," he said. "And certainly not without a fight."

"I just love a good fight," I said.

He ignored me. "So," he said, turning away from the window and crossing his arms across his massive chest. "How do you want to handle this?"

"Handle what?"

He threw back his head and laughed. It was a very animalistic gesture. He could have just as easily been a coyote—or a wolf—howling at the moon. "This new wrinkle in our working relationship," he said.

"As far as I'm concerned you are still my client and I'm still your detective. Nothing has changed."

"Nothing?"

"Other than the fact that you claim to be a werewolf."

"You don't believe me?"

"Mr. Fulcrum, werewolves are fairytales."

"And vampires aren't?"

I laughed. Or tried to. "I'm not a vampire. I just



have a *condition*."

"A condition that requires you to stay out of the sun," he said, incredulously. "A condition that requires you to drink blood. A condition that has turned you whiter than a ghost. A condition that has given you superhuman strength."

"I never said it was a *common* condition. I'm still looking into it."

He grinned. "It's called vampirism, my dear, and it's time for you to own it."

"Own it?"

"Isn't that what the kids say these days?" he said.

"Just how old are you, Mr. Fulcrum?"

"Never mind that," he said. "The question on the table is a simple one: do you believe I'm a werewolf?"

"No," I said.

"Do you believe you are a vampire?" he asked.

I hesitated. "No."

"Fine," he said. "Is your husband cheating on you?"

"Why would you say that?" I asked.

"I assume he is," said Kingsley. "I assume he's terrified of you and he doesn't know what to do about



it yet, especially with the kids in the picture.”

“Shut up, Kingsley.”

“And since you’re not denying it, I will also go as far as to assume he’s a son-of-a-bitch for abandoning you in the hour of your greatest need.”

“Please, shut up.”

“I also know something else, Mrs. Moon. He will take the kids from you and there isn’t a single goddamn thing you can do about it.”

Something came over me, something hot and furious. I flashed out of the client chair and was on Kingsley before he could even uncross his arms. My left hand went straight for his throat, slamming him hard against the wall. Too hard. The back of his head crashed through the drywall. Teeth bared, I looked up into his face—and the asshole was actually grinning at me, with half his head still in the wall. His hair and shoulders were covered in plaster dust.

“*Shut the hell up!*” I screeched.

“Sure. You got it. Whatever you say.”

We stood like that for a long time, my hand clamped over his throat, his head pushed back into the wall.



"Can you set me down now?" he asked in a raspy voice.

"Down?" I said, confused, my voice still raspy in my throat.

"Yeah," he said, pointing. "Down."

I followed his finger and saw that his feet were dangling six inches above the floor. I gasped and dropped him as his head popped out of the wall.

"Sorry," I said sheepishly. "I was mad."

Kingsley rubbed his neck. "Remind me next time not to piss you off," he said, dusting off his shoulders and opening his office door. "Oh, and I'm sorry to inform you, Mrs. Moon, that you are very much a vampire."

Eyes glowing amber, he winked at me and left.

## 13.

Sara and I spent the next three hours sorting through files and since Sara was a little on the



grumpy side, I did what any rational person would do under similar circumstances. I ordered Chinese. When it arrived she perked up a little. Some people needed alcohol to loosen up, apparently Sara needed fried wontons.

We ate at her desk. Or, rather, I *pretended* to eat at her desk. We ate mostly in silence.

Interestingly, according to the pictures on Sara's desk, she seemed to know how to let loose just fine. There were pictures of her in a bikini on some tropical isle, of her hiking along a heavily forested mountain trail, of her viciously spiking a volleyball, of her dressed as a pirate in an office Halloween party, complete with massive gold hoops, eye patch and mustache. In the background was Kingsley dressed as a werewolf. I almost laughed.

"You played volleyball?" I asked.

"Yes, at Pepperdine. I tried out for the Olympics."

"What happened?"

"Almost made the team. Maybe next time."

"Maybe next time," I said. "Is Kingsley a good boss?"

She shrugged. "He's kind enough. Gives big bonuses."



"What more could you want?" I asked cheerily.

She shrugged and turned her attention to her food. I tried another approach. "Do you like your job?"

She shrugged again and I decided to let my attempt at idle conversation drop. Maybe she needed more fried wontons.

While we ate, we worked from a long list of all of Kingsley's closed files from the past six years. Seven hundred and seventy-six in all. Kingsley was a busy boy. From these files, I removed all those Kingsley had personally litigated. Now we were down to three hundred and fifty-three. Still too many to work with. From those, I removed all violent crime; in particular, murder defense cases. Now we were down to twelve files.

I told Sara I would need copies of all twelve files. She promptly rolled her eyes.

While we made copies, Sara decided to open up a little to me. Okay, maybe she hadn't *decided* so much as *gave in* to my constant barrage of questions. Anyway, I gleaned that she had come here to Kingsley's firm straight from college. Initially, she had loved working for her boss, but lately not so



much.

“Why?” I asked, hoping for more than just a shrug. I had the Chinese restaurant’s number in my pocket should I need an emergency order of fried wontons.

Turns out I didn’t need the number. Rather heatedly, Sara told me in detail the story of the rapist who had been freed because Kingsley had discovered evidence of tampering at the crime scene. She finished up with: “Yes, Mr. Fulcrum’s a good man. But he’s a better defense attorney. And that’s the problem.”

I was sensing much hostility here. We were standing at the copier, working efficiently together, passing folders back and forth to each other as we copied them. Sara was very pretty and very young. Any man’s dream, no doubt. She was taller than me and her breasts appeared fake, but in Southern California that’s the norm and not the exception. She, herself, did not seem fake. She seemed genuine and troubled, and I suddenly knew why.

“You dated Kingsley,” I said.

She looked up, startled. “Why? Did he say something to you?”



"No. Just a hunch."

She passed me another folder. I removed the brackets and flipped through it, looking for papers of unusual sizes, or POUS's, that would jam the copier. As she spoke, she crossed her arms under her large chest and leaned a hip against the copy machine.

"Yeah, we dated for a while. So?"

"So what happened?" I asked.

"Ask *him*. He broke it off."

"Why?"

"You ask a lot of questions," she said.

"It's a compulsion," I said. "I should probably see a shrink about it."

Her eyes brightened a little and she nearly smiled, but then she got a handle on herself and remembered she didn't like me. "He said things were moving *too fast* for him. That he had lost his wife not too long ago and he wasn't ready for something serious."

"When did his wife die?" I asked.

"A few years ago. I don't know." She shrugged. She didn't know, and she clearly didn't care.

"Are you still angry with him?" I asked.



She shrugged and looked away and clammed up the rest of the night. Yeah, I think she was still angry.

We finished copying all twelve files, many of which were nearly a foot thick. Maybe within one I would find a suspect or a clue or *something*. At any rate, the files would give me something to do during the wee hours of the night, especially since I had recently finished Danielle Steel's latest novel, *Love Bites*, about two vampires in love. Cute, and uncannily dead on.

So Sara and I loaded up the files into a box and as I carried the entire thing out to the elevator, the young assistant watched me with open-mouthed admiration. I get that a lot.

"Jesus, you're strong," she said as we stepped into the elevator.

"It's the Pilates," I said. "You should try them."

"I will," she said. "Oh, and I'm supposed to remind you that these files are confidential."

"I'll guard them with my life."

Outside, in the crisp night air, Sara said, "I sure hope you find out who shot Knighty." She caught the indiscretion and turned beat red, her face glowing brightly under the dull parking lot lamps. "I mean, Mr.



Fulcrum.”

I smiled at her slip. “I do, too.”

She thanked me for the Chinese food, seemed to want to tell me something else, thought better of it, then dashed off to her car. I watched her get in and back out and drive away. Just as I shoved the box into the minivan, the fine hairs at the back of my neck sprang to life. I paused and slowly turned my head. My vision is better at night. Not great, but better. I was alone in the parking lot. Check that; there was an old Mercedes parked in a parking lot across the street. A man was sitting there, and he was watching me with binoculars.

I slammed the minivan's door and moved purposely through the parking lot, crossed the sidewalk, stepped down the curb and headed across the street.

He waited a second or two, watching me steadily, then reached down and gunned his vehicle to life. His headlights flared to life, and before I was halfway across the street, he reversed his Mercedes and tore recklessly through the parking lot. As he exited at the far end, turning right onto Parker Avenue and disappearing down a side street, I was



certain of two things:

One: he had no plates. Two: those weren't binoculars.

They were night-vision goggles.

## 14.

With the files in my backseat and thoughts of the night vision goggles on my mind, I called Mary Lou around 10:30 to thank her for watching my kids.

"I'm still watching them," she said sleepily.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Danny never showed up," she said.

"Did he at least call?" I asked.

"No."

I was on the 57 freeway, but instead of getting off at my exit on Yorba Linda Blvd, I continued on to Mary Lou's house two exits down. Yeah, it's nice to have family close by, especially when you have kids.

"I'm so sorry," I said when she opened the door. "I



didn't mean to stick you with the kids all night."

"Not your fault. I love them, anyway. Tell me you at least made some headway on your case."

"Some headway," I admitted. I left out the part about Kingsley being a werewolf but did mention the guy in the parking lot.

"Maybe he was just some creep," said Mary Lou, frowning. "I mean you are, after all, a hot piece of ass."

"Always nice to hear from your sister," I said.

"I say don't let it worry you."

"I won't," I said. "I can take of myself."

"I know," she said. "That's what worries me."

With the kids in the backseat sleeping, I called Danny's office. He wasn't there; I left a voice mail message. Next I called his cell phone and he answered just before it went to voice mail. He sounded out of breath. Something was wrong here and warning bells sounded loud and clear in my head. I did my best to ignore them, although I couldn't ignore the fact that I had suddenly gotten sick to my stomach.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Working late," he answered huskily.



"You doing push ups?" I said, trying to smile.

"Just ran up a flight of stairs. Bathroom on this floor isn't working."

"You didn't pick up your work phone."

"You know I never pick up after hours."

"You used to," I said.

"Well, honey, that was before I became so goddamn busy. Can I call you later?"

"Even better, why don't you *come home*."

"I'll be home soon."

He clicked off and I was left staring down at my cell phone. If it was possible, he seemed to have been breathing even harder by the end of the conversation.

\* \* \*

It was past midnight, and I had worked my way through more than half of the twelve files when Danny finally came home. He stopped by the study and gave me a little wave. He looked tired. His dark hair was slightly disheveled. His tie was off. The muted light revealed the deepening lines around his mouth and eyes. His eyes, once clear blue and gorgeous,



were hooded and solemn. His full lips were made for kissing, but not me, not anymore. He was a handsome man, and not a very happy one.

"Sorry about not picking up the kids," he said. He didn't sound very sorry. He didn't sound like he gave a shit at all. "I should have called your sister."

"That's okay. I'll make it up to her," I said. There was lipstick on his earlobe. He probably didn't think to check his earlobe.

He said, "I'm taking a shower, then hitting the hay. Another big day tomorrow."

"I bet."

He stood there a moment longer, leaning against the door frame. He seemed to want to say something. Maybe he wanted to tell me about the lipstick.

Then he slid away, but before he was gone, I caught a hint of something in his eyes. Guilt. Pain. Confusion. It was all there. I didn't think I needed any heightened sixth sense to know that my husband of fourteen and a half years had fallen out of love with me. We all change, I suppose. Some of us more than others.

After he was done showering, I listened to the



box springs creak as he eased into bed and I set down my pen and silently cried into my hands.

## 15.

I was running along Harbor Blvd at 3:00 a.m. I had finished reading through the files and needed some time to think. Luckily, I had all night to do so. Being a vampire is for me a nightly battle in dealing with loneliness.

I was dressed in full jogging gear, sweats and sweatshirt. No reflective shoes. I had been pulled over once too often by cops who had advised against a woman running so late at night. I wondered if they would give the same advice to a vampire. Anyway, I kept to the shadows, avoiding the cops and everyone else.

I kept up a healthy pace. In fact, my healthy pace was nearly a flat-out sprint. An un-godly pace that I could keep up for hours on end, and sometimes I



did. Sure, my muscles hurt afterward, forcing me to soak in my hot tub. But I love the speed.

Harbor Blvd sped past me. I breathed easily. The air was suffused with mist and dew. My arms pumped rhythmically at my side, adding balance to my churning legs. Harbor was empty of all traffic and life. I made a right down Chapman, headed past the high school and junior college. Streets swept past me, I dodged smoothly around lamp poles, bus benches, and metal box thingies that had something to do with traffic lights. I think. Anyway, there seemed to be a lot of those metal box thingies.

I didn't need water and I didn't need to pause for air. It was an unusual sense of freedom. To run without exhaustion. The city was quiet and silent. The wind passed rapidly over my ears.

I was a physical anomaly. Enhanced beyond all reason. My husband once called me a super hero after seeing an example of my strength and marveling at it.

There was a half moon hanging in the sky. I thought of Kingsley and his obsession with moons. It stood to reason that a werewolf would be obsessed with moons. I ran smoothly past an open-all-night



donut shop. The young Asian donut maker looked up, startled, but just missed me. The smell of donuts was inviting, albeit nauseating.

*A werewolf?*

I shook my head and chuckled at the absurdity of it. But there it was, staring me in the face. Or, rather, *he* had stared me in the face. So what was happening around here? Since when was Orange County a haven for the undead? I wondered what else was out there. Surely if there were werewolves and vampires there might be other creatures that went bump in the night, right? Maybe a ghoul or two? Goblins perhaps? Maybe my trainer Jacky was really an old, cantankerous leprechaun.

I smiled.

Thinking of Kingsley warmed my heart. This concerned me. I was a married woman. A married woman should not feel such warmth toward another man, even if the other man was a werewolf.

That is, not if she wanted to stay married. And I really, really wanted to stay married.

Perhaps I felt connected to Kingsley, bonded by our supernatural circumstances. We had much in common. Two outcasts. Two creatures ruled by the



night, in one way or another.

A car was coming. I ducked down a side street and moved along a row of old homes. Heavy branches arched overhead. With my enhanced night vision, I deftly avoided irregularities in the sidewalk—cracks and upheavals—places where tree roots had pushed up against the concrete. To my eye, the night was composed of billions and billions of dancing silver particles. These silver particles illuminated the darkness into a sort of surreal molten glow, touching everything.

I turned down another street, then another. Wind howled over my ears. I entered a tougher part of town, running along a residential street called Bear. Bear opens up to a bigger street called Lemon. I didn't give a crap how tough Bear Street was.

Yet another side benefit: *unlimited courage*.

My warning bells sounded, starting first as a low buzz in my ears. The buzzing is always followed by an increase in heart rhythm, a physical pounding in my chest. I knew the feeling well enough to trust it by now, and I immediately began looking for trouble. And as I rounded another corner, there it was.

Three men stepped out of the shadows in front of



me. I slowed, then finally stopped. As I did so, four more men stepped out from behind a low-rider truck parked on the street. Next to the house was an empty, dark school yard. As if reading their collective minds, I had a fleeting prognostication of my immediate future: an image of the seven men dragging me into the school yard. Then having their way with me. Then leaving me for dead.

A good thing the future isn't written in stone.

I smiled at them. "Hello, boys."

## 16.

Four of the seven were Latinos, with the remaining three being Caucasian, Asian and African-American. A veritable melting pot of gang violence. I studied each face. Most were damp with sweat. Eyes wide with anticipation and sexual energy. Details stood out to me like phosphorescent black and white photos, touched by ghostly silver



light. One was terrified, jerking his head this way and that, like a chicken on crack. All of them around same age—perhaps thirty—save for one who was as old as fifty. A few had bed-head, as if they had been recently roused from a drunken stupor.

I could smell alcohol on their breaths and sweat on their skin. The sweat was pungent and laced with everything from fear and excitement, to hostility and sexual frustration. None of it smelled good. If *mean* had a scent, this would be it.

A smallish Latino stepped forward. A switchblade sprang open at his side, locked into place. For my benefit, he let the faint light of the moon gleam off its polished surface. He was perhaps thirty-five and wore long denim shorts and a plaid shirt. He was surprisingly handsome for a rapist.

“If you scream, I’m going to hurt you.” His accent was thick.

“Gee, what a romantic thing to say,” I said.

“Shut up, bitch.”

I kept my eyes on him. I didn’t need to look at the others. I could feel them, *sense* them, smell them. I said, “Now what would your mothers all think of you



now? Ganging up on a single woman in the middle of the night. Tsk, tsk. Really, I think you should all be ashamed."

The little Latino looked at me blankly, then said simply: "Get her."

Movement from behind. I turned and punched, extending my arm straight from my body. Jacky would have been proud. My fist caught the guy in the throat. He dropped to the ground, flopping and gagging and holding his neck. Probably hurt like hell. I didn't care.

I surveyed the others, who had all stopped in their tracks. "So what was the plan, boys? You were all going to get a fuck in? The very definition of sloppy seconds—hell, sloppy thirds and fourths and fifths. Then what? Slit my throat? Leave me for dead? Let some school janitor find me stuffed in a dumpster? You would deny my children their mother for one night of cheap thrills?"

No one said anything. They looked toward their leader, the slick Latino with the switch. Most likely not all of them spoke English.

"I'll give you once chance to run," I said. "Before I kill all of you."



They didn't run. Some continued looking at their leader. Most were looking at the man rolling on the ground, holding his throat. Switchblade was watching me with a mixture of curiosity, lust and hatred.

Then he pounced, slashing the blade up. Had he hit home, I would have been cleaved from groin to throat.

He didn't hit home.

I turned my body and the blade missed. I caught his over-extended arm at the elbow and twisted. The elbow burst at the joint. He dropped the knife. I picked him up by the throat. Screaming and gagging, he swung wildly at me with his good arm, connecting a glancing blow off the side of my head. I simply squeezed harder and his flailing stopped.

His face was turning purple; I liked that.

I raised him high and swung him around so that the others could see. They gaped unbelievably.

"You may run now," I said.

And they did. Scattering like chickens before the hawk. They disappeared into the night, around hedges and into dark doorways. Two of them just continued running down the middle of the street. All



of them were gone, save for one, the fifty-year-old. He was pointing a gun at my head.

"Put my nephew down," he said.

"It's always nice to see gang raping and murdering kept in the family," I said.

I put his nephew down. Sort of. I hurled the kid with all my strength into his uncle. The gun went off, a massive explosion that rattled my senses and stung the hell out of my hyper-sensitive ears.

When the smoke cleared so to speak, the old man was looking down with bewildered horror.

Switchblade was lying sprawled on the concrete sidewalk, blood pumping from a wound in his chest. Spreading fast over the concrete. A black oil slick in the night.

*Blood.*

Something awakened within me. Something not very nice.

The older man looked from me to Switchblade, then at the gun in his hand. A look of horror crossed his features and tears sprang from his eyes. Then he fled into the shadows with the others, looking back once over his shoulder before disappearing over



someone's backyard fence.

I was left alone with Switchblade. His right hand was trying to cover the wound; instead, it just flopped pathetically.

"Well," I said to him, kneeling down, "nice set of friends you have."

And as I squatted next to him, the flopping stopped and he looked at me with dead eyes. I checked for a pulse. There was none.

Aroused by the gunshot, house lights began turning on one by one. I looked down at the body again.

*So much blood....*

## 17.

We were alone in an alley behind some apartments.

The early morning sky was still black, save for the faint light from the half moon. I was nestled between a Dumpster and three black bags of trash filled with



things foul. A small wind meandered down the alley. The plastic bags rustled. My hair lifted and fell—and so did the hair on the dead guy.

After my runs, I usually feed on cow blood. The cow blood is mixed with all sorts of impurities and foul crap. I often gag. Sort of my own private *Fear Factor* with no fifty grand reward at the end of the hour.

Before me lay Switchblade, the punk who had no doubt organized the gang bang. I had ferreted him away before anyone could investigate the shooting and now he lay at my feet, dead and broken.

I looked down at his chest, where blood had stained his flannel shirt nearly black.

*Blood....*

I ripped open his flannel shirt, buttons pinging everywhere. His chest was awash in a sea of caked red. The hole in his chest was a dark moon in a vermillion sky.

His blood would contain alcohol, as he had been drinking. I didn't care. The blood would be pure enough. Straight from the source. The ideal way to feed. Then again, *ideal* was relative. *Ideally* I would



be feasting on turkey lasagna.

I dipped my head down, placed my lips over the massive wound in his chest, and drank....

\* \* \*

I returned the body to the same house, left it where it had fallen. I drifted back into the darkness of the school grounds, where I knew in my heart they were going to drag me off to be raped.

It was still early morning, still dark. No one was out on the streets. Curious neighbors had gone back to sleep; there were no police investigating the sound of a gunshot. Apparently gunshots here were a common enough occurrence to not arouse *that* much suspicion.

The attackers themselves were long gone. They were scared shitless, no doubt. One of their own had been shot by one of their own. Each would awaken this morning with a very bad hang over, and pray to God this had all been a very bad dream.

Instead of their prayers being answered, they were going to awaken to find the body. What happened next, I didn't really know or care. I doubted



a group of men would even attempt to identify me, lest they reveal the nature of their true intentions the night before.

At any rate, using a half empty can of beer from the nearby dumpster, I had cleaned the wound of my lip imprints. Let the medical examiner try to figure out why someone had sloshed beer all over the gunshot wound.

As I stood there in the darkness, with a curious phantasmagoric mist nipping at my ankles, I remembered the taste of his blood again.

*God, he had tasted so good. So damn good—and pure. The difference between good chocolate and bad chocolate. The difference between good wine and bad wine. Good blood and bad blood.*

All the difference in the world.

I left the school grounds and the neighborhood as a slow wave of purple blossomed along the eastern horizon. I hated the slow wave of purple that blossomed along the eastern horizon. The sun was coming, and I needed to get home ASAP.

Already I could feel my strength ebbing.

Since my belly was full of Switchblade's blood, I did not want to cramp up and so I kept my jog slow



and steady. On the way home, as the guilt set in over what I had just done, I held fast to one thought in particular as if it were a buoy in a storm:

*I did not kill him; he was already dead....*

*I did not kill him; he was already dead....*

## 18.

The kids were playing in their room and Danny was working late. Tonight was Open House at the elementary school, and he had promised to make it home on time.

The words “we’ll see” had crossed my mind.

I had spent the past two hours helping Anthony with his math homework. Math didn’t come easily to him and he fought me the entire time. Vampire or not, I was drained.

All in all, I just couldn’t believe the amount of work his third grade teacher assigned each week, and it was all I could do to keep up. Didn’t schools realize



mothers want to spend quality time with their children in the evenings?

So now I was in my office, still grumbling. It was early evening and raining hard. Occasionally the rain, slammed by a gust of wind, splattered against my office window. The first rain in months. The weatherman had been beside himself.

I liked the rain. It touched everything and everyone. Nothing was spared. It made even a freak like me feel connected to the world.

So with the rain pattering against the window and the children playing somewhat contentedly in their room, I eventually worked my way through all of Kingsley's files. Only one looked promising, and it set the alarms off in my head. I've learned to listen to these alarms.

The case was no different than many of Kingsley's other cases. His client, one Hewlett Jackson, was accused of murdering his lover's husband. But thanks to Kingsley's adroit handling of the case, Jackson was freed on a technicality. Turns out the search warrant had expired and thus all evidence gathered had been deemed inadmissible in court. And when the verdict was read, the victim's



brother had to be physically restrained. According to the file, the victim's brother had not lunged at the alleged killer; no, he had lunged at *Kingsley*.

There was something to that.

And that's all I had. A distraught man who felt his murdered brother had not been given proper justice. Not much, but it was a start.

I sat back in my chair and stared at the file. The rain was coming down harder, rattling the window. I listened to it, allowed it to fill some of the emptiness in my heart, and found some peace. I checked my watch. Open House was in an hour and still no sign of Danny.

I pushed him out of my thoughts and logged onto the internet; in particular, one of my many investigation data bases. There had been no mention of the brother's name in the file, but with a few deft keystrokes I had all the information I needed.

The murder had made the local paper. The article mentioned the surviving family members. Parents were dead, but there had been two surviving siblings. Rick Horton and Janet Maurice. Just as I wrote the two names down, the house phone rang.



My heart sank.

I picked it up.

“Hi, dollface.”

“Tell me you’re on your way home,” I said.

There was a pause. He sucked in some air. “Tell the kids I’m sorry.”

“No,” I said. “You tell them.”

“Don’t.”

I did. I called the kids over and put them on the phone one at a time. When they were gone, I came back on the line.

“You shouldn’t drag the children into this, Samantha,” he said.

“Drag them into what, pray tell?”

He sighed. When he was done sighing, I heard a voice whisper to him from somewhere. A *female* voice.

“Who’s that whispering to you?” I asked.

“Don’t wait up.”

“Who’s that—”

But he disconnected the line.



We were late for Open House.

I had a hell of a time getting the kids ready, and had long ago abandoned any notion of making dinner. We popped into a Burger King drive-thru along the way.

"Tell me what you guys want," I said, speaking over my shoulder. We were third in line at the drive-thru. The kids were wearing some of their best clothes, and I was already worried about stains.

I looked in the rearview mirror. The kids were separated by an invisible line that ran between their two back seats. Crossing the line was grounds for punishment. At the moment, Tammy was hovering on the brink of that line, making faces at Anthony, taunting him, sticking her tongue out, driving him into a seething rage. I almost laughed at the scene, but had to do something.

"Tammy, your tongue just crossed the line. No TV or Game Boy tonight."

Anthony said, "Yes!" Then pointed at his sister.



“Ha!”

Tammy squealed. “But, Mom, that’s not fair! It was just my tongue!”

“Tongues count. Plus, you know better than to tease your little brother.” We moved up in line. “What do you two want to eat?”

Tammy said she didn’t want anything. Anthony gave me his usual order: hamburger, plain. I ordered Tammy some chicken fingers.

“I don’t want chicken fingers.”

“You like chicken fingers.”

“But I’m not hungry.”

“Then you don’t have to eat them, but if you waste them, the money’s coming out of your allowance. Anthony, don’t tease your sister.”

Anthony was doing a little victory dance in the back seat, which rocked the entire minivan. His sister had been successfully punished and he had escaped unscathed. It was a triumphant moment for younger brothers everywhere.

And just when he thought I wasn’t looking, just when he thought the coast was clear, he gave his sister the middle finger. Tammy squealed. I burst out laughing. And by the time we left the drive-thru, both



of them had lost two days of TV privileges.

And as I pulled out of the Burger King parking lot, Anthony wailed, "There's mustard on my hamburger!"

"Christ," I muttered, and made a U-turn and headed back through the drive-thru.

## 20.

After Open House, the three of us were sitting together on the couch watching reruns of *Sponge Bob*. Sadly enough, I had seen this episode before. Danny still wasn't home, nor did I really expect him to be any time soon.

Open House had gone well enough. Anthony was passing all his classes, but just barely. His teacher felt he spent too much time trying to be the class clown. Tammy, a few years older, was apparently boy crazy. Although her grades were just about excellent, her teacher complained she was a



distraction to the other students; mostly to the male variety.

Apparently, my kids liked attention, and I wondered if I was giving them enough of it at home.

"What's that smell?" I asked.

"Whoever smelt it dealt it," said Anthony, giggling.

"Probably you," said Tammy to her brother. "You're always cutting them."

"So do you!"

"Do not! I'm a girl. Girl's don't cut anything."

"Yeah, right!" shouted Anthony.

"I don't smell anything, Mommy," said Tammy, ignoring her brother.

I proceeded to sniff armpits and feet. As I smelled, they both giggled, and Anthony tried to smell my own feet.

"It's you, Mommy," he shouted, giggling. "Your feet stink!"

"Do not," I said. "Girls' feet don't stink."

"You're not a girl."

"Oh, really?"

"Then what is she, lame brain?" asked Tammy.

"She's a *lady*," said Anthony.



"Thank you, Anthony," I said, hugging his warm body. "Lady is good."

"And ladies have stinky feet," he added.

"Okay, now you just blew it," I said, and tickled the hell out of him. He cowered in the corner of the couch, kicking pillows at me, and then Tammy jumped on my back to defend her little brother and soon we were all on the floor, poking fingers at any and all exposed flesh, a big tickling free-for-all.

Later, as we lay gasping on the floor as Sponge Bob and his infamous square pants completed another fun-filled romp at the bottom of the ocean, Anthony asked, "Mommy, why are you always...cold?"

"Mommy is sick," I said. And, in a way, I was *very* sick.

"Are you going to die soon?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Mommy won't die for a very long time."

"Good!" he said.

"But can we catch what you have?" asked Tammy, always the careful one.

"No," I said. "You can't."

I suddenly wrinkled my nose. The smell was



back. From my angle on the floor, I could just see under the couch. And there, in all its glory, was one of Anthony's rolled up socks. A very smelly rolled up sock. I used a pencil and pulled it out, where it hung from the tip like radioactive waste.

"Look familiar, Anthony?" I asked.

He mumbled an apology and I told him to throw it in the wash, and as he got up to do so, Tammy and I made farting noises with each step he took.

Bad move.

He turned and threw the sock back at us and we spent the next few minutes playing hot potato with it, laughing until our stomachs hurt.

## 21.

After my attack six years ago, about the same time I first went online, I made a cyber friend.

I was exploring through the new and interesting world of chatrooms. I landed in a room called



*Creatures of the Night.* The room was comical to a degree, for there seemed to be a running script of a vampire appearing in a castle and sucking the life out of its inhabitants. There were many rapid postings, and it was difficult to keep up. Still, one thing was obvious: everyone here loved vampires with all their heart and soul. And many wanted to *be* vampires.

A private message box had next appeared on my screen. Someone named Fang950 was trying to contact me. He said *Hi* and I responded back. Over the course of the next few hours, which flew rapidly by, I found myself opening up to the this Fang950. It was exhilarating. I told him everything. Everything. All my deepest secrets. I didn't care if he believed me or not. I didn't know him from squat. But he listened, and he asked questions and he did not judge me. He was the perfect outlet to my angst. And no one knew about him but me. No one. He was all mine.

It was late, and it was still raining. I had gone to the open house alone. Danny had yet to come home. I had already fed for the night and was sitting in my office in a bit of a stupor. I always felt sluggish after feeding, not to mention bloated and sick to my



stomach.

A private message window popped up on my computer screen, followed by the sound of splashing water. It was Fang.

*You there, Moon Dance?* he wrote, referring to my screen name, the only name he knew me by.

*Yes, Fang, what's up?*

*Nothing new. Howabout you?*

There was never anything new with Fang. He told me little about himself. I knew only that he lived in Missouri and that he was twenty-eight.

So I spent the next few minutes catching him up on my new case. I left out names of course, but Fang was computer savvy. If he was interested enough he would find out about the story himself.

*What does your gut tell you about the file?* he asked.

*My gut tells me I'm onto something,* I answered.

*Too bad your gut can't be more specific.*

*Yes, too bad,* I wrote. *But it's helped me solve cases before, though. I've developed quite a reputation here. But I feel like I'm cheating.*

*Cheating?*

I thought about that a little, then wrote: *Well, other*



*P.I.'s don't have the benefit of a heightened sixth sense, or whatever you want to call it.*

*But other P.I.'s work in the day, he wrote. You are handicapped by working nights.*

*It's not much of a handicap. I can get around it.*

*Nonetheless. Remember, you help people. That's the important thing. Whether or not you're cheating doesn't matter. It's the end result, right? Didn't you once say you turn down more cases than you accept?*

*I wrote, Yes.*

*Which cases do you turn down? he asked.*

*Cheating spouses mostly.*

*Which cases do you accept?*

*The bigger cases. Murder cases. Missing person cases.*

*How do your clients find you?*

*Police referrals mostly, I wrote. If the police can't solve the crime, they will sometimes send the clients my way. I have developed a reputation for finding answers.*

*You do good work. You are like a super hero. You help those who have nowhere else to turn for*



*answers. You give them the answers.*

There it was again. Super hero.

The rain continued. I heard Danny come in, but he didn't bother to stop by my office in the back of the house. Instead, I heard him head straight into the shower. To shower *her* off him, no doubt.

*But sometimes the answers should remain hidden,* I wrote a few minutes later, distracted by Danny's appearance.

*Sometimes not,* wrote Fang. *Either way, your clients have closure.*

I nodded to myself, then wrote, *Closure is a gift.*

He wrote, *Yes. You give them that gift. So you think this distraught brother took a few shots at your client?*

*I'm thinking it's likely.* I paused in my typing, then added, *Do you believe that I am a vampire, Fang?*

*You have asked me this a hundred times,* he answered.

*And I have conveniently forgotten your answers a hundred times.*

Yes, he wrote. *I believe you are a vampire.*

*Why do you believe I am a vampire?*

*Because you told me you are.*



*And you believe that?*

*Yes.*

*I took in some air, then typed: I sucked the blood from a dead man last night.*

*There was a long pause before he wrote: Did you kill him, Moon Dance?*

*No, I didn't. He was already dead, part of a gang that attacked me. He was accidentally shot by someone in his gang. The shot had been intended for me.*

*OMG, are you okay?!*

*I loved Fang, whoever the hell he was. I wrote, Yes, thank you. It was nothing. The bangers didn't know with whom they were dealing.*

*Of course they didn't, how could they? So what happened to the dead guy?*

*I sucked his blood until I couldn't swallow another drop.*

*There was a long pause. Rain ticked on the window.*

*How did that make you feel? he asked.*

*At the time? Refreshed. Whole. Complete. Rejuvenated.*

*He tasted that good, huh?*



*Even better, I wrote.*

*How do you feel now?* he asked.

*Horrificed.*

*Does it worry you that he tasted so good?*

*Not really, I wrote. But I do realize now how much I'm missing. Cowblood is disgusting.*

*I bet. Can you still control yourself, Moon Dance?*

*Yes. I've never lost control of myself. As long as I'm satiated each night on the blood stored in my refrigerator.*

*What would happen if you ran out of blood?*

*I don't want to think about it, I wrote. It's never happened, nor do I plan on it happening.*

*Sounds like a plan,* he wrote.

*I laughed a little and sat back in my chair and drank some water. I typed, I met a werewolf.*

*No shit?*

*No shit, I wrote.*

*What's a werewolf like?*

*I don't really know just yet. Mysterious. Obsessed with the moon.*

*Stands to reason.*



*He's a practicing attorney, I wrote. And a very good one.*

*Well, we all need a day gig.*

*Or a night gig, I added.*

*Haha. Well, Moon Dance, it's late. Let me know how it goes with the werewolf. When will be the next full moon?*

*A few days. I already checked.*

*Have there been any unsolved murders resembling animals attacks?* he asked.

*Not to my knowledge.*

*Might want to stay alert for that,* he said.

*True, I wrote.*

*Goodnight, Moon Dance.*

*Goodnight, Fang.*

## 22.

I was driving south on the 57 Freeway when my cell phone rang. It was Kingsley.



"Have you heard the news?" he asked excitedly.

"That you're a werewolf?" I suggested.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, dear girl. Not over the phone lines. You never know who might be listening."

"Big Brother? Aliens? Homeland Security?"

"Hewlett Jackson's dead."

I blinked. "Your client."

"Now my ex-client."

"Murder?" I asked.

"Yes. Shot."

"Let me guess," I said. "Five times in the head."

"Close. Nine."

"Appears our killer wasn't going to take any chances this time."

"Find them," said Kingsley.

"That's my job," I said.

"You have any leads?"

"One."

"Just one?"

"That's all I need," I said.

"I see," he said. "Well, the police say you're the best. So I trust you."

There was some static, followed by a long pause. Too long.



"You there?" I asked.

"I'm here," he said, then added, "Tomorrow's a full moon, you know."

"I know," I said. "So, can I watch?"

"Watch?" he asked.

"You know, the transformation."

"No," he said. "And you're a sick girl."

"Not sick," I said. "Just were-curious."

He snorted and I could almost see him shaking his great, shaggy head. He said, "So I heard they found a corpse in Fullerton," he said, pausing. "Drained of blood."

"Tsk, ts, ts," I said. "Not over the phone. But if it puts you at ease, no, I didn't kill him."

"Good."

More static. More pausing. With some people, gaps in the conversation can feel uncomfortable. With Kingsley, gaps felt natural. Then again, we were immortal. Technically, we could wait forever.

Kingsley un-gapped the conversation. "So where you headed at this late hour?"

"It's early for me, and I'm following up on my one lead."

"Tell me about your lead."



So I did.

When I was finished, Kingsley said, "Yeah, I remember him. Rick Horton. His brother was dead and the only suspect was walking free because of a police screw up."

"Why, Kingsley, if I didn't know you better I would almost say you sound sympathetic."

"I wouldn't go *that* far."

"Tell me about the incident in the court," I said.

"He lunged at me, but it was sort of a half-ass effort. Mostly he called me a stream of obscenities."

"You must be used to them."

"Like they say, sticks and stones," he said. "He didn't seem the type for violence, though."

"Some never do."

"True," he said. "You know where he lives?"

"I've got his address. I still happen to have friends in high places."

"Good, let me know how it goes."

"Have fun tomorrow night," I said. "*Arr Arr Arrrooooo!*"

"Not funny," he said, but laughed anyway.

I disconnected the line, giggling.



## 23.

I took the 22 East, then headed south on the 55 and exited on Seventeenth Street. Rick Horton lived in an upscale neighborhood in the city of Tustin, about ten miles south of Fullerton. I continued following the Yahoo driving directions until I pulled up in front of a two-story Gothic revival. A house fit for a vampire.

From its triangular arches, to its cast-iron roof crestings, from its diamond-patterned slate shingles, to its multiple stacked chimneys, the Horton house was as creepy and menacing and haunted-looking as any house in Orange County. It was set well back from the road on a corner lot, surrounded by a massive ivy-covered brick and mortar fence. The fence was topped with the kind of iron spikes that would have made Vlad the Impaler proud. The entire house was composed of a sort of squared building stone.



I used the call box by the front gate. A man answered. I gave him my name and told him I was a private investigator and that I would like to speak to Rick Horton. There was a moment of silence, then the gate clicked open. I pushed it open all the way and followed a red brick path through a neat St. Augustine lawn. All in all, this brooding and romantic Victorian-era home seemed a little out of place in Tustin, California.

Just as I stepped up onto the entry porch, the door swung open. A small man with wire-rim glasses leaned through the open door. "Please come in," he said. "I'm Rick Horton."

I did and found myself in the main hall. To my right was a curving stairway. The ceiling was vaulted and there were many lit candles. The house was probably dark as hell during the day, perfect for a slumbering vampire.

I followed the little man through an arched doorway and into a drawing room. I've only been in a few formal drawing rooms, and, unlike the name suggests, there wasn't a single drawing in the place. Instead, it was covered in landscape oils. I was asked to sit on a dusty Chippendale camelback



sofa, which I did. The sofa faced a three-sided bay window with diamond-pane glass. The window overlooked the front lawn and a marble fountain. The fountain was of a mermaid spouting water. She easily had double-D breasts, which were probably a distinct disadvantage for real mermaids. Just outside the window three classic fluted Doric columns supported a wide veranda.

He sat opposite me in a leather chair-and-a-half, which was perfect for cuddling. I wasn't in the cuddling mood. Rick Horton wore single gold studs in each ear. He seemed about twenty years too old to be wearing single gold studs. Call me old-fashioned. He was dressed in green-plaid pajamas, with matching top and bottom. He had the air of a recluse. Maybe he was a famous author or something.

"Do you have a license I can see?" he asked. As he spoke, he looked a bit confused and out of sorts, blinking rapidly as if I were shining a high-powered light into his eyes.

I held out my license and he studied it briefly. I hated the picture. I looked deathly ill: face white, hair back, cheeks sallow. I looked like a vampire. The



make-up I had been wearing that day seemed to have evaporated with the camera's flash. The picture was also a little blurry, the lines of my face amorphous.

He sat back. "So what can I do for you, Ms. Moon?"

It was actually *Mrs.*, but you choose your battles. "I'm looking into a shooting."

"Oh? Who was shot?"

"My client; shot five times in the face." Horton didn't budge. Not even a facial twitch. "And I think you shot him, Mr. Horton."

That was a conversation killer. Somewhere in the house a grandfather clock ticked away, echoing along the empty hallways, filling the heavy silence.

"You come into my house and accuse me of murder?" he said.

"Attempted murder," I said. "My client did not die, which is how he was able to hire me in the first place."

"Who's your client?"

His attempt at moral outrage was laughable. His heart just didn't seem into it.

"Kingsley Fulcrum," I said.



“Yes, of course, the defense attorney. It was on the news. Watched him hide behind a tree. It was very amusing. I wished he had died. But I didn’t shoot him.”

I analyzed his every word and mannerism on both a conscious and subconscious level. I waited for that psychic-something to kick in, that extra-sensory perception that gives me my edge over mere mortals, that clarity of truth that tells me on an intuitive level that *he’s our man*. Frustratingly, I got nothing; just the fuzziness of uncertainty. His words had the ring of truth. And yet he still felt dirty to me. There was something wrong here.

“Did you hire someone to shoot Kingsley?” I asked.

“Maybe I should have an attorney present.”

“I’m not a cop.”

“Maybe you’re wired.”

“I’m not wired.” Weird, but not wired.

He shrugged and sat back. “I can’t express to you how happy I was to see that son-of-a-bitch get what he deserved. Trust me, if I had shot him I would be proud to say I had. But, alas, I cannot claim credit



for what I didn't do."

"Did you hire someone to kill him, Mr. Horton?"

"If I had, would I tell you?"

"Most likely not, but never hurts to ask. Sometimes a reaction to a question speaks volumes." More than he realized.

"Fine. To answer your question: I did not hire someone to kill Kingsley Fulcrum."

"Where were you on the day he was shot?"

"What day was it?"

I told him.

"I was here, as usual. My father left me a sizable inheritance. I don't work. Mostly I read and watch TV. I'm not what you would call a go-getter."

"You have no alibi?"

"None."

"Do you own a .22 pistol?"

He jerked his head up. *Bingo*. "I think this interview is over, Ms. Moon. I did not shoot Mr. Fulcrum. If the police wish to question me further, then they can do so in the presence of my attorney. Good night."

I stood to leave, then paused. "Hewlett Jackson was found dead today, shot nine times in the head."



Horton inhaled and the faintest glimmer of a smile touched his lips. The look on his face was one of profound relief. "Like I said, the police can interview me with my attorney present."

I found my way out of the creepy old house. I love creepy old houses. Must be the vampire in me.

## 24.

*You there, Fang?*

*I'm here, Moon Dance.*

*I visited a suspect tonight,* I wrote. When I instant message, I tend to get right to the point.

*The one you thought might be the shooter?*

*Yeah, that one, but now I'm not so sure he was the shooter.*

Fang paused, then wrote: *Doesn't feel right?*

*I'm not sure.*

*You're getting mixed signals.*

Yes, I wrote. Fang was damn intuitive himself,



and often very accurate in his assessments of my situations. I loved that about him. *But he feels dirty, though.*

*Well, maybe he's connected somehow.*

*Maybe. When I mentioned the gun, I got the reaction I was looking for.*

*There you go. Maybe his gun was used, but he wasn't the killer.*

*Maybe.*

There was a much longer pause. Typically, Fang and I chatted through the internet as fast as two people would talk. Perhaps even faster.

*I have a woman here, he wrote. She wants my attention.*

I grinned, then wrote: *Have fun.*

*I plan to. Talk to you soon.*

\* \* \*

It was time for my feeding.

I checked on my children; both were sound asleep. I even looked in on Danny. He once slept only in boxers. Now he sleeps in full sweats and a tee-shirt. His explanation was simple: He didn't like



brushing up against my cold flesh.

*Screw my cold flesh. I never asked for this.*

I walked quietly through the dark house. I didn't bother with the lights because a) I didn't need them and b) I didn't want to disturb the others. Danny recently commented that the thought of me wandering through the house at night creeped him out. Yeah, he said *creeped*. My own husband.

*Screw him, too.*

In the kitchen, I paused before the pantry. After a moment's hesitation, I opened the cupboard and reached for what I knew would be there: A box of Hostess Ding Dongs. I opened the box flap. Inside, two rows of silver disks flashed back at me. There was something very beautiful about the simplicity of the paper-thin tinfoil wrappings.

As I removed three of them, saliva filled my mouth. My heart began to race.

I sat at the kitchen table and unwrapped the first Ding Dong, wadding the foil wrapping tightly into a little silver ball. Before me, the chocolate puck gleamed dully in the moonlight. My stomach churned, seemed to turn in on itself, roiling like an ocean wave.



The first bite was small and exploratory. Christ, the chocolate tasted so damn good I could have had an orgasm. Maybe I did. Rich and complex and probably fake, the cocoa flavor lingered long after the first bite has been swallowed.

There was no turning back now.

I quickly ate the first Ding Dong and tore into the second. When I finished it, the third. Finally, I sat back in the wooden chair and felt like a royal glutton. Granted, most of my tastebuds were gone, but chocolate somehow made it through loud and clear.

Outside, through an opening in the curtained window over the sink, the sky was awash with moonlight. Tomorrow was a full moon. Tonight it was almost there, but not quite. I wondered if the almost-but-not-quite full moon had any affect on Kingsley. Maybe a few extra whiskers here and there. Teeth and nails a bit longer than usual.

I giggled about that and considered calling and teasing him, but it was two in the morning. Life is lonely at two in the morning.

My stomach gurgled.

*Here it comes*, I thought.

I wondered again how long Kingsley had been a



werewolf. I also realized he never really admitted to being one. Perhaps he was some variant of a werewolf. Perhaps a were-something else. Maybe a were-kitty.

I shifted in the chair to ease the pain growing in my stomach. Some serious cramping was setting in.

How old was he? Where was he from?

I suddenly lurched forward, gasping. I heaved myself out of the chair and over to the kitchen sink. I turned on the faucet just as the Ding Dongs came up with a vengeance, gushing north along my esophagus with alarming ferocity.

When done, I wiped my mouth and sat on the kitchen floor. I checked my watch. I had kept the Ding Dongs down for all of ninety-three seconds.

I wanted to cry.

25.

I don't sleep in a coffin.



I sleep in my bed, under the covers, with the blinds drawn. I go to bed the moment the kids head off to school, and wake up a couple of hours before they get out. Ideally, I could sleep through the entire cycle of the day, but I'm a mom with kids and *ideally* is out the window.

My sleep is deep and usually dreamless. It's also rejuvenating in ways that I can't fully comprehend. Prior to closing my eyes, usually minutes after my children have left for the day, I am nearly catatonic with fatigue. So much so that I sometimes wonder if I am dying—or perhaps nearly dead—and the deep sleep itself revives me, rejuvenates me, rebuilds me in supernatural ways that I will never understand.

And the moment my head hits the pillow I'm out cold. That is, until my alarm goes off at its loudest setting. I awaken grudgingly and exhausted, fully aware that I should still be sleeping, and that I should never, *ever* be seeing the light of day. Nevertheless, I do get up. I do face the light of day, and I keep trying to be the best mom I can.

My sleep is usually dreamless. But not always. Sometimes I dream that I am a great bird. I fly slowly, deliberately, my powerful wings outstretched,



flapping slowly. I never seem to be in a hurry.

Sometimes I dream of my kids, that I infect them with my sickness and they become like me: Hungry for blood, shunned by society, living a secret life of fear and confusion and pain. I usually wake up crying.

Today, I did not wake up crying. Today, I woke up with a smile on my face. Yes, I was still exhausted and could have used a few more hours of sleep, but nonetheless I woke up with a happy heart.

Today, I dreamed of a man. A great hulking creature of a man with the broadest shoulders I'd ever seem and a mane of hair as thick as any wild animal. A man whose eyes glowed amber under the moonlight and whose grin was more wolf than human. In the dream, Kingsley had been stalking me in the deep dark woods. Sometimes he was half-man, and sometimes he was all wolf. The biggest wolf I'd ever seen.

In the dream, I was hiding from him, but it was a game, and I had no fear of the man-wolf. I was hiding behind the trunk of a massive pine tree as he searched the forest for me.

We seemed to do this forever, playing, and I had



a sense that we *could* do this forever, if we so desired. That nothing could stop us. Ever. Finally, I stepped out from behind the tree and just stood there on the wooded path. Kingsley, the man, came to me, hunger in his amber eyes. I had forgotten about such hunger. Pushed it aside. I had assumed such a look would be forever lost to me, replaced only by Danny's disgust and horror.

But not with Kingsley. He *hungered* for me.

More important: He *accepted* me.

Then he was upon me, pouncing, taking me up in his great arms and lowering his face to mine. And as he did so, something flashed out of the corner of my eye. The golden amulet, the same one worn by my attacker years ago. I tried to ask Kingsley about the amulet but he lowered his face to mine and took me completely and wholly to a place I had never thought I would go again.

And that's when I awoke, smiling.

*Wow.*

A minute later when I had regained my senses, I got out of bed and, averting my eyes from the light sneaking in through the blinds, made my way into the living room. There, under the china hutch, I found the



box and opened it. Inside was the medallion with the three ruby roses.

I reached in and turned it over. There was blood on it. A tiny speckle that I had missed.

Why had Kingsley refused to discuss the medallion in my dream? Then again, how could he have even known about the medallion?

Then again, I reminded myself, it was just a dream.

*Better yet, why are you dreaming of another man? You are a married woman. Dreams like that could lead to trouble.*

A lot of trouble.

I returned the medallion to the box, closed the lid and smiled again.

It had been, after all, a hell of a dream.

## 26.

Before I became a full-time creature of the night, I



was a federal agent for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD. Although its acronym was not as sexy-sounding as the FBI, my ex-partner and I busted our fair share of bad guys; in particular, real estate scam artist and loan swindlers and those who preyed on the poor.

Anyway, Chad Helling and I had been partners for just over two years when I had been forced to quit and find a night job. He understood. Or, rather, he understood the *given* reason.

He and I were still close, and through him I used the federal government's resources for all they were worth. In exchange, I did some pro bono investigating work for him.

Chad answered his cell on the third ring. "Hey, sunshine."

"Sunshine?" I asked.

"Sorry. Poor choice of words. What's up?"

"I need some help," I said.

"What else is new?"

I ignored that. "The name's Rick Horton out of Tustin. I need to know if he has a twenty-two caliber pistol registered to his name."

"Anything else?"



"No, that's it."

"You got it, Sunshine."

"Asshole," I said, but he had already hung up.

It was late evening. I tried Kingsley at his office number, but was not surprised to discover that Kingsley had called in sick since this was the night of the full moon. I tried his home number. It was answered immediately.

"Tonight's the big night," I said. "Arooo!"

"Who's this?" asked a stuffy voice.

Whoops!

"I'm, uh, Samantha Moon. May I speak to Kingsley?"

A pause on the other end. I thought I heard a noise from somewhere in the background. Perhaps my imagination was playing tricks on me, but, son-of-a-bitch, I thought I had heard the howl of a dog.

Or a wolf.

"Master Kingsley is...indisposed at this time. I'll tell him you rang."

*Master Kingsley?*

"Please do," I said, trying to match the upper crust voice. I think I warbled perhaps a little too long on *do*. The line was disconnected, and not by me.



Almost immediately my cell vibrated in my hand. I looked at the face-plate. It was my ex-partner.

"Yup, a twenty-two caliber pistol is registered to one Rick Horton," said Special Agent Chad Helling. "If you knew that why did you need me?"

"I didn't know that," I said. "I surmised."

"That was a hell of a surmise. We could use someone like you at HUD. Too bad you keep such strange hours."

"Thanks, Chad. I owe you one."

"Or two; I've lost track."

## 27.

It was 6:30 p.m., and the kids were playing at a neighbor's house.

I was in my study going over my notes and reviewing the internet video feed of Kingsley's shooting. Despite myself I laughed as I watched Kingsley ducking and dodging the bullets. Although



immortal, each shot must have hurt like hell, and, at the time, the bullets had done serious enough damage to render him almost useless.

I paused on the clearest image of the shooter, which was still pretty grainy. Unfortunately, due to the poor quality of the image, it was impossible to tell if the shooter had been Rick Horton. Whoever it had been was wearing a generic warm-up jacket and a red ball cap. Seemed obvious to me that the shooter was wearing a fake mustache, too, but I couldn't be sure. It just seemed too prominent, and in one frame it even stuck out at an odd angle, as if the glue had come undone. This, too, was noted in the police file.

I now knew Horton owned a .22, and a .22 was used in the crime. Where did that get me? Not much, but at least it was a start.

I felt uneasy, unrested, *undead*.

Shrugging my shoulders, which at this time of the day suddenly seemed twice as heavy, I absently rubbed—or sought—an ache in my neck that seemed always to move just beyond my fingertips. Like trying to catch a fish with your bare hands. Since my attack, since my change, my body ached in places and in ways I had never thought possible.



*Maybe this is what it feels like to be dead.*

I next found an article on the internet about the murder of Hewlett Jackson, Kingsley's one-time client who had taken nine shots to the face. And, not being a werewolf, he promptly died. Hewlett's body had been found in a parking lot, still inside his car, shot outside a seedy bar I was unfortunately familiar with. There had been no robbery, just a blatant killing.

Interestingly, no one yet had made a connection with Jackson's murder to Kingsley's attack.

Maybe I was barking up the wrong tree.

*Did werewolves bark?*

I sat back in my chair and stared up at the painted ceiling. The cobwebs in one corner of the room were swaying gently, though I felt no breeze. I should probably clean those someday. The sun was due to set in a few minutes. Its lingering presence in the sky was the reason behind my current uneasiness and shortness of breath and general foul temperament.

I used to worship the sun. Now it was my enemy. Or, like Superman, my kryptonite.

I drummed my short fingers on the desk. My nails



were thick and somewhat pointed. The nails themselves were impossible to cut. They shaped themselves and seemed to hold steady at that length.

I wondered again if Horton had hired a killer.

But that didn't feel right. No hitman worth his salt would have made such a blatant and dangerous attempt in broad daylight. In front of video cameras. In front of a goddamn courthouse. No. The shooter was making a point; most important, the shooter had not cared about getting caught. I was sure of that. Oh, he cared just enough to wear some silly disguise, but I truly felt in my heart that the shooter had not expected to actually escape.

But the shooter had escaped.

There was a knock on my front door. I swung my feet around and stood. My legs were a little shaky. The shakiness was due to the lingering presence of the sun. I moved slowly through the house, to the front door.

And standing there in my doorway was Detective Sherbet of the Fullerton Police Department. He was holding a bag of donuts.



We sat in the living room.

I was in my grandmother's rocking chair and he was on the sofa across from me. The sun was still minutes from setting, and I felt vulnerable. My mind was firing at a slower rate. My body was sluggish. In fact, I felt mortal. I forced myself to focus on the detective sitting before me.

Sherbet held out the bag of donuts. "Place on Orangethorpe makes them fresh this time everyday."

I glanced inside the open bag and my stomach turned. "You are perpetuating the stereotype of policemen and donuts," I said.

"Hell, I *am* the reason for that stereotype." He chuckled to himself. "Lord knows how many of these I've eaten. Can't be too bad for you. I'm sixty-seven and still going strong."

I looked away when he took a healthy bite into his donut.



"You don't look too well, Mrs. Moon. Is it too early in the day for you? I tried coming when the sun set, you know, with your skin condition and all. Now what sort of condition do you have?"

I told him.

"Yeah, right, that one," he said. "Well, I looked into it."

"Really?"

"Oh, I'm not trying to snoop on you, Mrs. Moon, I assure you. I just love learning new things. Always been that way."

I nodded; he was snooping on me.

He continued, "Anyway, apparently it's a very rare condition. Usually shows up first in children, not so much in adults...." He let his voice trail off.

"Well, I'm a late bloomer. Always been that way." I wasn't feeling too chatty. Warning bells were sounding in my head—only my head felt too dull to sort through them. "What can I do for you, detective?"

"Oh, just wondering how your case is coming along. Actually, *our* case is coming along." He chuckled again.

"Our case is moving along fine," I said.

"Any leads?"



“Not yet.” I’m always hesitant to share any information to cops. At least, not until I’m ready. When I needed Sherbet, I’d come to him. Not the other way around.

He finished the donut and licked his fingers; he fished around in the bag—which must have gotten his fingers sticky all over again—and removed a cinnamon cake. He seemed pleased with his selection and promptly took a healthy bite.

I was sucking air carefully. My lungs felt somehow smaller. I was having a hell of a hard time getting a decent breath.

His eyes flicked over at me. “You okay, Mrs. Moon?”

“Yes; it’s just a little bright for me.”

“Your shades are down. We are practically sitting in the dark.”

I motioned toward the weak sunlight peaking through a crack in the curtains. “Any sunlight at all can be harmful.”

“You have a sensitive condition.”

“Very.”

“There was a murder in Fullerton a week ago,” he said, biting into the cinnamon donut. He wasn’t



looking at me. "Kid was drained of his blood, or at least most of it. The thing is, the medical examiner doesn't know where the blood went."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the kid was lying there on the sidewalk, shot to death, and there wasn't an ounce of blood around him—or even in him, for that matter." This time he didn't chuckle.

"Maybe he, you know, bled elsewhere."

"Maybe." Sherbet took another sizable bite. Cinnamon drifted down, glittering in the angled sunlight coming in through the blinds. "No one knows who shot him. No one heard anything. So I keep at it. You know, just doing my job. I find out that the victim is a known banger, has a long rap sheet, name of Gilberto. I talk to Gilberto's friends, discover they had a party the night of his murder. But that's all I get from them. I figure the victim must have been shot after their little party." He paused. "And then we find this."

The detective licked his fingers and reached inside his Members Only jacket and pulled out a photograph of a hand gun. "Kids found it in the bushes a few streets down the road. We test the gun, discover it's the same gun that did the banger.



We also lift some prints from it. Turns out the prints belong to Gilberto's uncle. Guy's name is Elias. So I shake down Elias the other night, and he says he shot the gun in self-defense."

Detective Sherbet peered inside the donut bag carefully. The room was still and quiet. Sherbet's face was half-hidden in shadows. The bag crinkled as his hand groped for the next donut. "So I push Elias some more, really come down on him. Believe it or not, I can be a real hardass if I want to be."

Actually, I believed it.

He continued. "And he tells me the whole story. I follow up on the story with the others who were there that night. The story checks out." He paused and studied me carefully. The whites of his eyes shone brightly in the dark. "The story goes like this. They were partying. A woman shows up. Jogging, believe it or not, in the dead of night. Anyway, I get a teenage punk to admit that they were going to gang rape her. But things go wrong, horribly wrong."

I said nothing.

"Turns out they cornered a tigress." He chuckled softly and went to town on a chocolate old-fashioned.



He worked his way along the outer rim of the donut. "She showed them hell. A real G.I. Jane."

I almost laughed. I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but it sounded funny.

He continued. "She apparently picks this Gilberto scumbag up by the throat. A two hundred and fifty pound man. Picks him up with one hand. And that's when the story gets a little fuzzy. At some point around that time a gun goes off, and Gilberto takes a bullet in the chest. The others flee like the scattering rats they are. One of them, hiding in the bushes, watches the woman carry off Gilberto's corpse into the dead of night."

We were silent. I could almost hear his tired digestive system going to work on the donuts.

"Hell of a campfire story, if you ask me," he said. He wadded up the paper bag. "What do you think about all of that?"

"Hard to believe."

He chuckled. "Exactly. Group of guys out having fun, drunk and fist-fighting and things turn ugly and a gun goes off, and one of them turns up dead. Happens all the time. Sometimes the group will even put their heads together and come up with a wild



story.”

He held the wadded-up donut bag in both hands. He rested his chin on top of his hands and stared at me. “But I have never heard of a story more wild than this.”

I continued saying nothing.

“You ever jog alone at night, Mrs. Moon?”

“Yes.”

We sat quietly. “Now, as far as I can tell, this girl committed no crime. She was acting in self-defense, and I can guarantee you she taught these boys a lesson. I’ve never seen a group of men so fucking spooked in my life. Still, I would kind of like to know what she did with that body. I mean it went missing for a few hours, then reappeared later that morning. Minus a lot of blood. You have any thoughts on that, Mrs. Moon?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

He stood up and gave me his card. “Well, thanks for chatting with an old man. I expect to see more of you.”

“Lucky you.”

He stepped over to the front door. “Oh, and Mrs. Moon...were you jogging that night?”



“Which night was that?”

He told me.

“Yes,” I said.

“And you didn’t see anything?”

“Nothing that would help you, detective.”

“Great, thank you.”

He shook my hand, holding it carefully in both of his. His hands were so very warm. He nodded once and then left my home.

*So very warm....*

## 29.

I drove slowly past the massive Gothic home, peering through the wrought iron fortification. The house was dark and still. I continued by the brooding structure, parked around the corner and killed the minivan’s engine.

Other than a handful of trash cans mixed between some parked cars, the street was empty, as it should



be at 2:00 a.m., the vampire's hour.

Whatever that means.

A small wind scuttled a red Carl's Jr. hamburger wrapper along the gutter. Hamburgers are not on my short list of acceptable foods, although raw hamburger meat has been known to sometimes—sometimes—stay down. Where it went, of course, I had no idea.

New topic.

The brick fence that ran along the east side of Horton's home was almost entirely covered in ivy. Streetlamps were few and far between, and none on this particular corner. Better for me.

I stepped out of the minivan and into the cool night air. The darkness was comforting. Perhaps I needed the darkness more than it needed me, but I liked to think that I enriched and added flavor to the night. I liked to believe I gave the night some purpose, a sort of symbiotic relationship.

It was 2:00 a.m., the vampire's hour, and I was feeling good.

I approached the vine-covered wall and did a cursory look around. No one was out. The street was empty. The wall before me was ten feet high and



topped with iron spikes. Spikes, stakes, ice picks, railroad spikes, of course, all made me nervous. Hell, I've been known to shudder at the sight of a toothpick.

With a small crowbar tucked into a loop on my jeans, I paused briefly beneath the brick fence and then jumped. High. Soaring through the air.

I landed on top and grabbed hold of an iron spike in each hand. Early on in my vampirism, I discovered I could dunk a basketball. Basketball rims were typically about ten feet high. The kids at the local park had been impressed beyond words. So was I. We had, of course, been playing at night.

Careful of the iron spikes, I squatted there on top of the wall like an oversized—albeit cute—frog. In true amphibian-like fashion, I jumped over the spikes and landed smoothly on the far side of the wall, hands flat on the cement.

I dashed around to the back of the house, and promptly pulled up short, coming face to face, or face to muzzle, with two startled Doberman pinchers. Both were huge and beautiful, sleek and powerful. Both blended perfectly with the night.

Their surprise at seeing me turned quickly to



fear. No doubt they caught a whiff of me. Whimpering, they turned and dashed off. Had they owned tails, those would have been tucked between their hind legs; as it were, their round nubs shuddered like frightened little moles poking up through the dark earth. The dogs disappeared within some thick shrubbery near a tool shed.

I had that effect on dogs, and animals in general, who seem to sort of see right through my human disguise. I guess they didn't like what they saw. Too bad. I love dogs.

Horton's house might have an alarm. Hell, in Southern California many lesser homes had some form of security. Although I suspected the Dobermans were the extent of the backyard security, I wasn't taking any chances with the downstairs French doors. Instead, I focused on the second floor balcony with its sliding glass door, leading, by my reckoning, to a guest bedroom.

I reached up, gripped the edge of the balcony's wooden floor. In one fluid motion, I pulled myself up and over the railing and landed squarely in the center of the balcony, which shuddered slightly. Next, I used the pry bar to jimmy open the sliding glass door's



lock. Luckily, nothing broke. This time. I was getting better at this.

I stepped into the house.

### 30.

It was indeed the guest room.

The bed, however, was currently empty of guests. A massive Peruvian tapestry hung behind the bed, evoking a simple scene of village life. Moonlight shone through the open drapes, splashing silver over everything. I loved moonlight. Sunlight was overrated.

The air was musky. Newly-stirred dust motes drifted into the moonbeams. Being a trained investigator, I surmised this room hadn't been used in quite some time.

I stepped through into a dark hallway. Well, dark for others, that is. For me, the hallway crackled with molten streams of quicksilver energy, turning everything into distinct shades of gray. Better than



any flashlight.

The hallway segued into a wooden railing. Beyond, was a view of the downstairs living room.

And that's when I met the Cat From Hell.

It was sitting on the railing in perfect repose, forepaws together, tail swishing, ears back, its reflective yellow eyes bright spheres of hate. It growled from deep within its chest cavity; we stared at each other for about twenty seconds, just two creatures of the night crossing paths.

Apparently, it wasn't feeling the same sort of kinship.

Like an umbrella, its fur sprang open. Pop. Then it *screeched* bloody hell, and in one quick movement, slashed me across my face. It leaped from the railing, darted down the hallway, hung a right and disappeared down a flight of stairs.

I touched my cheek. The little shit. The wound was already scabbing. I knew within minutes it would be gone altogether.

Still. The little shit.

I waited motionless, certain someone would come to investigate the devil cat. But no one came.

I continued on, and at end of the hall I peaked into



an open door. There, sleeping as peaceful as can be, was Rick Horton. From the doorway, I studied his massive room and noted the various antique furnishings, especially the massive, ornate mirror. The room itself was immaculate; everything in its place. Because of that, it was the last place I would have wanted to sleep. A bedroom needed to be lived in.

Rick Horton slept on an undraped four-poster bed. Instead, coats, sweaters and slacks hung neatly from hangers along the horizontal canopy board, perhaps an extension of his closet. Beneath the bed was a cardboard box. The box was slightly askew and not in accordance with the rigorous precision of the room, as if it had been recently shoved under the bed.

I walked quietly to his bedside. Little did Horton realize that an honest-to-God vampire was leaning over him in his sleep, peering down at the smooth slope of his pale neck, where a fat artery pulsed invitingly. I could easily overpower him, tear open the flesh and start drinking. It would be so easy, and warm blood tasted... *so... goddamn... good.*

I sighed and turned my attention to the box,



sliding it silently from beneath the bed. Horton never stirred, although I wondered if his sub-conscious was somehow aware of me. Perhaps at this very moment he was fleeing a beautiful vampire in his dreams. Okay, maybe not beautiful, but certainly damn cute with a curvy little body. I wondered fleetingly if the vampire in his dreams catches him. If so, what does she do with him?

I exited the room and made my way back through the long hallway and found a cavernous study. I didn't risk turning on the light. Instead, I pulled open the curtains and allowed for some moonlight, and sat down in a brass-studded executive chair behind a black lacquer desk. I opened the box.

Inside were folders and papers. I removed the first folder, flipped it open and was greeted almost immediately with my own agency's business card stapled to a sheet of paper. Written on the paper was my physical description. I was pleased to say that I was referred to as being *thin* and *pretty*. There was more. A meticulously written recap of our conversation. Most disturbing was a description of my minivan and my license plate number. He had watched me leave.



The second file was much thicker. Inside was a vast array of facts and photographs of Hewlett Jackson, Kingsley's now-murdered client. Hewlett was a young black man, good-looking. There were some pictures of him coming and going from a residence, pictures of him leaving a white Ford Mustang, of him sitting in a park with a female companion, or him drinking late at night with friends at an outdoor restaurant. Careful notes were made of times and places of Hewlett's movements and activities.

One particular time and place was circled in red ink. Most interesting was that it was the exact time and place Hewlett was found murdered.

The last file contained similar information on Kingsley Fulcrum. I read the entire file with much interest, then closed the box, exited the study and returned the whole shebang back under Horton's bed. I even made sure the box was slightly askew.

I stared down at the man who had lost his brother within this last year. I felt pity for him. But Rick Horton had decided to take justice into his own hands. And that's where my pity ended.



And, according to his notes, I was next on his list.

I could kill him now and never worry that he might make an unwanted appearance with my children present. But I do not kill people, especially people defenseless in their sleep. Better to let the law handle this.

I slipped away into the night.

## 31.

It was early afternoon, and I felt like crap, and I would continue to feel like crap until the sun disappeared in a few hours. We were at Hero's again, where very few people knew our names, but at least the bartender remembered our drinks.

"A glass of chardonnay and a martini?" he asked, giving us a warm smile. He had cute dimples around his mouth. Thick lips, too. Thick, juicy lips.

"You bet," Mary Lou said, beaming. He winked and moved down the bar to pour our drinks, and Mary Lou continued smiling at his back, or perhaps



at his backside. "Isn't he just amazing? What a memory!"

"Down girl. It's his job to remember," I said. "He does well to remember."

He returned with our drinks. Mary Lou handed him her credit card, although she probably would have preferred to slip it inside the waistband of his Jockey shorts. She sipped carefully from her glass and finally looked over at me. "So what's the latest news with your case?"

"Are you done undressing our bartender with your eyes?"

"Not yet. Wait. Okay, now I am."

"You're a married woman, with kids," I said.

"I know. Your point?"

"Married women shouldn't be undressing bartenders with their eyes."

"Show me that in the rule book."

"There is no rule book."

She looked at me. "Exactly. Now tell me about your case."

I gave her an update, and to her credit she forgot about the bartender and his buns and focused on



me.

"Well, Horton's obviously your guy. What a fucking creep." She shuddered slightly.

"Do you talk this way around your kids?"

"No, just you. I let it all out around you."

"Lucky me," I said.

"And you were next on his list?" she asked.

"You know, to silence the pesky private eye."

"You are kind of pesky, aren't you?"

"The peskier the better."

"So what're you going to do?" she asked.

I sipped some wine. I tasted nothing, literally, but at least I didn't double over with stomach cramps. Sipping from the wine glass gave me some semblance of normalcy. "I'm going to have a talk with Detective Sherbet this evening."

"But what can he do?" asked my sister. "He can't just barge in there and arrest the guy without probable cause."

"You've been watching too much TV, but you're right. Not without a search warrant. And one needs evidence to obtain a search warrant."

"So breaking into this guy's house and finding evidence hidden under his bed won't fly with a judge,



right?"

"Right," I said.

"So what will you do?" she asked.

"The detective and I will figure something out."

"Will you tell this detective about your break-in?"

"Yeah, probably."

"Will he like it?"

"Probably not."

We were silent, and I decided now was the time to tell her about the attempted rape and the death of the gang banger—and about the sucking of blood. So I did. The story took a few minutes, during which Mary Lou said nothing although I noted she had quickly finished her drink.

"That was very reckless of you," she said when I was done.

"I know."

"And you really drank his blood?"

"Yes."

She was silent. I was silent. The noises of the bar came floating to my ears, the chink of glasses being washed in the sink, the sound of laughter behind me, the snapping opening of the cash register drawer.

"What if this somehow causes you to lose control,



Samantha?"

"I love my kids too much to lose control."

"Then you took a foolish chance by drinking that man's blood."

"Yes, I did. But the situation had gotten quickly out of control. Before I knew it, I was holding a corpse."

"You should not be jogging so late."

I drank my wine. Sometimes Mary Lou was impossible to talk to.

"When is there a better time? I'm a goddamn vampire."

"The early evening."

"In the early evening I have the kids and work."

"Then why do you need to jog at all?"

"Because it helps me stay sane."

We were alone at this end of the counter. As we spoke, my eyes constantly scanned the crowd, making sure we had no eavesdroppers. "I walk a fine line, Mary Lou. Everything around me is threatening to crumble away. Something like exercise is within my control. I need control right now."

"Maybe you need help."

We had gone through this before. "There's no



one to help me.”

“Maybe you need to speak to a therapist, someone, anyone.”

“You think this is in my head?”

“No. It’s real. I know that.”

“The moment I tell a therapist that I’m a vampire, they’ll lock me up and take away my kids. Is that what you want?”

She didn’t answer immediately.

“Is that what you want, Mary Lou?”

“No, it’s not what I want, but I also think your kids are not living a very healthy and normal life.” She sighed and reached out and held my hand. “You are a good mother, I know that. I know your kids mean everything to you, but I think they are in an unhealthy environment.”

“I see it as a *different* environment,” I said, then studied her concerned face. “Wait. Do you worry for their safety?”

She said nothing.

“Do you worry that I will have a craving and drink from my own children?”

Nothing.



“You do, don’t you?”

She sucked in some air. “No, of course not. But if you keep behaving recklessly you might, you know, someday lose sight of who you are. Sam, you’ve fought for so long to keep things together. I don’t want to see your life crumble around you just because you found the taste of one man’s blood particular good.”

I studied her and she looked away. I suddenly had an insight. “You’ve been talking to Danny, haven’t you?”

She reddened. “Yes. He called me the other night to apologize for not picking up the kids. He’s worried about the kids.”

“Oh, really? And he shows this by coming home at midnight?”

She shrugged. “He worries that you will have a negative influence on their lives. I told him that was ridiculous. No mother loves her kids more than you.”

We were silent. It was just before dusk, and I was irritable and cranky and tired. I wanted to sleep.

“He’s screwing someone else,” I said.

“You know for sure?”

“No. But I’m going to find out.”



"I'm sorry, Sam."

"So am I. But it was bound to happen, right? Who wants to be married to a freak?"

"You're not a freak," she said, and then cracked a smile. "Well, okay, maybe a little freaky."

I laughed. She reached out and took my hand. I reveled in the warmth.

She said, "So what are you going to do, Sam?"

"Follow him," I said. "I am, after all, an ace detective."

## 32.

The sun had just set, and I was in Detective Sherbet's office. I felt good. Most important, I felt cognizant and lucid.

I sat in the visitor's chair in front of his desk and noticed for the first time that Sherbet was a handsome man. His arms were heavily muscled and tan, with dark hair circling his forearms. I didn't



usually go for arm hair on men, but on Sherbet it seemed fitting and a little exciting. He seemed like a man's man, powerful and virile. No wonder it galled him to think his kid might be gay.

"So how did the basketball game go the other day?" I asked.

There was a greasy bag of donuts sitting on top of a very full trash can. The scent of donut oil was foul, and slightly upsetting to my stomach. I fought through it.

"Kid was horrible. He actually took a shot at the wrong basket. Hell, he almost even made it. I nearly cheered. The coach benched him after that."

"Did your boy have fun?"

"No. He was miserable."

"Did you have fun?"

"No. I was embarrassed."

"So what are you going to do? Keep forcing him to play?"

"You sound like my wife."

"Your wife sounds like she might be the only reasonable parent in your household."

"I don't know what I'm going to do with that kid."

"Just love him."



"I do."

Our section of the police station was empty and quiet. The detective had his hands clasped over his rotund belly. Although his stomach could have been flatter, the roundness sort of added to his manhood, pronouncing him as a real man who wasn't afraid to eat.

"You're looking at my fat belly," he said.

"I would call it rotund," I said.

"Rotund? Are you trying to get on my good side?"

"Maybe."

He rubbed a hand over the curving sweep of his belly, then played with one of the clear plastic buttons. His face turned somber. "Samantha, I know you were assaulted six years ago, here in Fullerton. It's in your record. You were found in Hillcrest Park, half-dead. Your throat torn open. Although there was little blood at the scene, you had almost bled to death. At first it was believed that you might have been attacked by an animal, a dog or coyote. But later you told investigators that it had been a man. He was never found."

"Detective, I don't want to talk about—"

"Now, I understand you might not want to talk



about it, but there's something strange going on here in my town, my backyard, so to speak. My beat. I would appreciate if maybe someday you could help me understand."

"Someday," I said. "Just not today."

"Okay, fine. On to item number two. What do you have on the Fulcrum case?"

Relieved to be talking about anything else, I told him everything I knew about Horton. When I got to the part about breaking and entering Horton's home, I said, "Are you going to arrest me?"

"Not yet. Keep going."

"Horton had files on Hewitt Jackson and Kingsley Fulcrum, not to mention a new file on me. In these files are detailed information on Jackson's and Fulcrum's movements. A date and time was circled on Jackson. In fact, it was the exact date and time he was murdered."

Detective Sherbet's eyes widened a little. For Sherbet, this was the next best thing to him jumping up and down and yelling *yippee!* "Then he's our man."

"Yes, I think so."

"You think so? Hell, he had everything but the



smoking gun. And he might still have that, as well, once we serve a search warrant."

"He just doesn't feel right."

"Is that your gut talking?"

"Yes."

"Well, my gut says he's our man."

"How are you going to convince a judge to issue a warrant?"

He sat back, laced his fingers behind his thick head of salt and pepper hair. "Good question. Any ideas?"

"You're the homicide detective."

He thought about that. "How about a trash run?"

"As in dig through his trash?" I said.

"Sure. It's public domain. We find something incriminating we can convince a judge to issue a warrant."

I blinked. "We?"

"Yes, I'm not going to dig through his trash alone."

"The trash went out last night," I said. "I saw the barrels."

"It's settled then. Next Thursday we go out to Horton's place and dig through his trash."



“Sounds like a date.”

“Let’s just hope we find something.”

“Oh, I’m sure we’ll find something,” I said. “Let’s just hope we find the *right* something.”

### 33.

The kids were in karate class together, so I used the opportunity to work-out at Jacky’s. It was late evening, and the sun had set. I was feeling strong and healthy. At the moment, Jacky was taping my fists. We were both silent. I think he sensed I was in one of my moods. Occasionally, he would look up into my face, then quickly avert his eyes.

“I’m not going to bite you, Jacky.”

“You think I’m afraid of you?” he asked. “Well, I am.”

I rubbed his shining head with my already-taped right hand.

In fact, I was having a hard time letting go of my conversation with Mary Lou. I was trying to



comprehend the fact that she had been secretly speaking to Danny. Discussing what an unfit mother I was.

"Whatever's eating at you," said Jacky, "take it out on the punching bag. That's my motto."

And so I did. Pummeling the thing until I was dripping sweat. We worked in three minute drills, with Jacky screaming at me to keep my hands up. I would finish each round in a flurry of punches, rapid-fire body shots to the punching bag. During one of these flurries, I caught Jacky's expression as he steadied the punching bag. It was one of profound pain. The punches were reverberating through the bag and into him. The Irishman was taking a beating, but he seemed to love it.

At the end of the sixth round I dropped my hands to my side. The gloves felt like bags of cement. Jacky staggered away to get some water.

I leaned my forehead against the punching bag. I was still thinking about Danny. It seemed to me that he was building a case against me. Of course, building a case against me couldn't be easier. Hell, in my current condition, even I knew I was an unfit



mother. But I was doing my best and I loved my kids with all my heart. You could never replace that. Ever.

At the far end of the gym, I noticed a tall boxer working out with one of Jacky's long-time trainers. The boxer was young and blond and very muscular. His punches were rapid and precision-like. His muscles stood out on his hot skin.

Jacky came back, holding a little Dixie cup full of water. The cup was shaking in his hands.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about those Dixie cups," I said. "We pay good money to join your gym, and the best you can give us are these paper thimbles in return?"

"Ah, lass, you pay for the atmosphere."

I nodded toward the young, hotshot boxer. "Who's that?"

"That's Desmond Beacon. A boxing champion in the Marines, went undefeated. He's turning pro."

"I want to box him."

Jacky's eyes brightened briefly—perhaps with excitement—and then he came back down to earth and shook his head. "Look, kid, I know I built your hopes up and all that, but that ain't going to happen. Maybe we could arrange a fight with another broad."



“Broad?” I said. “Maybe I should box *you*.” I looked again at the ex-Marine. “I want to fight *him*.”

“No, lass. I’m sorry.”

“So he kicks my ass. At least it’ll give me something else to think about.”

Jacky looked at me and sighed. “Your day that shitty, huh?”

I thought of Danny cheating—or possibly cheating—and I thought of possibly losing my kids. “Yeah,” I said. “Hell of a shitty day.”

He sighed again and said, “Hold on.” He went over to the Wonder Kid and his trainer, spoke briefly, pointed at yours truly. Desmond Beacon shook his head, said something, and they all laughed. All of them, that is, except Jacky. He got into the tall Marine’s face. By got into his face, I mean, Jacky looked up from the man’s chest. I had no doubt that Jacky could have taken the Marine in his day. But his day was long past him. They stared each other down for another ten seconds and then the Marine turned away, dismissing Jacky with a contemptuous smirk.

“What was that all about?” I asked when Jacky had hobbled back.

“Fucking prick,” said Jacky. “I have a mind to kick



his ass.”

“What did he say?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“He doesn’t want to fight me?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“It’s because I’m a woman.”

“He said something about that,” said Jacky, looking back at the Marine, who had gone back to shadow boxing. “Actually, he said something about doing something else to you, but I ain’t gonna repeat it to you.”

“Is that when you stuck up for me?”

“The kid’s disrespectful. Someone needs to show him a lesson.”

“I agree.”

“Samantha...I get nervous when I see that look in your eye.”

But I wasn’t listening. I was already marching over to the six foot four Desmond Beacon, who was shadow boxing near the ring. When he saw me coming he stopped, nudged his trainer, and grinned. A wolfish sort of grin. When I got to him, I looked him in the eye, smiled sweetly, and promptly kicked him square in the balls.



*Hope he's wearing a cup.*

His eyes bulged and a look of confusion swept across his face and then he dropped to a knee, groaning and turning red.

*Guess not.*

His little trainer shrieked like a monkey. He grabbed my shoulder and tried flinging me around, but I don't fling easily and he lost his balance. Instead, he settled for getting in my face. "What the hell are you doing, Missy? Are you out of your goddamn mind?"

"Just maybe," I said. I pushed the trainer aside and looked down at the boxer kneeling before me. I felt like a queen. "Will you fight me now?"

Desmond Beacon looked up. His face had gone from red to green.

"You bet your ass," he croaked.



Jacky and I were in a corner of the ring.

The little Irishman was doing some last minute adjustments to my head gear. The headgear felt big and clunky. I didn't think I needed it, but having it on seemed to make the others happy. The Marine, in the opposite corner, was also wearing head gear. I assumed he, too, felt the gear was unnecessary.

I stared down at Jacky's bald head as he now worked on my gloves. From this angle I could just make out some old boxing scars above his brow. Many, many old boxing scars. There was a wicked little gleam in Jacky's eye whenever he looked up at me; he was breathing hard and fast, face red with excitement.

"Remember what I always tell you," he said, "keep your gloves up."

"Keep them up? Or down? I get confused."

But Jacky wasn't listening. In fact, he had this sort of dreamy look on his face. Perhaps he had regressed back to the backroom fighting halls of 1950s Belfast, when he was a young prize fighter with something to prove. His fighting days were long gone and I had a feeling I was his outlet, but that was okay. I wanted to fight. I wanted an honest-to-God



slugfest. Sometimes you just need to beat the crap out of something.

“Focus on your jabs, doll.”

“Don’t call me doll, and I’ll focus on whatever I want. This isn’t a real fight. I’m just going to beat the crap out of him and then pick up my kids.”

Jacky pushed me away and held me at arm’s length. “Don’t get too cocky, kid. You’re strong as hell, and to be honest, a little freaky, but this guy knows the fundamentals. I’m not sure you realize what the hell you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“We’ll see.”

Jacky held up a white towel. “I’m throwing this in if things turn ugly.”

“For me or him?”

“Either.”

\* \* \*

“Ding ding,” said Jacky.

Desmond Beacon stood nearly a foot taller than me. In the center of the ring we touched gloves. Now that the pain was gone from his groin, he didn’t look so eager to fight a woman—especially now that we



had a few female onlookers.

So, to get him back into the spirit of things, I hit him with a quick jab that landed on his chin and snapped his head back. When his head settled back into place, there was a suitable look of irritation in his eyes.

Behind me, Jacky screamed, "Yes, yes!"

Desmond now bounced on his toes and worked his neck, and suddenly flicked his glove out at me much quicker than I was prepared for. I tried to dodge right, but there was no escaping it. His glove hit me square in the jaw and I staggered backwards and promptly landed on my ass, skidding to a halt near the ropes.

"Sammy, you okay?" Jacky's worried, ruddy face peered down at me through the lowest rung of rope.

I got up. "I'm fine."

"I don't like this, Sammy. He's too good."

"Don't call me Sammy."

"Then what the hell do you want me to call you?"

"Just Sam."

We touched gloves again. Desmond wasn't smiling. In fact, he didn't seem to be enjoying any of this. I think he was hoping I would've gone away by



now. We circled each other. I was wary of his hand speed. His face was expressionless, although his cheeks were pinched together because of the headgear. He kept his gloves up like a good boy. His fist shot out again, another jab. I blocked it with my own glove, but the force of the punch knocked my own glove back into my forehead. Luckily the head gear is thickest at the forehead. He jabbed again. I blocked it and side-stepped. He was waiting for me to side-step. His next punch rung my bell, and I staggered backward again.

I caught a glimpse of Jacky. Or, rather, *two* Jackys. The old Irishman looked stricken. His interest in seeing a real fight had long ago dissipated. He was holding the white towel up. I shook my head at him, and he reluctantly lowered it.

Back in the ring, Desmond looked a little surprised to see me still on my feet. We circled each other some more. It seemed apparent to me that the Marine and his manager, and perhaps even Jacky, had agreed that I would only receive jabs. Harmless enough, and not too brutal. Wouldn't bode well for Jacky's female clientèle to watch a woman get



pulverized by a semi-professional male boxer.

Now even more people were watching. A small crowd of mostly women were standing around the sparring ring, all dripping sweat, their workouts finished or abandoned. They were talking amongst themselves and watching me closely. I didn't like close scrutiny, but I needed to pound something, and the Marine was the biggest thing in the gym.

I focused entirely on the Marine. Sweat dripped steadily down his cheeks and into his headgear. The muscles in his right shoulder flexed and I took a step back just as his lightning-fast jab swished through the air. *Focus on the shoulder.* The deltoid muscles flinched again and I moved back again and avoided the next punch as well. We circled, and he stopped bouncing on his feet and lowered his hands. The moment he lowered his hands, I delivered a combination of left jab and overhead right. Both landed. I am quick when I want to be and strong when I want to be, and I wanted to be both now. The punches staggered him backward and he landed against the ropes. A chorus of cheers erupted from the milling crowd of sweating women. The Marine pushed himself off the ropes and approached me,



fists raised. He was looking at the crowd of women out of the corner of his eye. He didn't know what to do. He was in a hell of a spot. He didn't want to hurt a woman, yet here was a woman in front of him who was hurting him. I decided to make that decision for him, and came at him like a bull. I faked a left jab and then came hard over his gloves with a straight right that hit him square on the nose. His knees buckled. I hit him again. He gathered himself and quit looking at the crowd. Good. Now he danced around the ring like he meant it. Good. He lifted his gloves and delivered a powerful combination that I used my gloves and arms to absorb. His punches hurt. He was throwing them hard. He didn't give a damn who was watching him now or how bad this might have looked. He was tired of some woman taking potshots at him.

Except I wasn't *some woman*.

Even with the sun still out in the late afternoon sky, my reflexes were better than average. But only slightly better. I still felt weak and sluggish—and that damn sun couldn't set fast enough.

The Marine suddenly threw a wild punch that veered off my shoulder and I used that opening to



deliver a rocking uppercut. I caught him under the chin and his head snapped up. He might have even lifted off the mat. Either way, he landed hard on his back. The crowd went wild. Alright, maybe not wild, but definitely a few cheers. The Marine got up and we touched gloves in the middle of the ring again. His eyes seemed a little unsteady. The big boy had taken a few hard blows to the head from a very healthy vampire. He raised his fists, did a little boxing dance, and sort of refocused himself.

And came out swinging.

Holy crap! Hell hath no fury like a man embarrassed by a woman. His punches were powerful and numerous; some landed, but most missed entirely. I soon found myself backed up against the ropes. Spit and sweat and blood flung from the Marine. His arms were a blur of punches. I heard gasps behind me. Surely this looked horrible to Jacky's female clientèle: a woman being beaten to a pulp by a hulking Marine. I'm sure Jacky was about to throw in the towel, when it happened.

I didn't see it happen, granted.

But I *felt* it.

The late afternoon soon had finally set, and I felt



alive.

*So damn alive.*

I slipped under his onslaught and backed into a corner. He was about to follow me in but must have seen something in my eyes and paused. He should have kept pausing. Instead, he charged ahead. As he came at me, I timed my punch perfectly. A hard right to the jaw.

*Too hard.*

Never had I hit something so squarely and so hard. I floored him. No. I lifted him off his feet and over the surrounding ropes. He landed in a heap on the padded floor. Women screamed and rushed over to him. I saw Jacky run over to the Marine, too. He looked at me, horror on his face.

*What had I done?*

I stood dumbly in the center of the ring as the Marine lay on his back, unmoving.



*I almost killed a man today.*

*Tell me about it.*

So I wrote it up for Fang. As usual, he read like a demon on crack, and posted his reply almost instantly.

*The Marine might be re-thinking his boxing career.*

I suddenly felt indignant, perhaps to mask my guilt. *Good. He was a pig, and boxing's certainly no way to make a living. Getting your brains beaten to a pulp day in and day out.*

*I see, so by knocking him out of the ring, you actually did a service to him.*

*Yes. He could think of it as career counseling.*

*Through the school of hard knocks.*

*Haha.*

*I think you are trying to assuage your guilt, Moon Dance, to justify your actions.*

*Okay, fine. I feel horrible! You happy?*

*No. At least you can admit your guilt.*

*He didn't deserve what I did to him.*

*Probably not. Then again, he sounded like he might have needed to be taught a lesson. Did you*



really kick him in the balls?

Argh! I'm horrible!

Yes, wrote Fang. You were today.

You don't let me off easy, do you?

Do you want me to let you off easy?

No, I wrote, thinking about it. I want you to always be dead honest with me. It's why I keep you around.

Gee, thanks. So what happened to the Marine?

They took him away in an ambulance. The paramedic said it looked like a concussion. I sent him flowers and a card apologizing.

Perhaps you should find other outlets for your anger, wrote Fang.

Perhaps.

You might have to be a little more, um, discreet with your gifts. You don't want to keep attracting unwanted attention.

I think you're right. I paused. But why call it a gift, Fang?

It's how you choose to view it, Moon Dance. You could focus on either the negative or the positive. As in all of life.

Thank you, Tony Robbins.

No, I'm not Tony Robbins but I'm certainly as



tall.

*Really? What else do you look like?* I wrote, eager for more information.

*As usual, he ignored any personal questions. Let's take a look at these gifts of yours. You have enhanced strength, night vision, speed and endurance. Not to mention the ability to shape-change.*

*Whoa!* I wrote, sitting back. *No one's ever said anything about shape-changing.*

*You've never shape-changed, Moon Dance?*

*Ever recall me mentioning turning into a bat?*

*There was a long pause, then he wrote: Most texts, resources and personal accounts are unanimous about this. You should be able to shape-change. Into what exactly, is open to debate.*

*I found myself laughing at my computer desk. Well, if your resources can tell me how to shape-change, then I'll give it a shot.*

*I'll look into it. Maybe you should look into it, too.*

*How?*

*Another pause: Maybe you need to look into yourself.*



The doorbell rang. The babysitter was here.  
*Goodnight, Fang.*  
*Goodnight, Moon Dance.*

## 36.

It was late and I was restless.

Earlier in the day, I'd dreamed of Kingsley again, and now I couldn't get the big son-of-a-bitch out of my thoughts. In my dream, we were in the woods again, but this time we weren't playing a game. This time he had captured me early on and I was on my back. I distinctly remembered the pine needles poking into my bare back and the sound of small animals scurrying away in the woods. Scurrying away in *fear*. Kingsley was in his half man/half wolf mode, dark shaggy hair hanging from his huge shoulders, down his long arms. A tuft of it sticking up along the ridge of his spine like a hairy stegosaurus. He was on all fours and he was above me. I was



pinned beneath him, distinctly aware that he was far too strong for me to push off. I was submitting to him. Body and soul.

In my dream, he was still wearing the medallion, hanging freely from his thick neck, suspended just inches above my face. Whenever I opened my mouth to ask about the medallion, he simply shook his great head and I knew I was not to discuss it, and so I didn't, although I wanted to. Badly.

Then he lowered his face to mine, a face that was still magnificently human and handsome, although in bad need of a shave. His breath was hot on my neck, my ears, through my hair. He was touching me with his lips or tongue, I didn't know which, nor did I care. I only knew I had not felt this good in a long, long time.

Then the alarm went off, and I could have cried.

*A hell of a dream, I thought. I think you might like the big guy.*

Ya think?

The question was: what did I do about it? I didn't know. Even though I knew in my heart my marriage was over, I still felt guilty for having feelings for another man.



*You shouldn't. Your husband is long gone. You can't keep living like this, and nor can he.*

But the moment I quit living like this—the moment my husband and I officially separated—would be the moment my kids are taken away from me, and I can't have that.

*I can't have that.*

*So quit thinking about Kingsley.*

Easier said than done.

It was late, and I was restless and I couldn't for the life of me keep Kingsley out of my thoughts. Damn him. What right did he have kissing a lonely and hurting woman? What right did he have of putting me through this?

I nearly laughed. It had, of course, been just a dream.

## 37.

"You home?" I asked.



"Of course I'm home," said Kingsley, "it's two-thirty in the goddamn morning."

"Don't sound so dramatic."

"Dramatic? If anything I sound tired."

"I'm coming over. Where do you live?"

There was a long pause. I wondered if Kingsley had fallen back to sleep. Then a thought occurred to me, maybe he had a woman with him. If so, I didn't care. I wanted to talk, and not with a mortal. Either way, last night had been the full moon, so tonight Kingsley should be his old self.

"Okay," he said, and gave me directions. "Oh, and remind me when you get here that there's something I need to talk to you about."

"That makes two of us."

Kingsley lived in Yorba Linda, just a few cities over. At a quarter to three, I drove east down Bastanchury Blvd. The night was still and quiet. To my left were empty rolling hills. Beyond was the county dump, well hidden from curious eyes and sensitive noses.

Here on Bastanchury was some of the best Orange County had to offer. Beautiful homes slightly removed from the hustle and bustle of the county.



I turned left into a long driveway, drove through a tangle of shrubbery along a crushed seashell drive. The seashell drive, reflecting the near full moon, was as bright as a yellow brick road to my eyes. The driveway continued for perhaps an eighth of a mile, until it curved before a massive estate house.

I parked in front of the portico, and briefly admired the huge structure. It was a Colonial revival, complete with two flanker structures on either end. Nearly the entire facade was covered in dark clapboard, and the windows were enclosed with paneled shutters. All in all, a fitting home for a werewolf.

Shortly after I rang the bell, a porch light turned on and a very tall and dour man appeared at the door, who looked down at me from a hawkish nose. He was frowning. Probably wasn't in his job description to be receiving guests at 3:00 a.m. There was something disjointed and odd about the man. It took me a second to realize what it was. One ear was clearly larger than the other.

"This way," he said. "Master Kingsley is waiting in the conservatory."

"With Professor Plum and the candlestick?" I



asked.

Big Ear was not amused.

## 38.

Kingsley was lounging on a leather sofa with a drink in hand.

He looked like hell: scruffy beard, hair in disarray, serious bags under his eyes.

“Um, you look good,” I said.

“Like hell I do.”

“Just what I was thinking.”

The conservatory was octagon-shaped and faced the expansive backyard which spread out into the hills beyond like a vast estate. Through the French window, I could make out an alabaster fountain gurgling away, depicting a naked nymph blowing water through her cupped hands. The sculptor went a little crazy with her breasts. Men and breasts. Sheesh.



"Would you like a drink?" Kingsley asked.

"Sure. I'll have whatever you're having."

Kingsley motioned to his butler. A moment later, a drink appeared before me.

"Thank you, Jeeves," I said.

Kingsley grinned. "His name is Franklin."

"Franklin the butler?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't have quite the same ring."

"No, it doesn't," Kingsley said, "but he's a good butler, and can pour a hell of a drink."

"It's true," said Franklin. "I almost never spill." His enunciation was clear and precise with a slightly lilting accent that could have been English. When he spoke, his face appeared completely still, as if the muscles were inert, or deactivated. I couldn't help but notice an ugly scar that ran along his chin and extended back to his hairline, as if Franklin had at one time or another lost his entire head.

Kingsley said, "Thank you, Franklin. That will be all. Sorry to rouse you out of your sleep in the dead of night."

"I am made to serve."

"And you do it so well. Off you go. Good night."



Franklin the Butler nodded and left. Curious, I watched him go. His strides were long and loping, as if his legs were disproportionate to his body.

"Franklin is an interesting fellow," I said when he was gone.

"You don't know the half of it."

"Must have survived a hell of an accident, scarred like that."

"Yeah, something like that."

"Where did you find him?"

"He was recommended by a friend."

I sipped the alcohol. It had no flavor at all, and no effect. The ice rattled in the tumbler.

"What do you know of vampire shape-shifting?" I asked suddenly.

Kingsley blinked, then thought about it. "Not a whole hell of a lot, I'm afraid. Why?"

"It's been coming up lately."

"I see."

"So, *can* vampires turn into, you know, *things*?"

He laughed, "They can indeed turn into...*things*."

My heart slammed in my chest. "What sort of things?" I asked.

"You really don't know, do you?"



"Would I be asking if I did?"

"And you've never tried shape-changing?"

"I wouldn't know where to begin."

"You could always try jumping off a tree branch and see what happens."

"And think like a fruit bat?"

"Is that the gay bat?"

"You're not helping."

"That's just it. I don't know how to help. My own transformation sort of takes place uninvitingly."

"I understand. So back to the question: what sort of things can vampires turn into?"

"Vampires turn into...something big and black." He paused and grimaced as if he had just bitten into something sour. "Something ugly and hideous. Something with massive leathery wings. A sort of hybrid between man and bat."

"You've seen one?"

He hesitated. "Yes."

"And?"

"And that's all I know."

"Who was the vampire?"

"I'd rather not discuss it right now."

"Why?"



He inhaled. His handsome face was mostly hidden in shadows, although that posed little problems for me. I could see the fine lines of his nose and jaw.

“Because he killed my wife.”

I breathed. “I’m sorry, Kingsley.”

“Hey, it’s in the past.”

“I ask too many questions. It’s the investigator in me. I don’t know how to turn it off sometimes.”

“You didn’t know.”

I wanted to ask him more about his wife. Why was she killed? Was she a werewolf, too? If not, then how did they make their marriage work? How long had they been married? And kids? Moreover, who was this vampire? But I held my tongue, which was something I didn’t do well. Therefore, I found myself thinking of flying around the city of Fullerton like a super-sized bat out of hell. The image was too crazy. I mean, I’m a mother of two. I went to a PTA meeting last week. I washed twelve loads of laundry over the weekend. Real people don’t turn into giant bats, right?

“So basically,” I said after a suitable time, “I turn



into a monster.”

He eased off the sofa and headed to the bar. He poured himself another drink.

“You’re not the only one,” he said. “Once a month Franklin keeps me locked up in a special room where I won’t hurt myself or others.” He swirled the contents of his glass. Some of the contents splashed over the rim. He didn’t seem to notice or care. “Only monsters need to be locked up.”

“But you have taken measures to control the monster within you. In my book, that makes you very much *not* a monster”

“By practicing safe-transformation?” he asked.

I laughed. “Precisely.”

As he sat, I noticed a particularly thick tuft of hair at the back of his hand. The hair hadn’t been there a few days before. I slipped out of my chair and to his side. I took his hand in my own and ran my fingers through the fur.

“Just what are you doing?” he asked. He didn’t move. I could feel his pulse in his wrist. His pulse was quickening. I pulled on the fur.

“It’s real,” I said.

“Of course it’s real.”



"You really *are* a werewolf."

"Yes."

"Can I call you Wolfy?"

"No."

A glint of amber reflected in his irises. I could have been looking into the eyes of a wolf staring back at me from the deep shadows of a dark forest.

*The forest. My dream. His hot breath. His hotter lips.*

I looked away. God, his stare was hypnotic. No wonder he won so many court cases. What juror could resist those eyes? I noticed then that the couch had a light sprinkling of what appeared to be dog hair. The hair was now on my clothing.

"You're shedding," I said.

"Yes, I tend to do that."

"How old are you Kingsley?"

"You will not be denied tonight, will you, Samantha?"

I shrugged. "Perhaps by understanding more about you, I can understand more about me, about who I am and where I'm going."

"Fine," he said. "I'm seventy-nine."

"Is that in dog years?"



"I'm going to bed," he said.

"Wait. What did you need to talk to me about?"

He nodded solemnly. "There's someone looking for you, Samantha."

"Who?"

"A vampire hunter."

"A...what?"

"A vampire hunter, and he wants you dead."

I choked on my drink. "Why?"

"Because you're a vampire and killing vampires is what he does."

"How does he kill vampires?"

"A crossbow, I think. Apparently arrow bolts have the same affect on vampires as stakes."

"When did you find this out?"

"Tonight."

"How did you find out?"

"I'm privy to such information. Through associates. From others like me."

"Werewolves."

"Yes."

I thought about that, and then told him about the man from the other night with the night-vision goggles. Kingsley shrugged.



“It could have been him. Perhaps he’s been following you.”

“No one’s been following me.”

“How do you know?”

“I watch for tails. It’s a habit of mine.”

“A good habit,” he agreed.

“Speaking of tails—”

“I’m going to bed,” he said again.

“Wait. What do you propose I do about this vampire hunter?” I asked.

“Kill or be killed. That’s where I come in. Let me help you get rid of this guy.”

“No,” I said. “I’m a big girl and this is my problem.”

“He’s a trained killer.”

“And I’ve been trained to protect myself.”

He didn’t like it, but said no more. We sat together on the couch, our shoulders touching.

“Why are you with him, Samantha?”

I knew who he was talking about. Danny. “It’s none of your business why.”

“Yes,” he said, “it is.”

“How so?”



“Because I think I’m falling in love with you.”

39.

It was late.

The kids were with my sister, and I was alone in a parking lot, hidden behind some bushes and beneath an overhanging willow. The digital clock on the car radio read 11:22 p.m. Too late for an attorney and his secretary to be working cases.

The engine was off, and the windows were cracked open. Even vampires need to breathe. Actually, I wondered about that. I held my breath, timing myself. A minute passed. Two minutes. Three. Four. Five. I let out my breath. Well, hell. You learn something new everyday.

Just what dark voodoo was keeping me alive then? Didn’t my brain and blood need oxygen, too? Maybe I just didn’t need as much, and the only reason I seemed to breathe on a regular basis was that my automatic nervous system didn’t know



enough to shut off. I felt my heart. It was beating, very slowly. I timed the beating. Ten beats a minute. Ah, hell. I should be dead a hundred times over.

But I wasn't. I was very much alive. But how, dammit?

Maybe it was better not to think about it.

I was alive. Perhaps I should have died six years ago, but I didn't. Something kept me alive, and for that I was thankful. Now, not only could I watch my kids grow up but I would probably outlive my grandchildren and their children's children.

*Jesus.*

*I ask again: what the hell kind of dark magic is keeping me alive?*

Danny's firm is a small firm. He owned it with a partner, where it occupied the entire second floor of a very plain professional building. Danny specialized in auto accidents. A classic ambulance chaser. He made good money at it, but sold his soul.

I used to give him crap about it long ago, until I realized he actually enjoyed the work. He enjoyed sticking it to the insurance companies. Now he enjoyed sticking it to his secretary.



The night was cool. Trees above me swished gently. The partial moon appeared and disappeared through a smattering of clouds.

There seemed to be a hint of light coming from one of the building's upstairs windows, but it was difficult to tell as the blinds were shut. I sipped from a water bottle. The water was lukewarm. I discovered that I liked lukewarm water, which was a refreshing change from the nightly dosage of chilled hemoglobin.

I thought of the vampire hunter. For the past few days I had been watching my tail, and was confident no one was following me.

Staking out anyone—even your husband—can be boring work. I held up my hand and studied it. My skin was white, almost translucent. Purple veins crisscrossed the back of my hand. My nails were thick and hard. Like my hair, they tended to grow slowly. I touched the center of my palm with my left index finger. The sensation sent a slight shiver up my right arm. Flesh and bone. I was three dimensional. I could feel. I could laugh. I could love my kids.

So why couldn't I die? And what gave me my unnatural strength?



I turned the rearview mirror my direction.

There was nothing in the mirror. Nothing at all, save for an image of the driver's seat headrest. My clothing moved as if occupied by the Invisible Woman. Fairly disconcerting. It was as if the mirror refused to acknowledge my existence. I turned it away in disgust.

"Well, I'm here, dammit," I said to the mirror. "Whether you like it or not."

Or perhaps I was saying this to Danny. Or the world.

So a creature called a vampire had attacked me one night. It tainted my blood with his. Because of that taint I was forever and irrevocably changed.

It had to do with the blood. I thought of blood now. It was the lifesource. Without it, we die. Well, without a lot of other stuff we die, too. Without your head you die. Without your heart you die.

How could something in my blood change me *forever*?

Blood connected everything, flowed through everything. Blood infused throughout the entire body.

The blood, I realized, was the key. My blood, my tainted blood, was keeping my body unnaturally alive



—and would, apparently, keep it unnaturally alive for all eternity.

*My God*, I thought.

And then I wondered: was I still a child of God. Or was I rendered into something evil?

I didn't feel evil.

The street was quiet, but not empty. Across the street, the door to my husband's building opened. Two figures emerged. One of them was my husband and the other was a woman. I didn't recognize the woman. He had mentioned acquiring a new secretary a few months back. I hadn't met her. This girl was tall and angular, with straight, blond hair. She wore a very tight white skirt.

They walked together into the adjoining parking lot. He led her to a little red convertible with its top down. At her door my husband put his arms around her waist and gave her a very long, and very deep kiss. They held that position for well over a half a minute. Then she disentangled herself from him, got in the car and drove away. He watched her leave, then turned toward me, and I held my breath. For one brief second I thought he might have been looking at me. Then he turned away, reached for his keys in his



pocket, got into his Escalade and left. To drive home to his wife and kids.

Numb, I stayed where I was, the engine off. I was surprised to discover that my hand had unconsciously reached inside my jacket for a gun that wasn't there.

## 40.

Danny and I were lying in bed together.

He was under the covers and I was on top of them. As usual. He was naked and I was completely clothed. As usual. Heat from his recently-showered body emanated from his skin. He had removed the scent of her. What a guy. In the dark, I could see his pale shoulders clearly. I could also see that he was looking away from me, eyes open and staring up.

I rolled from my side onto my back, staring up at the ceiling along with him. The ceiling crackled and swirled with the secret particles of light that only I



could see.

"I saw you with her tonight," I said.

"I know."

"You haven't kissed me like that in a long time."

He said nothing. The particles of light seemed to react to the tension around us, swirling faster, agitated.

I said, "You knew I was there and you kissed her in front of me anyway?"

"I saw you immediately when we stepped outside."

"So you gave her a particularly long kiss."

"Yes."

"Why even bother coming home?"

"My kids are here."

My voice started shaking, and I could not hide the fear and the hate. I wanted to rise up and pound his goddamn chest, make him hurt as much as he was hurting me.

"Do you love her?"

"I think so. Yes."

"Do you love me?"

"I don't know. I used to." He paused. "I do not think I can love what you have become. I've tried. I



honestly tried. But....”

“I repulse you.”

“Yes,” he said. “You sicken me and scare the hell out of me, and when I touch you it’s all I can do to not gag.”

“Words every wife wants to hear.”

“I’m sorry, Sam. I really am. I’m sorry that you were attacked. I’m sorry it has come to this. But a marriage is between a man and a woman.”

“I am not a woman?”

“I don’t know what the hell you are. A fucking vampire, I suppose. And what is that?”

“I’m still the same person.”

“No, you’re not. You drink blood in the garage like a ghoul. I have nightmares about you. I dream that you attack me in the middle of the night, that you attack our children—that you just lose it and slaughter us all.”

I was crying now. Sobbing and crying and completely out of control. This was my worst fear, and it had come to pass. The love of my life was leaving me, and I didn’t blame him for one second.

He ignored my crying. In fact, he turned his back to me.



And then I lost it. Just lost it.

In a blink of an eye I was on top of him. Both hands snaked down around his throat, faster than any cobra, faster than he could defend himself. I pinned him to the bed. "You fucking take my kids and I will kill you, you son-of-a bitch. Do you understand? I will hunt you down and kill you and tear you into fucking shreds."

My voice was hysterical, shrieking, piercing. I saw my hands around his muscular neck—my narrow, pale, strong hands. His own were struggling with mine, trying desperately to pry me loose, but no luck. I didn't know if he was getting any air, and I suddenly didn't care. He kicked and convulsed, and still I strangled him, still I cursed and screamed at him. Now my arms shook with the effort. One more second, one more pound of pressure per square inch, and I would have killed him, and I would have enjoyed it. At least, in that moment.

Then I released my hold and he rolled off the bed, falling, coughing and gagging and spitting up. His body wrenched with the effort to breathe.

My heart was racing. "Don't you ever take my kids away, Danny," I whispered. "Ever."



Danny was sitting up against the headboard, his knees drawn up against his chest. A sort of guy version of the fetal position. He was watching me with wary eyes. Who would blame him?

Although the room was dark, I could see the red welts around his neck. He had regained his breath and I had calmed considerably. The fury that overcame me had nothing to do with the vampire in me, and everything to do with the mother in me.

"I have given strict instruction to my attorney to release sealed information concerning your...*disease*," he said. His voice was ragged and torn, as if he were speaking through a very old microphone. Or a very damaged throat. "That is, should anything suspicious happen to me."

"What do you mean?" I was sitting on the edge of the bed. A sick realization came over me. Danny,



despite my threats of bodily harm, would have the upper hand in this situation.

"I've completely detailed everything about your vampirism. Everything. From your attack six years ago to your account with the butchery in Norco."

"No one will believe it. They'll think you're crazy."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"What does that mean, Danny?"

"I've included in the packet two additional items. A video of me holding a mirror up to you while you slept, and a vial of your own tainted blood."

"Are you insane?" I asked.

"Maybe. But I want the kids, and I want them safe, and I want you to stay away and keep your filthy hands off me—and them."

We were silent again as I absorbed all of this. I was stuck. Whether or not anyone believed his story or bothered to test the vial of blood was debatable, but one I could not chance. I had known early on that I could never, ever risk being exposed.

"What about the kids?" I asked.

He took a deep breath and drew his knees up higher. "I'm taking the kids, Samantha."

I needed a clear mind for this. He was leaving,



that much I understood, that much I could try to deal with. But to take the kids....

When I spoke again, I was the voice of reason and calm. "Danny, baby, listen to me. We've lived like this for six years. I've given them nothing but love. I would never harm anyone, not a living soul, especially not my kids. They need their mother."

He snorted. "After what just happened? My God, Sam, I thought you were going to kill me."

"I was furious, Danny. You've been cheating on me. Hell, you practically flaunted it in my face. Anyone woman—any mother—would have reacted the same way." I paused. He rubbed his neck and winced. "They need their mother, Danny."

"I agree, which is why I will allow you to see them every other weekend. Supervised." He inhaled deeply, raggedly. He knew what he was doing to me, he knew he was killing me, but he continued on. "Don't fight me on this either, Sam. Don't make me expose you for the monster that you are, because I will. I will do it to save the kids."

"Danny, please."

"I'm sorry. I truly am. You never deserved this to happen to you, and you never asked for it. Neither



did I. Neither did the kids. But I am determined to keep them safe. I stuck it out this long, Sam. I did it for the kids. I think they're both old enough now to understand that mommy and daddy's relationship isn't so good anymore."

In a flash of rare compassion, he reached out and took my hand. I noticed he didn't recoil in horror, or hold it limply. He held it firmly and compassionately. "This is for the best, Sam. Now you can live...your life, however you need to live it. You don't have to worry about picking the kids up from school anymore, or about going to parent/teacher conferences, or about staying up with the kids during the day if one is sick. You can be free to be who you are, to be *what* you are, whatever that is...."

He kept talking, but I wasn't sure if I was listening. I could only think of my children growing up without their mother. I could only think of not seeing their faces everyday. Worse, I realized there was nothing I could do short of kidnapping them, and I would never do that because what kind of life would that be? Danny continued talking, extolling the virtues of being on my own, unhindered by the kids and the daily



grind of being a mother; he continued stroking my hand, and I knew that my kids were lost to me. Every other weekend seemed an eternity. Suddenly, the daily grind of being a mother never looked better, and every time I tried to state my case the words failed me, because, in my heart, I knew he was right.

*I am a monster. I am unnatural. They deserve better.*

*Bullshit. I'm their mother.*

*No matter what.*

I had always known this day was coming. I had fought against it so hard. I had tried to do everything right and it still wasn't enough.

"If I promise not to fight you, if I promise to give you the kids to raise with whomever you choose, can I ask you one favor?"

He said nothing. Lying next to me, I could almost see him biting his lower lip, as he always did when in deep thought. This hesitation coming from a man who once proposed to me in a hot air balloon even though he had been terrified of heights.

"Please, Danny, just one favor."

"Maybe."



“That I see them every weekend, unsupervised.”

He thought about it long and hard. He let out a long stream of breath. “Okay, Sam, every weekend. But I’m afraid I must insist the meeting be supervised.”

“Thank you, Danny,” I said quietly, my voice full of emotion and pain, unrecognizable even to my own ears. “When will the three of you be leaving?”

And the moment I uttered those words, I realized my mistake. They weren’t going anywhere.

“We are not leaving, Sam. *You* are leaving, and I want you out by tomorrow night.”

## 42.

In the late evening, I was standing on the ninth floor balcony of the Embassy Suites Hotel in Brea.

It had been a rough day. My sister had come over to help me move, although there wasn’t really much to move. Mostly she was there for moral support. Danny was there, too, but he wasn’t there for moral



support. Instead, he watched over me like a prison warden.

Since it was my last day with the children, I had let them stay home from school. Earlier, I tried explaining to them why mommy was going away. I told them it wasn't their fault, that mommy and daddy could not live together anymore, that mommy and daddy still loved each other but not in that special way. They both cried. So did I.

At the hotel, Mary Lou helped me unpack, even the packets of chilled blood, which we stored in the suite's mini-refrigerator. I caught her studying one of the packets. Her face, I noted, had turned white. To her credit, she didn't say anything about the blood, and I silently thanked her for that.

We sat together on my bed and she rubbed my neck and shoulders and gently stroked my hair. Her touch, her warmth, her compassion gave me strength. She didn't think I should be alone and wanted to stay the night with me. I thanked her and told her I wanted to be alone. She didn't like it, but relented, and when she was gone I found myself alone—really alone—for the first time in years.



The suite had a small balcony with two canvas folding chairs and a circular table. I opened the sliding glass door and stepped out onto the balcony, and was immediately blasted by cold wind. The city was so breath-takingly beautiful from up here. Twinkling lights spread in all directions, as far as the eye could see.

In one swift motion, I pulled myself up onto the balcony's wall and hung my feet over the ledge. I kicked my feet absently like a kid hanging from a swing.

Cars sped by on the little street that separated the hotel from the nearby mall. Its various parking lots were jammed with cars. Malls and Orange County sort of went hand-in-hand.

I was hungry and, at the same time, sick to my stomach. Sometimes those two went hand-in-hand, as well.

Wind pulled and tugged at me, moaning softly over my ears. It was just after 8:00 p.m. It had been a hell of a shitty day, and I hadn't slept a wink.

The attack six years ago had cost me so much. It had cost me my job, my sunny days, my home, my husband, my kids and my life.



I watched people entering and leaving the big mall, eager to spend their hard earned money at over-priced stores. Even from nine stories up, I could make out details of clothing and facial expressions. Most appeared to be in relatively good moods. Just living the American dream. Nothing better than spending an evening at the mall with the family. Shopping for nice things in nice stores with nice-looking kids. One person, returning a JCPenny bag, didn't look so happy.

Like a hawk watching field mice, I watched it all from above, sitting on the ledge, feeling increasingly separated from the human race.

I stood suddenly, pulling my feet up, balancing easily on the wide ledge. The wind seemed to pick up, but not enough to threaten to knock me off.

I looked down at the narrow street below, at the bustling mall, the streaming cars, the distant city lights. Sounds and smells came at me, too. The occasional, echoing honk of a car horn in an enclosed parking garage. The murmur of voices. The murmur of children's voices.

I took a deep, worthless, shuddering breath.

I had nothing to lose, really. My kids had been



torn from my life. Hell, my *life* had been torn from my life.

The ground was far, far below. Nine stories up looks like a hundred and fifty stories up, especially if you are thinking of jumping. And I was thinking of jumping.

I closed my eyes, then leaped off the balcony.

## 43.

Time seemed to slow.

I arched up and out into the night and stretched my arms to either side. I lifted my face to the stars and felt the wind in my hair and experienced a profound and uncommon silence, as if all noise in the world had suddenly been muted. Slowly, I tilted down into a natural dive.

And then I plummeted.

Only then was I aware that perhaps I should have ditched the clothing. I didn't want to be a bat trapped



in a cardigan sweater.

By all rights I should die in the next few moments. No one should be able to survive such a fall, perhaps not even a vampire.

A flash of yellow light erupted in my head. And within that light was an image of something black. Something with wings. Something large and alien and frightening.

And then the image disappeared.

The world began to accelerate. The floors to the hotel swept past me. Some of the curtained windows were open. One man dressed only in his tighty-whitties turned suddenly, as if he had seen something in his peripheral vision. He had—a falling woman. But I had swept past him before he could complete his full turn.

The image of the winged creature reappeared, but this time taking on greater detail. It was vaguely humanoid with great leathery wings. I felt an immediate and powerful affinity for the creature.

A sliver of sidewalk, once only a silver thread from high above, now rapidly grew into a very real sidewalk. A very real *cement* sidewalk. Picking up speed, I past a few more floors. Unfortunately for me,



the hotel was running out of floors.

I spasmed suddenly.

The ground rose rapidly to greet me.

I had only seconds.

My clothing burst from my body. A huge set of thickly-membraned wings flapped from my arms and legs like a failed parachute.

The ground was upon me.

I changed position, altered my body.

The flapping skin, stretching from my wrists to somewhere around my mid-thigh, caught the wind and snapped taut. My arms shuddered and I held them firm and veered over the sidewalk with just a few feet to spare. I swept up, instinctively knowing just what I had to do.

My right hip slammed into a No Parking sign.

I lost control, tumbled through the air. And as if some ancient memory of flight had been re-born within me, I somehow regained control and righted myself, and flew low and fast over the mall parking lot, skimming over the roofs of a few dozen gleaming SUVs. I lifted my head and gained some altitude, and very quickly I was above the mall.

I was flying.



*Flying.*

Born from an innate knowledge I didn't comprehend or question, I skillfully flapped my wings and propelled myself up into the night sky.

## 44.

I was dreaming, of course.

I had to be. I mean, this really couldn't be happening to me, right?

Any minute now I was going to wake up and discover that I wasn't flying five hundred feet above the city of Brea. That I was back in my hotel room, alone, and miserable.

Dream or no dream, I might as well enjoy the ride.

A blast of wind hit me. I lost control and fumbled through the air. I panicked, until my on-board navigational system kicked in again and I adjusted my wings and lowered my shoulder and smoothed



out the ride.

As I flew, and as my panicked breathing returned to normal, I looked over to my right arm. Make that *wing*. The arm appendage was thin and black and deeply corrugated with hard muscle. A thick membrane of leathery skin was attached to my wrist and ran down below my waist.

Below was Randolph Street. I followed it for a few minutes before lowering my right arm, raising my left, and making an arcing turn to starboard. The ability to turn came naturally to me, as if I had been doing this all my life.

Brea was bustling at this hour; it was still early evening, the streets crowded with vehicles. I flew over a section called Downtown Brea, alive with hundreds of people, all moving purposefully from one shop to another. The sky was cloudless, just a smattering of stars. Against this backdrop, my black skin would have been almost invisible to the human eye. Surprisingly, southern California was ideal vampire country.

I decided to experiment.

But first I wanted to see what the hell I looked like. I found a suitable office structure made entirely of



glass. I swept past the second floor in hopes of seeing my reflection—and was dismayed to see nothing at all. Same old story.

I swept back up into the sky, flapping hard, gaining elevation. The motion was already fluid and effortless for me. I continued climbing and suddenly wondered how high I dared to go. Already I was many hundreds of feet above the city.

So I continued up, climbing higher and higher.

The sky darkened. The city lights diminished. The wind and cold increased. I felt I could continue forever, tirelessly, across time and space, to other worlds, other stars, other universes. I felt free and alive and for a first time in a long, long time, I did not curse my fate.

I finally stopped ascending and hovered, stretching my arms out, soaring on the currents of space. Orange County shimmered far below. Far off I could see LA and Long Beach. To the south the great black expanse of the Pacific Ocean.

The wind was powerful and relentless. I rocked and absorbed the punishment, battered about like a demon kite. A demon kite with no strings. In this form I knew I could travel the earth. Travel anywhere and



everywhere.

I had lost my kids on this day—but gained unlimited freedom. In more ways than one.

I tucked in my wings, the membranes collapsing in upon themselves like twin Geisha fans. I rocketed down like a blood-sucking meteorite. The city lights rapidly approached. Adrenalin rushed through my blood stream. I found myself screaming with delight; or, rather, *screeching* with delight. Wind pummeled me. I shook and vibrated and kept my eyes barely above a squint. Natural folds along my cheekbones and brow ridges did wonders to keep my vision clear.

Downtown Brea came back into view, seemingly rising up to meet me. The details of the busy street came rapidly into view, and only at the last possible second did I pull up, lifting my head and opening my arms. The sheer gravitational force on me should have been enough to rip my leathery wings from my arms, but they didn't rip. Instead, they performed wonderfully and I swept down the middle of the crowded street, barely above the roofs of the many SUVs and minivans.

People saw me. Many people. They pointed and



turned and spilled their drinks and ice creams. But I was already gone, turning hard to port and disappearing down a side street.

The side street led back to the hotel, where I carefully settled on my balcony. At least, what I hoped was my balcony. I was breathing hard. Apparently, I did need oxygen.

My arms were still long, slender and black. The flying membranes, attached to each side of my body, hung behind me like twin capes. As I stood there on my balcony, wondering what the hell I was supposed to do next, a vague image of me as a human appeared in my mind.

I opened my eyes and looked at my arms. They were aglow with pink flesh. I looked down and was not surprised to see that I was entirely naked.

I was back.



*I flew tonight.*

I was typing on my laptop, one of the few possessions, outside of clothing and makeup, that I had brought with me. The hotel provided wireless connections, which was one of the reasons I had picked it. That, and because it had nine floors. Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I was planning on making my leap, and the taller the hotel the better.

*You did!?* came Fang's immediate response.

*Yes!*

*You figured this out on your own?*

*Yes.*

*But how?*

I told him the sequence of events leading up to my decision to leap from my balcony. Or, rather, my *impulse* to leap from the balcony.

*I am sorry about your marriage, Moon Dance. Maybe someday you can marry me. I promise to be accepting.*

*I'm not in the mood for jokes, Fang.*

*No joke.*

*Then I'm not in the mood to be propositioned.*

Sorry. He paused, then typed: *What was it like, flying?*



*Heavenly. Rapturous. Nothing like it in the world. I will definitely be doing that again.*

*What exactly did you turn into?*

*Something scary. Something nightmarish.*

*But you were still you, right? You could think, feel?*

*Yes, I never left. It was still me, just in the skin of something horrific.*

*Describe it.*

*I did, as best as I could. I told Fang that there was really very little of me I could see, other than the image I had in my mind. The image was scary enough.*

*What am I? I asked him when I was through.*

*You are a vampire, Moon Dance.*

*But am I even one of God's creatures? Am I something evil? Am I even truly alive?*

*Do you feel alive?*

*Yes.*

*Do you feel evil?*

*I thought about that. I feel like such an aberration, a mistake. Something forgotten. Something to be ignored. Something to fear.*

*Moon Dance?*



Yes?

*We all feel that way. You are just different. He paused. Do you believe in a Creator?*

*I paused, then wrote: I don't know I believe in something.*

*Well, do you think that Something has suddenly decided to ignore you because you were attacked and changed into something different against your own free will?*

*I don't know, Fang.*

*There was a long pause. I don't. I don't think a god of creation has suddenly decided to ignore you, Moon Dance. I think, in fact, you have been granted a rare opportunity to do things some people have never thought possible, to express yourself in ways that many people will never, ever experience. You could choose to see this as an opportunity or as a curse. Do you choose to see the good or the bad?*

*So there is good in me?*

*More good than most.*

*So I have not been forgotten?*

*Who could forget you, Moon Dance?*



*Thank you, Fang. Thank you for always being here for me.*

*Always. And Moon Dance?*

*Yes?*

*Take care of yourself. There are people out there who love you. A long pause. I waited. And I am one of them.*

*Thank you, Fang, that means a lot. Goodnight. Goodnight, Moon Dance.*

## 46.

On a Thursday night just a little past 9:30 p.m., Detective Sherbet picked me up outside the Embassy Suites. A light rain had been falling and I hadn't bothered with an umbrella.

"Trash night," he said when I slid in next to him. Sherbet was driving a big Ford truck with tinted windows. "Hey, you're all wet."

"I enjoy the rain."



“So enjoy the rain with an umbrella. You’re getting my leather seats all wet.”

“Get over it. It’s just a truck.”

“It’s not just a truck. It’s my baby.”

“There’s more to life than trucks.”

“Someone in a bad mood?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He grinned and pulled out into traffic. The truck had a throaty roar. The detective, I quickly discovered, drove like a mad man. He pulled into traffic with reckless abandon, confident that his truck could survive any impact. I found his driving exciting. Maybe I was a closet adrenalin junkie.

“So do you have termites or something?” he asked after a cacophony of horns had subsided behind us.

“Excuse me?”

“Is that why I’m picking you up at a hotel in Brea? Does your house have termites?”

“Oh,” I said. “Sure.”

“Speaking of Brea, did you hear about the flying creature last night?”

“No.”

“Police call centers got swamped last night.



About a hundred total. Apparently something dropped out of the sky and swooped down the middle of Downtown Brea."

"Maybe it was a bird," I said distractedly. I didn't feel like talking. I was missing my children, and could not fight the horrible feeling that they were forever lost to me.

"This was no bird." He chuckled and made a right onto State College Blvd. A minute later we were waiting at a stoplight to turn left onto Imperial. Through the side window I noticed a few teenage boys gawking at the truck.

"The boys love your truck," I said.

"They should. It's bitchen."

I laughed, despite myself.

Sherbet continued, "Witnesses say it was black and massive and flying almighty fast."

"What happened to it?"

"Made a right onto Brea Blvd and was gone."

"Did it at least use its turn signal?"

The light turned green. He gunned the truck as if he were in a drag race. He looked over at me and smiled. "You don't seem to believe any of this."

"No," I said. "Do you?"



“Hard to say. A hundred witnesses is a lot of witnesses.”

“Mass hallucination?” I suggested.

“Maybe,” he said. “Or maybe they really saw something.”

Sherbet pulled behind a long line of cars waiting for the freeway on-ramp. I had the distinct—and exciting—feeling that Sherbet would have preferred to go *over* the cars.

“You hungry?” he asked suddenly.

“No.”

“You sure? You look like you could eat.”

“I’m sure.”

He pulled out of the line of cars, hung a suicidal turn back onto Imperial Blvd, and headed into a nearby Wendy’s drive-thru.

“That was frightening,” I said.

“Then why are you smiling?” he asked.

“I guess I like frightening,” I said.

He ordered his food and pulled up in line. He said, “The wife tonight made a German dish called *machanka*. She thinks I like it. I haven’t had the heart to tell her that I quit liking it fifteen years ago.”

“You must love her.”



"With all my heart," he said.

"Lucky her," I said.

"Lucky *me*."

He got his food. Two bacon burgers, an order of fries, and a king-sized Coke.

"That'll kill you," I said.

"True," he said. "But on the flip side: no more *machanka*."

Shoving fries into his mouth, he recklessly made a left into traffic, into a break of traffic that was virtually non-existent. He looked at me and grinned around the fries.

I grinned, too.

Soon, we were heading south on the 57 freeway.

## 47.

It was after 10:00 p.m. when we parked on a street that ran perpendicular with Horton's massive Gothic revival.



A thin sheet of rain obscured the street. We sat in the cab of his truck with the engine and wipers off. Moving wipers attracted attention, as did an idling car. So we ate in the cold and wet. The house before us was massive and brooding. Its towering gables spiked the night sky. Hawthorne would have been pleased. The truck's tinted glass made the world darker than it really was. I liked darker.

After a moment, Sherbet shook his head. "Who could live in something like that?" Sherbet shuddered. "Like something in a fucking Dracula movie."

"I like it," I said.

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Nothing. Just being a wise guy."

Sherbet was still sipping on his king-sized Coke. Occasionally some of the sips turned into loud slurps. The remnants of his greasy meal were wadded into a greasy ball and shoved into the greasy bag. The strong smell of burgers and fries suffused the interior of the truck cab. My hungry stomach was doing somersaults.

*Easy, girl.*



"That your stomach growling?" he asked.

"I don't know. Haven't noticed."

He shook his head and slurped his Coke. The street was mostly empty. Occasionally a big car would splash past, and since tomorrow was trash day, most of the residents already had their trash cans out by the curb. Rick Horton's trash cans were nowhere to be found.

"Maybe he forgot tomorrow was trash day," said Sherbet.

"Maybe."

"Maybe he's one of those procrastinators who runs out just as the trash truck pulls up, dragging their trashcans behind them, beseeching the truck drivers to wait."

"Beseeching?" I said.

"It's a word."

"Just not a word you often hear from a cop with a dollop of ketchup on his chin."

He hastily swiped at the dollop, but missed some of it. He licked his finger. "You have good eyes," he said.

"And you have a bad aim." I used one of the napkins to clean his chin.



The rain picked up a little. The drops were now big enough to splatter. Overhead, the weeping willows wept, bent and shuddering under the weight of the rain.

"I could use some coffee," the detective said. "No telling when this guy is coming out with his trash."

So we got some coffee at a nearby Burger King. Or, rather, Sherbet did. He bought me a bottled water.

"You're a cheap date," he commented as he mercifully decided—at the last possible second—that an incoming bus was too close to dash in front of.

"And you're the reason fast food establishments stay in business."

"On second thought," he said. "I would never date someone as grouchy as you."

"It's been a bad week."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"No."

He didn't push it. We pulled back up in front of Horton's Gothic revival. Nothing much changed. Horton still hadn't taken out his trash, which was, at least tonight, the object of our interest.



So we waited some more. Investigators are trained to wait. We're supposed to be good at it. Waiting sucks. The interior of the truck was filled with the soothing sound of rain ticking on glass and sheet metal. I sipped some water. Sherbet was holding his coffee with both hands. Steam rose into his face. A light film of sweat collected on his upper lip. The coffee smelled heavenly. Coffee was not on my list. Rivulets of rain cascaded down the windshield. The shining street lamps, as seen through the splattered windshield, were living prisms of light. I watched the hypnotic light show.

"What's it like working for the feds?" Sherbet suddenly asked.

"Safe, secure. Often boring, punctuated with the occasional thrill. My days were endlessly fascinating. I loved my job."

"Do you miss it?"

"Hard to say. I miss the camaraderie of my partners. My job now is a lonely one. When I get the chance to work with someone else I often take it."

"Even with an old dog like me?"

I looked at him. The truck was mostly silent. I



heard him breathing calmly through his nose. Could smell his aftershave. He smelled like a guy should smell. Moving shadows from the rain dribbling down the windshield reached his face. The man seemed to like me, but he was suspicious of me. Or perhaps just curious. As a homicide investigator, he had his own highly-attuned intuition, which worried me because I was obviously causing it to jangle off the hook. But I had committed no crime, other than draining a corpse of blood, which I didn't think was a crime, although I'd never perused the penal code for such an article.

"Sure," I said. "Even an old dog like you."

"How reassuring."

Through Horton's wrought iron fence I saw a figure struggling with something bulky. The fence swung open and Horton appeared in a yellow slicker, struggling to wheel a single green trash can. The can appeared awkward to maneuver. Or perhaps Horton was just clumsy. As he deposited the can near the curb, his foot slipped out from under him, sending him straight to his back. I voted for clumsy.

Sherbet shook his head. "Smooth," he said.



"Let's wait a few minutes," said Sherbet after Horton had dashed inside. Horton ran like a girl.

"Doesn't look like much of a killer," I said.

"No," said Sherbet. "They never do."

The rain came down harder, pummeling the truck, scourging what appeared to be a custom paint job. Sherbet seemed to wince with each drop.

"Aren't you a little too old to be into cars?" I asked.

"You can never be too old."

"I think you're too old."

"Yeah, well how old are you?"

"I'd rather not say. Not to mention you've looked at my police record and already know."

"Thirty-seven, if I recall," he said. "A very young thirty-seven. Hell, you don't even have a wrinkle."

"I'm sure it will catch up to me someday," I said,



and then thought: *or not*. But I played along. "And before I know it, I'll look into the mirror one day and find a road atlas staring back at me."

He snorted. "Welcome to my world."

We waited some more. The rain continued to pound. Some of the water collected and sluiced along the windshield in shimmering silver streaks. Sherbet and I were warm and secure in our own little microcosm of leather, plastic, wood, and empty Wendy's bags. Here in this mini-world, I was the vampire queen, and Sherbet was my noble knight. Or perhaps my blood slave, from whom I fed.

"Your name always reminds me of ice cream," I said. "I like your name."

"I hate it."

"Why?"

"Reminds me of ice cream."

A light in Horton's upstairs window turned off. The house was dark and silent. So was the street.

"You stay here while I procure the target's trash," Sherbet said. "We're going to have to adhere to some protocol if we hope to get a search warrant out of this."

"Lot of fancy words to basically say you'll be the



one getting wet.”

“Oh, shut up,” he said.

I grinned. “Procure away, kind sir.”

“Okay,” he said, pulling on his hood. “Here goes.”

He threw open his door and dashed off through the rain. His nylon jacket was drenched within seconds. He moved surprisingly well for an older guy. He reached Horton’s trash can, pulled open the lid, and removed two very full plastic bags. I was suddenly very much not looking forward to digging through those. He shut the lid, grabbed a bag in each hand, and hustled back to the truck. He deposited both in the bed of his truck.

“You’re dripping on the leather,” I said when he slid into the driver’s seat.

“I know,” he said, starting the truck. “It saddens the heart.”



We drove until we found an empty parking garage adjacent to an ophthalmologist college. The lights inside the garage were on full force and a white security pick-up truck was parked just inside the entrance.

We pulled up beside the truck. The guard was out cold, wrapped in his jacket, hugging himself for warmth, the windows cracked for air. Sherbet rolled down his window. The sound of thumping rain was louder and more intense with the window down. The guard still hadn't moved.

"Hey," said Sherbet.

The man bolted upright, accidentally slamming his hand against the steering wheel. The horn went off and he jumped again, now hitting his head on the cab's ceiling.

Sherbet turned to me. "Night of Ten Thousand Fools."

"An Arabian farce."

The detective leaned out the window, producing his badge from his jacket pocket. "Detective Sherbet, Fullerton PD. We need to, um, commandeer your garage for a few minutes."

"Of course, detective." The guard's voice was



slightly high-pitched. He was fortyish and much too small to be taken seriously as a guard. His neck was also freakishly long. "It's the rain, you know. Knocks me out every time. My bosses found out I was sleeping again, they'd fire me." He looked sheepish.

"Don't worry about it, pal," said Sherbet. "I won't tell if you don't."

He brightened, his job secure. "Is there maybe something I can do for you? You know, maybe help you out?"

"Sure," said Sherbet. "Guard this entrance with your life. No one comes in."

"You got it, detective!"

Sherbet rolled up his window and we eased into the parking structure and out of the rain.

"Commandeer the garage?" I said.

"Sounds important."

I looked back. The guard had positioned his truck before the garage's entrance. "Good of you to give him something to do," I said. "But what happens if someone wants to come in?"

"Then they'll have to deal with Flamingo Neck."

I snorted. "Flamingo Neck? Thought he looked more like a stork."



"Whatever." Sherbet pulled into a slot. "You ready to dig in?"

"As ready as ever."

The covered garage was mostly empty, save for a few desolate vehicles. These vehicles had the look of semi-permanence. Sherbet handed me a pair of latex gloves.

The bags were sodden. One of them stank of rotten dairy. I gave that one to the detective.

"Thanks," he said.

"I'm a lady," I said. "Ladies don't dig through smelly trash."

"They do when they're on my shift."

"Yeah, well, luckily I don't work for you."

"Luckily."

With legs crossed, I hunkered down on a parking rebar. I untied the my bag and was immediately greeted with what must have been last night's chicken teriyaki. My stomach growled noisily. My stomach seemed to have missed the memo about my new diet. My new *blood* diet.

*No chicken teriyaki for you, my friend. Ever.*

I removed the big stuff first. An empty gallon of milk that, because it was sealed, had bloated to half



again its normal size. Boxes of cereal, an empty jar of peanut butter, many cardboard cases of beer. Someone liked beer. A smattering of plastic Coca-Cola bottles. I sorted through it all, leaving a careful pile to my left.

At the bottom nook was a batch of papers which proved to be torn mail, the majority of which were credit card applications. Smart man. Debt, bad.

"Nothing over here," I said.

I looked over at the detective who was squatting down on one knee. His hands were smeared with gelatinous muck. He looked a little green, and for a homicide detective, that's saying a lot.

"More of the same," he said. "Nothing."

Beyond, the security guard was pacing in the rain before his truck. Occasionally he stole glances at us.

"Same time next week?" Sherbet asked.

"Yes," I said. "More fun."

"And Mrs. Moon?" he said, looking down at his rancid ichor-covered latex gloves. "Next time *you* get the smelly bag."



Sherbet dropped me off at the hotel and suggested that I take a shower because I smelled like trash. I told him thanks. At the hotel lobby, the doorman greeted me with a small bow. I could get used to that. Then he crinkled his nose. Maybe I did need to take a shower.

Conscious of my stench, I took the elevator to the ninth floor and inserted my keycard into the lock and pushed the door open and my warning bells went off instantly.

*Someone was inside.*

Movement down the hall. I turned my body, narrowing it as a target, just as an arrow bolt struck me in the shoulder, slamming me hard into the open door, which in turn slammed shut. I ducked and peered through the darkness and there, standing near my open balcony, was a man. A good-looking man. Tall and slender. Silhouetted in shadows. But I could see into shadows. His spiky blond hair looked like a frayed tennis ball. He was staring at me down



the length of a cocked crossbow.

I knew him. It was the UPS man.

He didn't say anything, didn't move. Simply stood there with his crossbow trained, sweat gleaming on his forehead. His hands were unwavering. A flask of clear liquid was at his hip. There was a cross around his neck and a strand of garlic. He adjusted his sights imperceptibly, and I realized he was searching for a clear shot at my heart. I was determined not to give him that clear shot. I looked at him from over my shoulder.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"You don't need to know."

"Then why are you doing this?" My breath came in short gasps. I needed to do something about the shaft in my shoulder, but I didn't dare take my eyes off the man. The strand of garlic was bullcrap. Hell, I cooked with garlic all the time. But the water on his hip—holy water, no doubt—was troubling. I hadn't dared experiment with holy water.

"It's nothing personal," he said.

"The bolt in my shoulder makes it personal."

"It was meant for your heart."



Behind me I heard voices. Someone was getting off the elevator. The voices were mixed with drunken laughter.

Although I hadn't taken my eyes off the hunter, I had unwittingly shifted my weight to the sound of the voices. Apparently I had exposed my heart. He saw the opening he was looking for, and fired.

I heard the *twang* and *snap* of the bolt leaping from the crossbow. I saw it coming, too. Clearly. Rotating slightly in the air. My world slowed down. Much as it had when I leaped off the balcony.

As it rotated, its metal tip gleaming off of light unseen, my hand was coming up. And just before it buried itself into my heart, I caught the damn thing in the air, snagging it just inches from my chest.

The hunter gaped at me in disbelief, then flung himself backward through the open French doors and vaulted the railing. I pushed away from the doorway, stumbled through the suite and out onto the balcony. It was still raining. I peered down over the ledge and saw a man rappelling down the facade of the building. The rope was attached to the roof above. He dropped down into some foundation brush and unhooked himself. He looked up at me



briefly and then dashed off. I watched him disappear around the corner of the hotel.

Back in my suite, out of the rain, I gripped the fletched end of the arrow shaft and winced. *Okay, this is going to hurt.* I inhaled deeply and pulled slowly. The pain was unbearable. I gasped and stumbled into the bathroom. The mirror revealed empty clothing, animated clothing, a miracle of special effects. An arrow protruded from the blouse's shoulder area. A thick wash of blood was spreading down from the shoulder. The sight of the bloodied disembodied clothing was surreal.

I closed my eyes, continued pulling. White flashes appeared behind my eyelids. I pulled harder, screaming now. I looked down once and saw that the metal tip was almost out. I also saw that it was bringing with it a lot of meat from my arm.

Tears streamed from my eyes and I heard myself whimpering and still I continued to pull, and finally the bolt came free, followed immediately by a great eruption of blood.

It was then that I fainted.



Sometime during the night I awoke in the bathroom to find myself in a pool of my own blood. I was cold and not very shocked to see that the wound in my shoulder had healed completely. I stumbled into the bedroom and collapsed into bed.

I slept through the day and awoke at dusk. I felt like hell, groggy, disoriented. I had to remind myself where I was. I bolted upright. Shit! I had forgotten to pick up the kids!

I was just about to hop out of bed until I remembered it wasn't my job to do so anymore. Danny's mother picked them up now. I slumped back into bed, immediately depressed.

My daytime obligations had vanished. Perhaps that was a good thing in away, since I did not operate well during the daylight hours. And, for the first time since the kids had been taken away from me, I felt—which was immediately accompanied by a lot of guilt—a sense of freedom. No kids to pick



up. No dinners to cook, no husband to attend to or worry about.

Freedom and guilt, in just that order.

I stretched languidly on the bed, reveling in the surprisingly soft mattress. Why had I not noticed how soft the mattress was? A moment passed, and then another, and then my heart sank.

I had no children to pick up from school and no one to cook for! I missed my kids—but not my husband. Knowing I repulsed him helped sever my emotional ties to him. Yes, I missed the good times with Danny. But I wouldn't miss these past few years.

But I would see my children this weekend. It sucked, but there was nothing I could do about it now, although I vowed to get them back.

Somehow.

For now, though, there was nothing to do but lie here and hurt—and wait for true night to fall. The drapes were thick and heavy and kept out most of the setting sun. My window dressings at home were, in fact, the same heavy curtains found in hotels. Early on, right after my attack, I had wanted to board up the windows, but Danny resisted and we compromised with the heavy drapes.



I massaged my shoulder. Although it still ached, there was no evidence of a wound. Another few inches over and I would have been dead. My only saving grace had been a last-second alarm that went off in my head, a warning that told me to *turn dammit*.

I thought of the vampire hunter. I couldn't have him taking potshots at me whenever he damned well felt like it. I had to do something about him, and short of killing him—which was a definite option—I just wasn't sure what yet.

First things first. I needed to figure out how the hell he kept showing up without me spotting him. I always check for tails, a good habit for an investigator to have. So I was certain he wasn't following me.

Of course, there are other ways to keep tabs on people, especially tabs on vehicles. In fact, at HUD, we had employed such techniques. Tracking devices.

As I waited for the sun to set, I turned on the boob tube and flipped through some news channels and a re-run or two until I came across an Angels game. I couldn't recall the last time I watched an Angels



game. I loved baseball, especially the leisurely pace of the game. I liked the quiet moments when the pitcher stepped off the mound and gathered his thoughts while the world waited. My father was a minor league pitcher in Rancho Cucamonga. He was good, but not great, which is why he never made it past single-A ball. Still, surrounded by my three older brothers, I learned to love the game at an early age.

The Angels were up 3-2. Tim Salmon had just hit a line-drive single up the middle.

Those childhood memories seemed to belong to someone else. Someone I barely recalled, yet remembered in detail. I was a different person now. The pre-attack Samantha as opposed to the post-attack Samantha were two different people. Hell, two different *species*.

Salmon had a nice butt. So did most baseball players.

I rubbed my shoulder again as I watched the game. So how the hell did it heal so quickly? What caused this to happen? Ancient magic? If so, was this the same magic keeping me alive? Was I even truly alive? Or was I dead and didn't know it?



Bengie Molina, the Angel's catcher, ripped a line drive back to the pitcher. The pitcher doubled-up Salmon at first. End of inning.

Perhaps I was nothing more than a spirit or a ghost who didn't have enough sense to move on. But on to where? I didn't feel dead.

It was the eighth inning, and the Angels brought in their closer, *El Toro*, the bull. Percival was a big man with big legs. He looked like a bull. I liked the way he squinted and curled his tongue. He looked like a gunslinger. Except this gunslinger slung baseballs. He struck out the first batter in four pitches.

Perhaps I was a plague on the earth, an abnormality that needed to be cleansed. Perhaps the world would have been better off if the vampire hunter's arrow had hit home.

More squinting from *El Toro*. I heard once that Percival needed to wear glasses but he chose not to while pitching, forcing himself to focus solely and completely on the catcher's signals, blocking out all other distractions. On his next pitch, the batter popped out to center field.

Perhaps I didn't need to know what kept me



alive. Perhaps my existence was no more a mystery than life itself. Hell, where did any of us come from? That thought comforted me.

Percival struck out the next batter and pumped his fist. It was the bottom of the eighth inning.

I was suddenly content and at peace with myself. I would have ordered room service if fresh plasma was on the menu. Instead, I sipped from a bottle of water and let the day slip into night. And when the sun finally set, when my breathing seemed unrestricted and my body fully alert, I was ready to take on the world.

Oh, and the Angels won.

With all the time on my hands, maybe I'll catch a night game this season.

## 52.

I first headed over to an auto repair shop in Fullerton.

The young mechanic came out to meet me as I



pulled in front of an empty service garage. He wore a light blue workshirt with the name *Rick* stitched on a patch over his chest.

"Sorry, we're closing," said Rick when I rolled down my window.

I pulled out a twenty dollar bill. "All I need for you to do is lift my van."

"Why?"

"I want to have a look underneath."

"You want to? Why?"

"Because this is how I spend my Friday nights. Just lift the van for a few minutes, let me have a look underneath, and the twenty is yours."

Rick thought about, then shrugged. "Hey, whatever you say, lady," he said and took the twenty.

He motioned me forward. I drove into the narrow space, straddling the lift. I got out and Rick manipulated some nearby controls and soon the above-ground lift was chugging into action. The van rose slowly, wheels sagging down. A few minutes later, now at eye level, I thought the minivan looked forlorn and sort of helpless, like a wild horse being airlifted from an overflowing river.



“Okay,” Rick said. “Have at it. Just don’t hurt yourself. You need a flashlight?”

“No,”

“So what are you looking for?” he asked, standing next to me.

“I’ll know it when I see it.”

The underside of the van was a mess of hoses, encased wires and steel shafts and rods. I walked slowly along the frame until I found it. Held in place by magnets and twisty-ties, the tracking device was about the size and shape of a cell phone.

“What the hell is that?” asked Rick.

“My TV remote,” I said. “Been looking everywhere for it.”

“No shit?” he said.

“No shit.”

## 53.

It took two nights of waiting before I saw the hunter again.



I had left the minivan parked in an alley behind a Vons grocery store. I knew the hunter would eventually investigate, and to do so he would have to physically enter the alley. A typical ambush, and I'm sure he suspected a trap. If so, he would be right. This ~~was~~ a trap.

I sat on top of the grocery store roof, near a huge rotating vent. My great, leathery wings were tucked in behind me. The night was warm, but the breeze cooled things down. My skin was thick and rubbery. My new hide did wonders for keeping me warm, especially in the higher altitudes. I had discovered that I could remain in this form for as long as I wished. This was a good discovery, as it was nice shedding my old skin for this new one. People should try it sometime.

The alley was dark and mostly forgotten. My minivan attracted very little interest, even from hooligans. So that's why when the bum appeared I perked up.

In my new form, my eyesight was razor sharp and eagle-like, an obvious necessity to high-flying predators. (And thinking of myself as a *high-flying*



*predator* was almost too weird to, well, think about.) The bum was pushing a shopping cart filled to overflowing with what appeared to be junk. I immediately recognized the handsome face, the rugged jaw, the striking blue eyes, and the spiky blond hair shooting out from under a dirty and warped Dodger cap.

*Nice costume, asshole.*

As an added touch, he even dragged his leg a little behind him. The hunter was putting on quite a show, even hunching his shoulders now Quasimodo-like. I couldn't help but smile. At least, I *think* I smiled. It was hard to tell; plus, I wasn't even sure I had lips. At any rate, I *intended* to smile. Anyway, his shopping cart was, in fact, filled to the brim with soda cans. I wondered if he had purchased the cart and cans from a real bum, or collected the cans himself.

*Probably just stole it,* I thought.

He continued slowly down the alley, his head sweeping from side to side. Unfortunately for him, he never thought to look *up*. About fifty feet from the van, he removed a camouflaged crossbow from inside his tattered jacket. He armed it quickly with a bolt,. And then held it out in front of him like a gun.



He approached my van very, very carefully, leaving behind his cart full of cans. He went slowly from window to window, peering inside with a flashlight. I noted he had forgotten to limp.

I stayed put and waited for my opening.

He tried the doors, discovered they were locked, then popped one open with a Slim Jim. He goofed around inside a bit. Reappearing again, frowning. He seemed a bit perplexed. If anything, I had successfully confused the bastard.

The back door to the grocery store suddenly opened, yellow light splashing out into the alley. A kid appeared, hauling a big blue trash can. The hunter, distracted, turned toward the kid.

*Now!*

I leaped from my perch above.

54.

I tucked in my arms and shot down.



The hunter's back was still to me. Wind thundered in my ears. The ground came up fast. More importantly, the hunter's broad shoulders came up fast.

At the last possible second, I spread my wings wide. The leathery hide snapped open like a parachute. The hunter turned at the sound, swinging his crossbow around, but he was too late. My outstretched talons snatched him up by the shoulders. He cried out, screaming like a school girl. The crossbow tumbled away, skittering over the ground. I beat my wings powerfully, once, twice and finally lifted him off his feet and then slowly up out of the alley. He weighed a lot. More than I was prepared for. My arms and wings were strained to the max.

He struggled, kicking, as his arms were now pinned to his sides. He kicked the air futilely. We rose slowly into the sky together. I looked down in time to see the kid running back into the store. I think he wet himself.

Up we went. I was growing stronger, getting used to the added weight. The air grew colder. The hunter should be warm enough thanks to his homeless



costume, which consisted of many layers of clothing.

I looked down just as he looked up. His face had drained of all color. He looked terrified. He should be terrified. A creature from his nightmares had snatched him away and for all he knew I was going to drop him into an active volcano. Not that there were many active volcanoes in Southern California.

Orange County spread before us, its hundred of thousands of blinking lights evidence that Thomas Edison had certainly been on to something. We flew over Disneyland, which glittered like its own happy constellation. Perhaps park guests would later report seeing a parade float gone amuck.

We reached the beach cities and finally the black ocean itself. Without the city lights, we were plunged into darkness. He stiffened here, and I think he might have whimpered. No doubt he thought I was going to drop him in. I still hadn't ruled it out.

Much later, perhaps assuming he was safe, the hunter relaxed and sagged onto my talons. He spoke to me now, his voice rising up to me along with the smell of sea salt and brine, "How is your shoulder, Samantha Moon?"

The sound of my own name startled me. That this



flying creature had a name was hard to believe. I didn't bother answering. Even to my own ears my voice was nothing more than a shriek.

He went on, "I suppose you can't speak in your changeling form. That's fine, I'll do all the talking. I know you've had a hell of a shitty week. I saw your children get taken away from you. And probably the last thing you needed was an arrow in your shoulder. So I guess what I'm trying to say is I'm sorry."

*Apology accepted*, I thought. I was nothing if not forgiving.

I continued at a steady pace, wings flapping smoothly and effortlessly, propelling us over the eternal black ocean. I adjusted endlessly to the varying wind conditions.

"I've never seen a vampire with a family before. You have two beautiful children. At first I thought the family was just a facade. Perhaps you were just courting these mortals for your own nefarious means. A new angle, you know, to acquire blood. So I assumed you were hideous and vile to formulate such a scheme. Until I saw that this was indeed *your* family. The little girl is your spitting image."

He stopped talking, and the silence that followed



was filled with the rippling of water over the ocean's surface, and something else, something deep and unfathomable, perhaps the sound of millions upon millions of megatons of water turning and roiling and moving over the face of the earth. The ocean's song, if you will, and it was beautiful and haunting.

The hunter told me about himself. His name was Randolph, and his brother, years ago, had been killed by a vampire. Randolph devoted his life to finding his brother's killer, and in the process to kill every vampire he came across.

*Ambitious, I thought. But problematic for me.*

His search eventually led him to an old vampire living in a mansion in Fullerton. Randolph ambushed him, killing him with a bolt through the heart. In going through the old vampire's papers, Randolph had come across my name.

He had, in effect, found the vampire who had attacked *me*.

Not just found him. Found him and killed him. Saved me a lot of trouble.

Randolph continued, "But he was not my brother's killer. I still have some unfinished business." He



paused. "You are not like other vampires, Samantha. May I call you Samantha?"

I nodded; I'm not sure he saw me nod.

"In your hotel room I found packets of cow and pig blood in your refrigerator. You are not a killer. Not like the others."

I glanced down. He was still wearing the dirty Dodger cap. His spiky blond hair trailed over his ears. His face was purple with cold.

I continued steadily out to sea. I found that distinguishing the black water from the black sky was difficult, but my innate compass kept us on a clear course, and my equally innate horizontal balance kept us from plunging into the ocean. I thought of the old joke: *I just flew in from Chicago, and boy are my arms tired....*

But my energy seemed limitless, even hauling a full grown man. Still, I didn't want to fly too far out to sea; I needed to provide for enough time to safely return before the sun's ascent.

In the far distance, on the surface of the ocean, I spied the twinkling of lights. I altered course and headed toward the lights. Randolph snorted from below. I suspected he had been dozing. A hell of a



rude awakening for him, no doubt, hanging from the claws of a flying beast.

The lights turned out to be a ship. In fact, it was a cruise ship.

"You're taking me to the ship," he said.

*Smart boy.*

"I get the hint," he said, laughing. "You want me to stay away. And thank you for not killing me."

There was a lot of activity on the deck of the cruise ship, so I circled the control tower, and set the hunter on the roof of the cabin. Whether anyone saw a black shape descend from the sky remained to be seen.

Randolf scrambled to his feet, no worse for wear. As I hovered above, as he held down his baseball cap against the downdraft of my wings, his astonishing blue eyes caught the starlight. He really was kind of hunky—even to a creature of the night.

He called up to me, "Have a safe flight home, Samantha Moon. Oh, and any idea where I'm headed?"

I had no idea.

I circled once and headed back home.



Kingsley looked far more robust and pink than when I had last seen him.

We were at Mulberry Street Cafe in downtown Fullerton, sitting next to the window. It was raining again and the sidewalk was mostly empty of pedestrians. The rain had a trickle-down effect, if you will. Mulberry's was quieter than normal.

Kingsley was wearing a long black duster, and leather Sole gloves, which he removed upon sitting. His dark slacks were darker where the rain had permeated. His face had a rosy red hue and his hair was perfectly combed. He was clean shaven and smelled of good cologne. He was everything a man should be. Gone were the tufts of hair along the back of his hand.

Pablo the headwaiter knew me well. He looked slyly at Kingsley, perhaps recalling that my husband was usually the man sitting across from me. The



waiter was discreet enough not to say anything. He took our drink orders and slipped away.

"I'm impressed," said Kingsley, glancing out the window. "Whenever I come here they seat me in the back of beyond."

"They happen to like me here."

"Pretty girls get all the breaks."

"You think I'm pretty?"

"Yeah," said Kingsley. "I do."

"Even for a vampire?"

"Even for a vampire."

Our drinks came. Chardonnay for me and bourbon and water for the counselor. Kingsley ordered shrimp tortellini and I had the usual. Steak, rare.

"You can eat steak?" he asked.

"No," I said. "But I can suck the blood out of the carcass."

"Should make for an interesting show."

"Yes, well, it's the only way I can participate in the human dining experience."

"Well, you're not missing much," said Kingsley. "Food nowadays is entirely processed, fattening and just plain horrible for you."



"Does it still taste good?"

"Wonderful."

"Asshole."

He laughed. I drank some of my wine. Kingsley, no doubt due to his massive size, often garnered curious glances from both men and women. I think, perhaps, he was the strongest-looking man I had ever seen.

"Are we human, Kingsley?" I asked suddenly.

He had been raising his glass to his lips. It stopped about halfway. "Yes," he said, then raised it all the way and took a sip. He added, "But are we mortals? No."

"Then what makes us *immortal*? Why don't we die like everyone else? What keeps us alive?"

"I don't know."

"Surely you must have a theory."

He sighed. "Just a working hypothesis."

"Let's have it."

"I think it's safe to say that you and I hover on the brink of the natural and the supernatural. So therefore both natural and unnatural laws apply simultaneously. I believe we are both human...and perhaps something greater."



“Sounds lofty.”

“Do you suspect we’re something *less*?” he asked.

I thought about that. “No. We are certainly not less.”

The waiter came by and dropped off some bread. I didn’t touch it, but Kingsley dug in. “You mind?” he asked.

“Knock yourself out,” I said. “So what are we, then? Some supernatural evolutionary hybrid?”

He shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Maybe we are super humans.”

“Maybe.”

“But during the day I certainly don’t feel super. I feel horrible.”

“Because our bodies are still governed by some physical laws, along with...other laws. Mystical laws perhaps, laws unstudied and unknown to modern science.” He looked at me and shrugged. “Who put these laws into place is anyone’s guess. But they’re there nonetheless. For instance, one such law dictates I will turn into a wolf every full moon cycle; another dictates you drink only blood.”

Kingsley spread liberal amounts of honey butter



over his bread. He seemed particularly ravenous. Maybe it was the animal in him.

"Perhaps we are the result of a powerful curse," I suggested.

"Perhaps."

"That makes sense to me, to some degree."

He shrugged. "I'm not sure anyone really knows."

I suspected someone out there *might* know something. Be it vampire, werewolf or something else, something greater perhaps.

I said, "The curse angle could be why holy water debilitates a vampire."

He shrugged. "Sure."

"So to sum up," I said. "We are both natural and supernatural, abiding by laws known only to our kinds."

"And even much of that is open to speculation. For all I know you are part of one long, drug-induced dream I'm still having in the sixties."

Our food came. Kingsley watched me cut a slice of meat from the raw steak, swirl the slice in the splatter of blood, raise the dripping piece to my lips, and suck it dry.



“Sort of sexy,” he said. “In a ghoulish way.”

I shook my head, then told him about my adventures with the vampire hunter.

He slapped his knee when I was finished. “A Carnival cruise ship?”

“Yes, headed for Hawaii, I think.”

“Then let’s hope he stays there.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s hope, although he was kind of cute.”

“Oh, God.”

I reached down into my purse and pulled out the medallion. It was wrapped in a white handkerchief. I unwrapped it for him.

“What’s that?” Kingsley asked.

“It was worn by my attacker six years ago.”

“Your attacker?”

“The vampire who rendered me into what I am now.”

“How did you get it?”

I told him about the vampire hunter, his dead brother, and the UPS package. When I was finished, Kingsley motioned toward the medallion. “Do you mind?”

“Knock yourself out.”



He picked it up carefully, turned it over in his hand. The gold and ruby roses reflected brightly even in the muted light.

"So why did he give you this?" asked Kingsley.

"I think he was sort of feeling me out, seeing what he was up against. To him, the medallion had no meaning."

"And to you it does?"

I told Kingsley about my dreams. I left out the part where he ravaged me in the woods.

"Those are just dreams, Samantha," he said, studying the heavy piece, turning it over in his big hands. "I've never seen this before."

"But could you look into it for me?" I asked.

"I'll see what I can do," he said. "Do you mind if I take it?"

"Go ahead."

He pocketed the medallion. We continued eating. Outside, a couple sharing an umbrella stopped and examined the menu in the window. She looked at him and nodded. He shrugged. They stepped inside. Compromising at its best.

"Sometimes I think God has forgotten about me," I said.



"I know the feeling."

"That, in fact, I have somehow stumbled upon the loophole of life."

"Loophole?"

"Like you being a defense attorney," I said. "You look for an ambiguity in the law, an omission of some sort, something that allows you to evade compliance."

He nodded, "And being a creature of the night is the ambiguity of life?"

"Yeah. I'm the omission."

"Well, that's certainly one way of looking at it."

"What's another way?"

"To make the most of the life we're given," he said. "To see life—even for the undead—as a great gift. Imagine the possibilities, Samantha? Imagine the good you can do? Life is precious. Even for those who exist in loopholes."

I nodded, thinking of Fang. "Someone told me something like that recently."

"It's good advice," said Kingsley. "In fact, it's good advice for everyone."

"So we are like everyone?"

"No," he said, reaching across the table and



taking my hand. His was so damn warm...mine must have felt like a cold, wet, limp noodle in his own. Self-conscious, I almost pulled my hand away, but he held it even tighter, and that warmed my cold, bitter heart.

He said, "No, Sam. We are *not* like everyone else. I'm a wolf in sheep's clothing, and you're a blood-sucking fiend. Granted, a very *cute*, blood-sucking fiend."

## 56.

On a Wednesday night I broke back into Rick Horton's Gothic revival.

I found the same box under the same bed. The file on me now contained a photograph of my home and a picture of me getting into my van. The picture was taken with a telephoto lens from a great distance away. I studied the picture closely; I so rarely saw myself these days. My face was, of



course, blurry, but my body looked strong and hard. A diet of blood will do that to you. The picture was taken during the day, and I could see the sunscreen gleaming off my lathered cheeks. My hair was hidden in a wide straw hat. I had probably been on my way to pick up the kids from school.

In another file, the same one I had seen the first time I broke in, I found a computer print-out that chronicled in excruciating detail the day in the life of Hewlett Jackson, Kingsley's now-murdered client. The paper had notes written in the margins. One of the handwritten notes said: "Not at work. No access." Another note said: "Not in front of his children."

*Yeah, this would do nicely.*

I pocketed it and returned the box under the bed. In the backyard, with his ferocious guard dogs cowering in the bushes, I wadded up the note in my gloved hands and carefully stuffed it in an empty cereal box in Horton's trash can.

Tomorrow was trash day.

\* \* \*

The next night, Sherbet and I were in the same



parking structure being guarded by the same rent-a-cop. The same two vehicles were in the same two parking slots. The only difference tonight was that there was no rain.

I extracted the wadded up piece of incriminating evidence from the cereal box and made a big show of it.

Sherbet took the crinkled paper from my hand and studied it closely. He then squinted at me sideways, studying *me* closely, suspicious as hell. I innocently showed him the cereal box where I had found the note. Finally, after some internal debate, a slow smile spread over his face.

"I think we've got our man," he said.

"I do, too."

"And you had nothing to do with this note?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, detective."

"Let's go," he said. And go we did.



I was leaving the hotel suite to see my children for the first time in a week when my cell phone rang. It was Sherbet.

“You did good work, Mrs. Moon.”

“What do you mean?”

“Based on the evidence in the trash can a judge granted us a search warrant. We went through the house yesterday and today we arrested Rick Horton. We found enough incriminating evidence to convict two men for murder.”

“I’m not sure that analogy makes sense.”

“It doesn’t have to. You know what I mean.” He paused. “You are a hell of a detective.”

“That’s what they tell me.”

“So why don’t you sound happy?” he asked.

“I am very happy. One less killer walking our streets.”

We were silent. Sherbet took in some air. “You don’t think we got the right guy, do you?”

“I was hired to find out who shot Kingsley Fulcrum,” I said. “Did you get Horton’s phone records?”



"Of course."

"Could you fax them to me."

"Why?"

"Just humor me."

There was a long pause. Static crackled over the phone line. Finally, I heard him sigh deeply. "Where do I fax them?"

I gave him the number to the courtesy fax machine at the hotel's business center.

"How many months back do you want?" he asked.

"Four months."

"You don't have to do this," he said. "The case is closed."

"I know," I said. "But this detective never sleeps."

"Well, not at night, at least. And Mrs. Moon?"

"Yes?"

"Someday we're going to discuss the eyewitnesses that claim to have seen a man rappel down from your balcony."

"Sure."

"And we're definitely going to discuss the kid who worked at Vons who reported seeing a winged creature carry off a man."



“Sure.”

“I don’t have any idea what the fuck is going on, but we will talk again.”

“I understand,” I said. “And detective?”

“Yes?”

“You might have a better idea than you think.”

He paused, then hung up.

## 58.

It was the first time I had been back to my home in over a week.

The house itself sat at the end of a cul-de-sac, with a chain link fence around the front yard. Early on I had hated that ugly chain link fence and wanted it torn down. Danny argued against it stating it might prove useful. He was right. The fence kept my young children away from the street, corralled puppies and kittens, bikes and loose balls, and was perfect for stringing Christmas lights along. It was also used as



a sort of giant pegboard. We attached posters, artwork and ribbons to it. Advertised their lemonade stands and the birth of any puppies or kittens. I missed that damn fence.

Last year, Danny made us get rid of our dog and cat. The kids were traumatized for months. I think Danny secretly feared I would kill our family pets and feed from them, although he never admitted his concerns to me.

Anyway, now the fence was bare and there were no children playing in the yard. No balls, and certainly no puppies or kittens. Danny's Escalade was parked dead center of the driveway. Usually he parked to the far left half to give my minivan room on the right. He didn't have to worry about that now.

I parked on the street, headed up to the house. The sun was still out and I felt weak as hell, but that wouldn't stop me.

Danny yanked open the door as soon as I reached the cement porch. He stared down at me gravely. He couldn't have seemed less happy to see me. He was as handsome as ever, but that was lost on me now. I only saw his fear and disgust.

"I only have a few minutes, Samantha. These



meetings are terribly inconvenient for me.”

“Then leave,” I said.

“I can’t do that.”

“Why?”

He stepped in front of me. “For the protection of my children, that’s why.”

I pushed him aside and entered my house. “Where are they?”

“In their room. You have only a few minutes, Sam. The babysitter will be arriving and I am leaving on my date.”

I tried to ignore his hurtful words. Mostly, I tried to keep calm and my voice from shaking. “We had agreed on two hours, Danny.”

“Things change, Sam,” he said dismissively, and I caught the undercurrent of his words. Things change...and so do humans. Into vampires.

He led the way forward and rapped on the children’s door. “Kids,” he said stiffly. Danny never had a way with our kids. They were always treated like junior assistants, interns or paralegals. “Your mother is here. Come along.”

The bedroom door burst open. Little Anthony, with his mess of black curls, flung himself into my



arms. Tammy followed a half second later. Their combined weight nearly toppled me over. Squatting, I held their squirming bodies in my arms. Anthony pulled away and I saw that he was still clutching his Game Boy. Neither hell nor high water would separate him from his Game Boy.

“When are you coming back, Mommy?” Anthony asked.

Before I could answer, Danny stepped in. “I told you, son, that your mother is not coming back. That she is sick and she needs to stay away.”

I almost dropped the kids in my haste to stand and confront Danny. “Sick? You told them I was sick?”

He pulled me away into a corner of the living room, out of range of the children. “You are sick, Samantha. Very sick. And if I had my way I would report you and have you committed—for your safety and the safety of everyone around you.”

“Danny,” I said carefully. “I am not sick. I am a person like you. I have a problem that I am dealing with. The problem does not control me. I control it.”

“Look, whatever. It’s easier for the children to accept that you are sick. I’m going to have to



demand that you play along with this, Sam.”

I stared at him some more, then headed back to the kids. The three of us sat together on the edge of Tammy's bed while they both chattered in unison. They wanted assurance that I would not die, and I guaranteed them that I would never, ever die. Danny rolled his eyes; I ignored him.

And much too soon, I was back in my minivan driving away, crying.

## 59.

My sister came by my hotel suite, bearing with her a bottle of merlot.

Now we were sitting on my bed, legs tucked under us, sipping from our glasses. Mary Lou was on her second glass and already buzzed. I was nowhere near being buzzed. In fact, my last buzz had been when I sucked the blood out of the gang-banger.

“So your case is over?” said Mary Lou.



"Yes, I suppose."

"You suppose?" she asked. "It was in the paper. The police found their man. Your name wasn't mentioned of course. Although that hunky detective had his mug on the front page. Sherbert or something."

"Sherbet," I corrected. "And he is kind of hunky, huh?"

She shrugged. "In a grizzly bear sort of way."

"Sometimes that's the best way."

"Sometimes," she said. "So why do you *suppose*?"

"I think we got the wrong guy."

"The detective seems to think you got the *right* guy."

"We're missing something, I'm not sure what."

"Tell me about it?," she said, topping off her glass. "Walk me through it, maybe I can help you."

"Perhaps you could have helped before you started on your third glass."

"You know I'm very lucid when I drink. Give me a shot. Lay it on me."

And so I did. Everything, from working through the files with Kingsley's secretary, Sara, to the



multiple break-ins and the subsequent arrest.

"Other than the fact I don't agree with you tampering with evidence," said Mary Lou, "I don't see any holes here. Horton had the evidence, the files. He had the motive, and he even had a similar weapon registered to him."

"I have no doubt he killed Kingsley's client," I said.

"You just don't think he was the shooter who attacked your attorney."

"No," I said. "I don't."

"Why?"

"For one, they don't look alike."

"He was wearing a disguise," said Mary Lou, over enunciating her words, as she always did when she drank. "Anyone who's seen the video knows that was a fake mustache."

"Horton was clumsy," I said. "Sherbet and I watched Horton struggle with a trash can, and then slip and fall on his ass. He was as athletic as a warthog."

"I don't understand."

"The killer was athletic. Damn athletic. At one point in the video, he leaps smoothly over a bench



“And shoots him,” said Mary Lou. “Yeah, I remember that. I re-watched the video after you took this case. That stood out. Wow, you’re good, sis.”

I shrugged. “Still don’t know who he is.”

“Maybe it’s not a *he*,” said Mary Lou.

Something perked up within me. “What do you mean?”

“What about his sister? Didn’t you mention Horton had a sister?”

I nodded. “She lives in Washington state and is currently recuperating from a broken ankle she suffered a month ago. She was in no condition to shoot and jump over a bench.”

“How do you know this?” she asked.

“I’m not considered a super sleuth for nothing.”

“Do you think Horton was working alone?”

“I don’t know,” I said. My gut told me no, but I didn’t say anything.

“You going to drink that?” asked Mary Lou, motioning for my glass. I gave it to her. She poured the contents of mine into what was left of hers. “And, since I know you like the back of my hand, you won’t rest easy until you find the shooter.”



"No," I said, "I won't."

"Perhaps you won't have to wait long, especially if he has an accomplice."

"What do you mean?"

"You were third on the hit list. Perhaps the accomplice will find you."

"Perhaps," I said. "And for the record, I *never* rest easy."

## 60.

An hour after Mary Lou left the hotel phone rang.

I had been staring down at the lights of Brea, lost in my own thoughts, when the phone rang, startling me. I nearly jumped out of my pale, cold skin at the sound of the ringing phone. I answered it.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Moon?"

"Yes."

"It's the front desk. We have a fax waiting for you



in the lobby.”

“Thank you. I’ll be down in a minute.”

With the fax in hand and back in my hotel room, I hunkered down in one of the straight-back chairs and started reading. The cover letter was printed in tight, unwavering letters. Very cop-like. No surprise since the fax was from Sherbet. In his cover letter, he reminded me that the information contained within was confidential. He also reminded me that the case was closed, that he was looking to retire soon, and the last thing he needed was for me to make his life more difficult. He signed his name with an awkward happy face: the eyes were off-set and the mouth was just a long ghoulish gash, a sort of perversion of the Wal-Mart happy face. I wondered if this was Sherbet’s first happy face. Ever.

The rest of the fax consisted of Rick Horton’s phone records spanning the last four months. Riveting reading to be sure, so I settled in with a packet of chilled hemoglobin. I flipped through the records methodically, because I am nothing if not methodical. Anyone with eternity on their side damn well better be methodical. I read each number. I looked at dates and times and locations. Most of it



was meaningless, of course, but some information began to emerge. First, Rick Horton was obsessed with his sister. A half dozen calls were made to his sister in Washington state each day. Second, Horton had made a handful of calls to Kingsley's office. In fact, eighteen calls in all. Prank calls? Or had Kingsley been in personal contact with Horton?

Next, I searched for key dates and key times and was not really surprised to discover that an hour or so before both Kingsley's shooting and the Hewlett Jackson murder a telephone call had been placed to the same unknown number. It was a local number.

I dialed the number from my hotel phone, which should be untraceable. I waited, discovered that my heartbeat had increased. I was calling the true killer, I was sure of it. In fact, I felt more than sure. I just *knew*.

The line picked up.

A generic voice mail message. I hung up. Maybe I should have left a nasty little message. Then again, I didn't want to scare the killer away, as ironic as that sounds.

Instead, I flipped open my address book and called my ex-partner, Chad Helling. He didn't answer. Typical. I left Chad a voice mail message



asking for a trace on the cell number. Once done, I stepped back to the window, pulled aside the curtain and continued staring down at the city.

## 61.

An hour later, still at the window, my cell rang.

The name that popped up on the LCD screen said it was Sara Benson, Kingsley's receptionist. "Mr. Kingsley Fulcrum requests a meeting tonight at the Downtown Grill in Fullerton at ten thirty."

"Oh, really?" I said, rolling my eyes. "And why doesn't Mr. Kingsley Fulcrum call me himself?" I emphasized *Kingsley Fulcrum*. I mean, who has their secretary set up dates for them? Not only was I falling for a werewolf, I was falling for a werewolf with a massive ego.

"He's in a meeting at the moment."

I checked my watch. Geez, defense attorneys kept weird hours. *Talk about the pot calling the*



*kettle black.*

"Fine," I said. "Tell Kingsley I'll be there."

"I'm sure he will be pleased."

More than likely this was a business meeting, but since this was Friday night, who knows, maybe Kingsley had something more on his mind.

As I was getting dressed for what might or might not be a date, my cell rang again.

"Funny how you only call when you need something," said the deep voice immediately. It was Chad.

"Would you prefer I called if I didn't need something?"

"Would be a pleasant change."

"I'll think about it."

"How's that skin disease working out for you?" he asked.

"Very well, thanks for asking."

"Anytime," he said. "You want the name and address for that cell number?"

"Would be nice," I said, very aware that the name he was about to give me could very well be the shooter.

He gave me the name and address. I used the



hotel stationery and pen. By the time I finished writing, my hand was shaking.

I clicked off and stared at the name.

## 62.

I parked in the half full parking lot. Ever the optimist.

I was wearing flats, which slapped loudly on the swath of cobblestones that led up to the rear entrance of the restaurant. The night was clear and inviting, and I had a sudden surge of hope, and love of life. I felt that all was right in the world, or would be, and for the first time I actually believed it. Hell, I almost felt sorry for people who were not vampires, who did not get to experience this side of the night. I was lonely, sure, but that could always change. Loneliness is not permanent.

The cobblestone path ended in a short alley. The alley was kept immaculately clean, for it provided



convenient access to the many shops and restaurants. At the moment, the alley was empty and dark. The lights were out. Or broken. I was willing to bet broken. I had long ago lost my fear of dark alleys. My footfalls reverberated off the high walls of the surrounding businesses. I passed behind the back entrance to a used bookstore, a comic book shop, a stationary store and a pet store. The Downtown Grill was the only establishment open at this hour. Music pumped from the restaurant's open door. Fire escapes crowded the air space above the alley like oversized cobwebs.

Sitting on the fire escape was a woman. Pointing a gun at me.

There was a flash, followed immediately by a muffled shot. Something exploded in my chest and I staggered backward. I kept my balance and looked down. Dark blood trickled from a hole in my dress. Next came two more muffled shots—and the impact of two more bullets turned me almost completely around. The bullets had been neatly placed in my stomach. Some good shooting. My red dress was ruined.

The woman walked casually down the fire



escape. I saw that there was a silencer on the gun. No one would have heard the muffled shots, especially above the din of music pumping from the restaurant. The fire escape creaked under her weight.

From out of the shadows emerged Sara Benson, Kingsley's receptionist. She paused in the alley and held the gun in both hands like a pro. Her hair was pulled back tightly, revealing every inch of her beautiful face. Her eyes were wide and lustful, and tonight she appeared particularly radiant. Her shapely legs were spaced evenly at shoulder width. A good shooting stance. Any attorney should be so lucky to have such a beautiful receptionist.

Except this receptionist had gone over the edge. "How could you help that animal, Mrs. Moon?" she said. Her voice was even, and calculating, as if her words had been planned well in advance. I could hear again the undercurrent of rage and hatred, and now I understood fully who that anger was directed toward.

I assumed she was talking about Kingsley. "He's not an animal," I said. Actually, technically, she might have had a point there.



She paused, no doubt surprised that I was still speaking. Her surprise quickly turned into indignant, self-righteous rant. "Not an animal? Murderers have been set free, rapists have been let loose. The man has no conscience. He's manipulative and horrible."

"He's just doing his job."

"He does it too well."

"Perhaps. But that's neither for you nor I to decide. There are safeguards put into place in the law to protect the innocent. He upholds these safeguards. Not everyone in prison belongs in prison."

She shook her head, and continued moving closer. I could see tears streaming down her face. Why the hell was *she* getting so emotional? Wasn't I the one getting shot here?

"I love him," she said. "There is something so different about him, and I wanted to be part of that. I would have done anything for him. I gave him everything in my heart, but still he left me. And now he has you."

"Let me guess. If you can't have him, then no one can?"

She cocked her head and fired her weapon



again. My head snapped back. Blood poured down the bridge of my nose. I'll give her this much: she was a hell of a shot. Which didn't surprise me much, since she was also a hell of an athlete.

*And able to leap small park benches in a single bound.*

For a brief second, my vision doubled and then even trebled, then everything righted itself once again. Three seconds later the bullet in my head emerged and dropped into my open palm.

Let's see Copperfield do *that*.

Sara stared at me in dumbfounded shock.

From the opposite end of the alley, coming up from the Commonwealth Avenue entrance, another figure appeared. A very large and burly figure. He was standing in a small pool of light from the alley opening.

"Stop!" shouted Detective Sherbet. "Drop your weapon. Now!"

But Sara didn't drop her weapon. Instead, she swung her arm around with the gun.

I jumped forward. "Sara, don't!"

Too late. She didn't get all the way around. Three



gunshots exploded from Sherbet's end of the alley. His shots weren't muffled by a silencer. The echoes cracked and thundered down the narrow corridor, assaulting the eardrums.

Sara pirouetted like a ballerina, spinning on one heel. Her gun flung off in one direction and her shoe in the other. And as the sound of Sherbet's pistol still reverberated in the alley, Sara's last dance was over and she collapsed.

Sherbet dashed over to us. He was out of breath and looking quite pale. As he reached down for Sara he called for backup and an ambulance.

Then he looked up at me for the first time.

"You okay, Sam—" And then he stopped short. "Sweet Jesus. You've been shot."

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

"The ambulance is on its way."

"Won't be necessary."

He was silent for a long time. In the distance, I heard the coming sirens.

"We will definitely be talking, Samantha."

"I expect so, Detective."



Rain drizzled outside Kingsley's open French windows.

Water gurgled forth from the fountain with the breasts. Kingsley and I were sitting together on his leather couch. Our shoulders touched. There seemed to be a sort of kinetic energy between us. A sexual energy. At least, there was a sexual energy in *me*.

"Tell me how you figured out Sara was the shooter," he said.

"Three things. First, Horton was in constant contact with her, especially in the hours prior to each shooting. Second, she contacted me from her cell number, claiming she was calling from work, which I found odd. Third, I recalled the picture on her desk, the one taken at the office Halloween party. She went as a pirate."

Kingsley smacked his forehead with his palm. "The mustache. Good Lord, I've seen that picture a



hundred times.”

“It’s the spitting image of your shooter.”

“But why didn’t you suspect her earlier? I thought you had some sort of ESP thing going on?”

“I do. But it’s not an exact science. I sensed a lot of anger from Sara, but I assumed that anger was directed at her failed relationship with you.”

“Granted most of my relationships have been failures since the death of my wife, but how did you know about Sara and me?”

“I’m an ace detective, remember?”

“Yes, but—”

“She hinted at it.”

“Okay, yeah, we dated. We hit it off initially, but things didn’t quite take.”

“Ya think?”

We drank some more wine. Our shoulders continued touching.

“Speaking of dating,” I said. “Danny’s secretary dumped him.”

“Is that why you can’t wipe that smile off your face?”

“It’s one of the reasons,” I said. “Not to mention Horton has admitted Sara approached him with a



proposal to kill you and your client. He provided the gun and surveillance. She did the shooting.”

“Then why attack me in broad daylight, in front of so many witnesses?”

“That was calculated. The shooting was scheduled between security shifts; her getaway truck was parked nearby, the plates removed. Horton was waiting a few blocks away, where they swapped cars. The truck was then concealed in a parking garage.” I paused and sipped from my Chardonnay. Even vampires get dry mouths. “Now, with Sara dead and the game up, Horton confessed to everything. He will stand trial as an accessory to murder and attempted murder.”

We were silent. Kingsley reached over and gently took my hand. His hand was comforting. And damn big. The rain picked up a little and *plinked* against the French windows.

“You did good work,” said Kingsley. “You were worth every penny.”

“Of which you still owe me a few.”

“When I get my new secretary I’ll have her write you a check.” He took my wine glass and walked over to his bar and filled me up. From the bar, he



said, "I did some research on the medallion."

I perked up. "And?"

"The medallion is rumored to be connected to a way of reversing the effects of vampirism."

"Reversing?" I said, "I don't understand."

"The medallion," he said, "can *reverse* vampirism."

"You mean—"

"You would be mortal again, Sam. That is, if we're talking about the same medallion, which, by the way, is highly coveted, so you might want to keep this on the down low."

My head was swimming with the possibilities. To be human again. To be *normal* again. To have my kids again.

I looked over at Kingsley and there was real pain on his face. He was hurting.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" he asked.

"You think that if I choose to be mortal..." my voice trailed off.

"I would lose you," he said, finishing. "And I wouldn't blame you for one second."

I stood and came to him, this beautiful, massive



man who made me feel alive again, who made me feel sexy again, who made me feel human again, even when I was at my lowest. I sat down in his huge, warm lap and put my arms around his huge, warm neck. I leaned in and pressed my lips softly against his.

When I pulled away after a long moment, I said, "And what if I told you I was falling in love with you?"

"Then that would make me the happiest man, or half-man, on earth," he said. "But what about being mortal again?"

"We'll look into that another day."

"Good idea."

And he kissed me deeply, powerfully, his lips and tongue taking me in completely.

It was a hell of a kiss.

64.

*Did I catch you at a good time, Fang?*



*It's always a good time when I hear from you, Moon Dance.*

*No girls over tonight?*

*No girls for awhile. So what's new in your world, Moon Dance?*

So I told him. I wrote it up quickly in one long, mangled paragraph.

*More type-o's than a blood bank, he answered when I had finished. I think Sara truly loved Kingsley, at least in her own twisted way.*

*Loved him and hated him.*

*And it drove her to a certain madness.*

Yes, I wrote, remembering Sara's pirouetting body. Watching her land in a heap as a pool of dark blood spread around her. I had stared deep into that dark pool, and felt a hunger.

Fang wrote: *She thought Kingsley morally reprehensible, which justified her attempt on his life. And she would have succeeded had he not been immortal. You immortals get all the breaks.*

*Some of them, I wrote.*

*Rejection can make you do some crazy things.*

*Like jump off a hotel balcony, I added.*

*Yes. But not everyone has wings.*



*So why no girls for awhile, Fang?  
Because I was in love with another woman.  
So who's the lucky woman?*

There was a long delay. A very long delay. I wrote: *Fang?*

And then on my computer screen appeared a single red rose, followed by the words: *I love you, Moon Dance.*

I stared at my monitor. More words appeared.

*I fell in love with you instantly. I know this sounds crazy because I've never met you, but I have fallen in love with the image I have created of you in my mind. There will never be a woman on the face of this earth who can compare to this image. All will fall short.*

He stopped writing, and I read his words over and over again. Finally, I wrote my response.

*We are both crazy, Fang. You know that, right?*

*Yes, I know that.*

*Goodnight, Fang.*

*Goodnight, Moon Dance.*

*To Be Continued*







# VAMPIRE MOON

by

J.R. RAIN

Vampire for Hire #2

## **VAMPIRE MOON**

Published by J.R. Rain

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### *Dedication*

To Susanna, the bravest girl I know.

### *Acknowledgments*

To Sandy Johnston (again!) and Eve Paludan for helping me look a little smarter than I really am, and to Elaine Babich, always my first reader.

### *Vampire Moon*

“The moving moon went up to the sky, And nowhere



did abide; Softly she was going up, And a star or two  
beside.”

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

“The devil’s in the moon for mischief.”

—Lord Byron

## Chapter One

I was alone in my hotel room.

The thick curtains were tightly drawn, and I was watching Judge Judy publicly humiliate this loser slumlord when my cell phone vibrated. I absently rooted through a small mound of Kleenex’s on the nightstand until I found my cell. I glanced at the faceplate: unknown number. I briefly debated ignoring the call. After all, Judge Judy nearly had this jerk in tears—and I just love it when she reduces jerks to tears—but I figured this might be a job, and I needed the work. After all, this hotel room didn’t pay for itself.



I muted Judge Judy's magnificent rant and flipped open the cell. "Moon Agency."

"Is this the Moon Agency?" asked a male voice.

"Would be a hell of a coincidence otherwise."

There was a long pause. On the other end of the line, I could hear the caller breathing deeply, probably through his open mouth. His voice had sounded nasally. If I had to guess, I would guess he had been crying.

"Are you, you know, a detective or something?"

"Or something," I said. "How can I help you?"

He paused again. I sensed I was about to lose him, and I knew why. He had been expecting a man. Sadly, I was used to this sort of bias in this business. In reality, most women make better detectives. I waited.

"You any good?"

"Good enough to know you have been crying," I said. I looked at the balled up tissues next to my night stand. "And if I had to guess, I would say there's about a half dozen used Keenixes next to you."

I heard a sound on his end. It was sort of a snort. "You're good."

"It's why I get paid the big bucks. I have a list of



references, if you want them.”

“Maybe,” he said. More wet breathing. I heard a rustling sound, wiping his nose, no doubt. “Look, I just need help. I don’t know who else to turn to.”

“What kind of help?”

“Better if we don’t talk about it over the phone.”

“Are you in Orange County?” I asked.

“Yes, Irvine.”

“I’ll meet you in an hour at The Block in Orange. The world’s third largest Starbucks is there.”

“No shit?”

“Actually, I was using hyperbole. But it’s pretty damn big.”

He made another snorting sound over the phone and I could almost hear him grin. “Okay,” he said, “I’ll meet you at what may or may not be the world’s third largest Starbucks.”

Whoever he was, I liked him already. I told him to look for the dark-haired girl in the wide-brimmed sunhat.

“Sunhat?”

“I like to look fashionable. My goal is to block out the sun for anyone standing within three feet of me.”

He laughed. I noticed his was a hollow laugh.



Empty. There was a great sadness in him. And it had to do with someone he had lost. My sixth sense was getting stronger, true, but it didn't take a psychic to figure this one out.

"Well, we all need goals," he said. "I'll look for the dark-haired girl in the wide-brimmed sunhat causing her own solar eclipse."

This time I grinned. "Well, moons and eclipses do go hand-in-hand."

He gave me his name, which was Stuart, and I verified his cell number should he fail to find the world's third largest Starbucks and the giant sunhat shading half of Orange County.

Yes, more hyperbole.

We agreed on a time and hung up. I unmuted the TV just as Judge Judy finished publicly dismembering the slum lord. The verdict: he owed his ex-tenant her full deposit.

Yea, for the little people!

I didn't want to get out of bed. In fact, I didn't want to move. The afternoon wasn't optimum time for me. By all rights I should have been sound asleep at this hour, but I had long ago gotten used to getting up at



this hour and picking the kids up at school.

Except now I had been banned from picking the kids up at school.

The ban went into place two weeks ago. The monster in me was probably grateful to finally get to sleep in until sunset. But the mommy in me was heartbroken.

And the mommy in me won out in the end.

Prior to a few weeks ago, I used to have to set an alarm clock to wake up on time. An alarm clock turned to its loudest setting and placed as near to my ear as possible.

Now I woke up on my own, at 3:00 p.m., every day. Like clock work.

Up at 3:00 p.m. with no where to go.

And that's usually when I started crying. Not a great way to start your day—or night, in my case.

I wallowed in some more self-pity before finally forcing myself out of bed and into the bathroom. Once there, I proceeded to apply copious amounts of the strongest sunscreen on the market to my face and hands.

Once done, I grabbed my purse, keys and sunhat and headed for the door. And while I waited for the



elevator, I wondered what my kids were up to. I checked the time on my cell phone. They would be home by now with Danny's mom, who watched them every day. No doubt they were doing homework, or fighting over the TV, or fighting over the video games. Or just fighting. I sighed heavily. I even missed their fights.

I would call them tonight, as I did every night at 7 p.m., which was my nightly phone privilege with them. I would tell them I loved them and missed them. They would tell me the same thing. They would tell me about their day, and I would ask what they did during school, and about the time Anthony would launch into another long-winded tale, Danny, my ex-husband listening on the other end of the line, would jump in and tell me my ten minutes were up and to tell the kids to say goodbye. Once we said goodbye, Danny would abruptly hang the phone up for them.

*Click.*

And I wouldn't hear from them for another 23 hours and 50 minutes. I used to have twenty minutes with them, and then fifteen. And now ten.

I was going to need more Kleenexes.



## Chapter Two

I was waiting for Stuart under a wide green awning, sitting as deep in the shade as possible, as the sun was mercifully beginning to set behind the shining dome of the nearby cineplex.

The Block in Orange is a hip and happening outdoor mall that seemed to appeal mostly to groups of fifteen-year-old girls who spent most of their time doubled over with laughter. Looking at the girls, I was reminded of my daughter. These days, she didn't spend much time doubled over in laughter. These days, she seemed to be sinking deeper into a depression.

Nine years old is too young for a depression.

Suddenly depressed myself, I spotted a man coming around a corner, moving determinedly. He scanned the busy Starbucks crowd, spotted me, and then moved my way. Speaking of shiny domes, the man was completely bald and apparently proud of it. As he got closer, I noted his slacks and tee shirt



were badly wrinkled. A thin film of sweat glistened off his head. He wore a cell phone clipped at his hip that looked like it was from the late nineties.

“Samantha Moon?” he asked.

“What an amazing guess,” I said.

He looked at my hat.

He said, “Not as amazing as you might think. It’s hard to miss that thing.”

I usually avoid shaking hands. People tend to recoil when they touch my cold flesh. But Stuart held out his and I reluctantly shook it. Although he flinched slightly, he didn’t make an issue out of it, which I was grateful for. As we shook, I also got a strong psychic hit from him. Something bad had happened to him. No. Something bad had happened to someone close to him. And recently. I looked at his other hand. He was wearing a wedding band.

*Something bad has happened to his wife.*

“Would you like a coffee?” I asked. “Since we’re at the third largest Starbucks in the world.”

He looked around us. His bald head shimmered in the sun.

“You weren’t kidding. A place this big, you’d think



the coffee was damned good.”

“Not just good,” I corrected. “This is Starbucks. Their coffee is magical.”

“It sure as hell can make five bucks disappear. Seven bucks if you get all that foo-foo crap.”

“Foo-foo crap?”

“You know, whipped cream and syrup and something called java chips.”

“Oh, the yummy foo-foo crap.”

He grinned and sat opposite me. He was a small man and slender. His bald head was oddly appealing to me. It was perfectly proportioned. No deep ridges or odd grooves. The skin was lightly tan and even. I thought I might just be looking at the world’s most perfect bald head. I wanted to touch it. Bad.

He pointed to my hat.

“So do you always wear such a big hat?” he asked.

I generally deflect personal questions, especially any questions that relate to my...condition.

I said, “It helps with my phone reception.”

He looked at me blankly for a second or two, then broke into a smile. “Ah, it looks like a satellite dish, I



get it. Funny.”

I asked if he wanted some magical coffee and he declined, claiming it was too late in the day to drink coffee. I used that as my excuse, too, although it was only a half-truth. Six years ago, it would have been too late in the day for coffee, but now coffee only made me sick.

“So tell me about your wife,” I said. “It’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

He sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. His eyes narrowed. His pupils shrank.

“Yes, but how did you know about my wife?” he asked.

“Women’s intuition.”

He studied me some more, then finally shrugged. He sat forward again and rested his small hands loosely on the table in front of him.

“My wife was killed about a month ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“So am I,” he said.

He told me about it. She had died in a local plane crash. She, and nine others. The plane had flown into the side of the San Bernardino Mountains not too far from here. No survivors. I recalled reading about it on



the internet, but the story had not been followed up on in the news, and I had no idea why the plane crashed or where the investigators were in their investigation. It had been a big story that turned quickly into a non-story. I smelled a cover-up.

I don't think I had ever known anyone who had lost someone in a plane crash. I recalled Stuart's words from a few minutes earlier: *She was killed*. Not: *She was in an accident*.

"I'm sorry," I said again when he was finished.

He nodded. Talking about his wife dying in a plane crash had sombered him. Had I known him a little better, I would have reached out and took his hand. As it was, all I could offer were some sympathetic noises and the occasional sorry. Both seemed inadequate.

We were silent for a few more seconds and when the time seemed appropriate, I said, "You don't think the crash was an accident."

"No."

"You think someone killed her."

"I *know* someone killed her. She was murdered. And so was everyone else on board."



An elderly couple sat next to us with their books of crossword and sudoku puzzles. Both sipped quietly from tall cups of coffee. In Starbucks speak, tall cups were, of course, small cups.

I studied Stuart. I wasn't sure what to think about him. My sixth sense didn't know what to make of him either. He seemed sane enough, although terribly grief-stricken. The grief-stricken part was what worried me. Grief-stricken always trumped sane.

With the elderly couple nearby, Stuart and I automatically lowered our voices and moved a little closer.

I asked, "Why do you think she was murdered?"

"She had received multiple death threats prior to the plane crash, she and everyone else on board."

Okay, sanity was gaining. But I had questions. Serious questions.

"Why would someone threaten your wife's life, and the others on board?"

"They were going to testify in court. She, and five or six other witnesses."

Stuart unconsciously reached for something that wasn't there. As it was, his fingers closed on empty



air. I suspected I knew what they were reaching for: something alcoholic and strong. Unfortunately, we were at a Starbucks, and as far as I knew, they didn't serve any whiskeyaccinos. At least not yet.

"At the time of the crash, she was with the other witnesses?"

"Yes," he said. "They were being flown to a safe house at the Marine base in Camp Pendleton. At the time, of course, I hadn't known where the government was flying her to. I do now."

"Who was she going to testify against?"

Stuart looked at me hesitantly. I sensed I knew the source of his hesitancy. He was about to involve me in something extremely dangerous. He wasn't sure if he should. Here I was, a cute gal wearing an urban sombrero, and no doubt he didn't want to put me in harm's way.

"You can tell me," I said. "I'm a helluva secret keeper."

He shook his head.

"Maybe I should just let this go," he said.

"Maybe," I said. "But I'm a big girl."

"These people are extremely dangerous and, as you can see, can strike anywhere."



"You caught the 'big girl' part, right?"

"It's going to take more than being a big girl, Samantha. It's going to take an army, I'm afraid."

"Call me Sam. And there's very little that I fear."

He squinted, studying me, and as he did so his perfect bald head caught some of the setting sun. There's beauty everywhere, I thought, even in baldness.

"You're really not afraid, are you?" he asked.

"Nope."

"You should be."

"I'm afraid of a lot of things, but men with big guns aren't one of them. My kids' math homework, well, that's another story."

He grinned.

"Fine," he said. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

"Duly noted."

He looked at me some more. He didn't know what to do with his empty hand. It opened and closed randomly. No doubt he was used to holding his wife's hand. Now, I suspected, her hand had been replaced by a crystal tumbler of the hard stuff.

"She was going to testify against Jerry Blum."

I nodded. I knew the name, especially since I had



once been a federal agent. Jerry Blum had single-handedly built an enormous criminal empire that stretched down into Mexico and as far up as Canada, which was no surprise since he was, of all things, Canadian. These days he worked hard to bring drugs to the streets and schools of Orange County. Six years ago, he had dabbled in home loan scams, which had been my specialty. He had an uncanny knack of distancing himself from anything illegal, and an even more uncanny knack to avoid prosecution, which is why my department never caught him.

Last I heard, he had been standing trial for a bizarre crime outside a nightclub in Seal Beach, California, where Jerry Blum had uncharacteristically lost his cool and popped someone with a handgun. Yes, witnesses were everywhere.

I asked Stuart about this, and he confirmed that his wife had indeed been one of the witnesses. She had seen the whole thing, along with five others. She had agreed to testify to what she saw, thus putting her life in mortal danger.

I tapped my longish fingernail on the green plastic table. My fingernails tended to come to a



point these days, but most people seemed not to notice, and if they did, they didn't say anything about it. Maybe they were scared of the weird woman with pointed fingernails.

I said, "Why do you think Jerry Blum was involved in your wife's plane crash?"

"Because as of today he is a free man. No witnesses, and thus no case. It's been ruled self-defense."

"But we're talking about a *plane crash*, and if the plane was headed to a military base, then we're probably talking about a military aircraft."

"I know I sound crazy, but look at the facts. Jerry Blum has a history of silencing witnesses. This case was no different. Just a little more extravagant. Witnesses silenced, and Blum's a free man."

I continued tapping. People just didn't take down military aircrafts. Even powerful people. But the circumstantial evidence was compelling.

Whoops! I was tapping too hard. Digging a hole in the plastic. Whoops. A vampiric woodpecker.

I asked, "So what have federal investigators determined to be the cause of the crash?"



"No clue," said Stuart. "The investigation is still ongoing. Every agency on earth is involved in it. I've been personally interviewed by the FBI, military investigators and the FAA."

"Why you?"

"No clue," he said again. "But I think it's because they suspect foul play."

I nodded but didn't tap.

Stuart added, "But he killed her, Sam. I know it, and I want you to help me prove it. So what do you say?"

I thought about it. Going after a crime lord was a big deal. I would have to be careful. I didn't want to jeopardize my family or Stuart. Myself I wasn't too worried about.

I nodded and he smiled, relieved. We discussed my retainer fee. We discussed, in fact, a rather sizable retainer fee, since this was going to take a lot of time and energy. He agreed to my price without blinking and I gave him my PayPal address, where he would deposit my money. I told him I would begin once the funds had been confirmed. He understood.

We shook hands again and, once again, he barely flinched at my icy grip. And as he walked



away, with the setting sun gleaming off his shining dome, all I wanted to do was run my fingers over his perfect bald head.

I needed to get a life.

### Chapter Three

A half hour later, I was sitting in a McDonald's parking lot and waiting for 7:00 p.m. to roll around.

I had already concluded that traffic was too heavy for me to get back to my hotel in time to call my kids, and so I decided to wait it out here, just off the freeway, with a view of the golden arches and the smell of French fries heavy in the air.

My stomach growled. I think my stomach had short-term memory loss. French fries were no longer on the menu.

The sun was about to set. For me, that's a good thing. The western sky was ablaze in fiery oranges and reds and yellows, a beautiful reminder of the sheer amount of smog in southern California.



I checked the clock on the dash: 6:55.

My husband Danny made the rules. We had no official agreement regarding who could see the kids when. It was an arrangement he set up outside of the courts, because in this case he was judge, jury and executioner. A month or so ago he threatened to expose me for who I am, claiming he had evidence, and that if I fought him I would never see the kids again. Danny was proving to be far more ruthless than I ever imagined. Gone was the gentle husband I had known, replaced by something close to a monster of his own.

Not the undead kind. Just the uncaring kind.

For now, as hard as it was not seeing my kids, I played by his rules, biding my time.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. A small wind made its way through my open window, now bringing with it the scent of cooking beef. Maybe some McNuggets, too. I sniffed again. And fries, always the fries.

I looked at my watch. Three minutes to go. If I called early, Danny wouldn't answer. If I called late, then tough shit, 7:10 was my cut-off no matter what time I called. And if I called past 7:10, he wouldn't



pick up. Again, shit out of luck. The calling too late thing had only happened once, when I was in a client meeting. I vowed it wouldn't happen again, clients be damned.

Two minutes to go. I treasured every second I had with my kids, and I hated Danny for doing this to me. How could he turn on me like this?

*Easy, I thought. He's afraid of you. And when people are afraid they do evil, hurtful things.*

One minute. I rolled up my window. I wanted to be able to hear my kids. I didn't want some damn Harley coming by and drowning out little Anthony's comically high-pitched voice, or Tammy's too-serious recounting of that day's school lessons.

Thirty seconds. I had my finger over the cell phone's send button, Danny's home number—my *old* home number—already selected from my contact list and ready to go.

Ten seconds. Outside, somewhere beyond the nearby freeway's arching overpass, the sun was beginning to set and I was beginning to feel good. Damn good. In fact, within minutes I was about to feel stronger than I had any right to feel.



And I was about to talk to my kids, too. A smile that I hadn't felt all day touched my lips.

At 7:00 p.m. on the nose, I pushed the *send* button. The phone rang once and Danny picked up immediately.

"The kids aren't here," he said immediately in his customary monotone.

"But—"

"They're with Nancy getting some ice cream."

Nancy was, of course, the home-wrecker. His secretary fling that had become more than a fling. The name of that witch alone nearly sent me into a psychotic rage.

"They're with *her*?"

"Yes. They like her. We all do."

"When will they be back?"

"I don't know, and that's none of your concern."

"So when can I call back?"

"You can call back tomorrow at seven."

"That's bullshit, Danny. This was my time with—"

"Tomorrow," he said, and hung up.



## Chapter Four

An hour later, I was boxing at a little sparring club in downtown Fullerton, a place called Jacky's. Jacky himself trained me, which was a rare honor these days, as the little Irishman was getting on in years. I think he either had a crush on me, or didn't know what the hell to make of me, since I tended to destroy his boxing equipment.

The sun had set an hour ago and I was at maximum strength. I was also still pissed off at Danny, hurt beyond words, and now the old Irishman was feeling the brunt of it.

He was wearing brand-new punch mitts, which were those little protective pads trainers use to cover their hands. I was leveling punch after punch into his mittened hands, sometimes so rapidly that my hands were a blur even to my eyes.

And I wasn't just punching them, I was hitting them hard. Perhaps too hard.

Jacky was a tough guy, even though he was pushing sixty. He was an ex-professional boxer back in Ireland who had suffered his share of broken



noses, and no doubt had broken a few noses himself. I had never known him to show pain or any sign of weakness. And so when he began wincing with each punch, I knew it was time to ease up on the poor guy. He was far too tough and stubborn to lower the gloves himself and ask for a break.

I paused in mid-strike and said, "Let's take a break."

To say that Jacky was relieved would have been an understatement.

Still, he shot back. "Is that all you got, wee girl?" he asked loudly, and, I think, for the benefit of anyone watching, since I sometimes attracted a crowd of curious onlookers, and Jacky had a tough-guy image to uphold.

Of course, I never wanted to attract crowds of onlookers, as I generally avoid bringing attention to myself. But since that incident last month with a Marine boxer, an incident in which I put him in a hospital, well, I had become somewhat of a hero in this mostly women's boxing club.

"Well, I could probably go another round or two," I said lightly to Jacky.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," he said.



Jacky shook off the protective gloves. His hands were ruddier than his Irish complexion; his fingers were fat and swollen.

"Sorry about that," I said. "I had a bad night."

"I'd hate to get on your bad side."

"Doesn't seem to worry my ex-husband."

"Then I say he's not right in the head. You punch like a hammer." He shook his head in wonder. I often caused this reaction from the old boxer, who hadn't yet figured me out. "Harder than anyone I've ever trained, man or woman."

"Yeah, well, we've all got our talents," I said.

"Yours, for example, is having red hair."

"That's not a talent."

"Close enough."

He shook his head and held up his red hands which, if I looked hard enough at them, I could probably see throbbing.

"I need to soak these in ice," he said. "But if I soak these in ice, the women here will think I'm a pussycat."

I leaned over and kissed him on his sweating forehead. The blush that emanated from him was



instant, spreading from his balding head, down into his neck.

"But you are a pussycat," I said.

"Well, you're a freak of nature, Sam."

Jacky, of course, didn't realize how freaky I was. In fact, I could count on one hand the number of people who knew how freaky I was.

"You could be a world champion," he said. Now we were making our way over to the big punching bag.

"I'm too old to be a world champion," I said. Jacky was always trying to get me to fight professionally.

He snorted. "You're, what, thirty?"

"Thirty-one, and thank you."

However, Jacky was closer than he thought. I was indeed thirty-seven calendar years old, but I was frozen in a thirty-one year old's body.

The age I was when I was attacked.

Granted, if a girl had to pick an age to be immortalized in, well, thirty-one would probably be near the top of her list.

*And what happens ten years from now when you're forty-seven but still look thirty-one? Or when*



*your daughter is thirty-one and you still look thirty-one?*

I didn't know, but I would cross that bridge when I got there.

Jacky took up his position behind the punching bag. "So what's eating at you anyway, Sam?"

"Everything," I said. I started punching the bag, moving around it as if it were an actual opponent, using the precise body movements Jacky had taught me. Ducking and weaving. Jabs. Hooks. Hard straight shots. Punches that would have broken jaws and teeth and noses. Jacky bared his teeth and absorbed the punches on the other side of the bag like the champion he was, or used to be. I took a small breather. So did Jacky. Sweat poured from my brow.

"Let me guess," said Jacky, gasping slightly, and looking as if he had taken actual physical shots to his own body. "Is it that no-good ex-husband of yours?"

"Good guess."

"Does he realize you could kick his arse from here to Dublin?"

"He realizes that," I said. "And why Dublin?"



“National pride,” he said. “So why don’t you go kick his fucking arse?”

“Because kicking ass isn’t always the answer, Jacky.”

“Works for me,” he said.

“We’ll call that *Plan B*.”

“Would be my *Plan A*. A good arse-kicking always clears the air.”

I laughed. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Break’s over. Hands up.”

He leaned back into the bag and I unleashed another furious onslaught. Pretending the bag was my ex-husband was doing wonders for me.

“You’re sweating like a pig, Sam,” screamed Jacky. “I like that!”

“You like pig sweat?”

He just shook his head and screamed at me to keep my fists up. I grinned and unleashed a flurry of punches that rocked the bag and nearly sent little Jacky flying, and attracted a small group of women who gathered nearby to watch the freak.

And as I punched and sweated and kept my fists up, I knew that fighting Danny wasn’t the answer. Luckily, there were other ways to fight back.



## Chapter Five

After a long shower and a few phone calls to some friends working in the federal government, I was at El Torito Bar and Grill in Brea—just a hop, skip and a jump from my hotel.

I was wearing jeans and a turtle neck sweater. Not because it was cold outside, but because I looked so damn cute in turtle neck sweaters. The stiff-looking man sitting across from me seemed to think so, too. Special Agent Greg Lomax, lead investigator with the FBI, was in full flirt mode, and it was all I could do to keep him on track. Maybe I shouldn't have looked so cute, after all.

*Damn my cuteness.*

El Torito is loud and open. The loudness and openness was actually of benefit for anyone having a private conversation, which was probably why Greg had chosen it.



Personally, I found the noise level here a bit overwhelming, but then again, I'm also just a sweet and sensitive woman.

It was either that or my supernaturally acute hearing that quite literally picked up every clattering dish, scraping fork, and far ruder sounds best not described. And, of course, picked up the babble of ceaseless conversations. If I wanted to I could generally make out any individual conversation within any room. Handy for a P.I., trust me. Granted, I couldn't hear through walls or anything, but sounds that most people could hear, well, I could just hear that much better.

"Lots of people over at HUD talk very highly of you," he said.

"I gave them the best seven years of my life," I said.

"And then you came down with some sort of, what, rare skin disease or something?"

"Or something," I said.

"Now you work private," he said.

"Yes. A P.I."

"How's that working out?"

"It's good to be my own boss," I said. "Now I give



myself weekly pay raises and extra long coffee breaks.”

He grinned. “That’s cute. Anyway, I was told to tell you what I could. So ask away. If I can’t talk about something, or I just don’t know the answer, I’ll tell you.”

We were sitting opposite each other in a far booth in the far corner of the bar. I was sipping some house zinfandel, and he was drinking a Jack and Coke. White wine and water were about the only two liquids I could consume. Well, that and something else.

Just thinking about that something else immediately turned my stomach.

I said, “So do you think the crash was an accident?”

“You get right to the point,” he said. “I like that.”

“Must be the investigator in me.”

He nodded, drank some more Jack and Coke.

“No, this wasn’t an accident. We know that much.”

“How do you know that?”

He smiled. “We just know.”

“Okay. So how did the plane crash?”

“All signs point to sabotage.”



“Sabotage how?”

He was debating how much to tell me. I could almost see the wheels working behind his flirtatious eyes. No doubt he was computing the amount of information he could still give me and still not give up any real government secrets, and yet leave me satisfied enough to sleep with him tonight. A complex formula for sure.

Men are better at math than they realize.

He said, “Someone planted a small explosive in the rudder gears. The pilot heard the explosion, reported it immediately, and then reported that he had lost all control of the plane. Ten minutes later the plane crashed into the side of the San Bernardino Mountains.”

“And everyone on board was killed?”

“Yes. Instantly.”

“Is there any reason to believe that these key witnesses were killed to keep them from testifying?”

“There is every reason to believe that. It’s the only motive we have.” He drank the rest of his Jack and Coke. “Except there’s one problem: our number one suspect was in jail at the time of the crash.”

The waiter came by and dropped off another



drink for Greg. Perhaps the waiters here at El Torito Bar and Grill were psychic. Greg picked up his drink and sipped it.

"It would take a lot of pull to sabotage a military plane," I said.

"Not as much as you might think," said Greg. "This was a DC-12, and the contract the government has with them stipulates that the makers of the planes get to use their own mechanics."

"So the mechanic was a civilian."

"Yes."

"Have you found the mechanic?"

"Yeah," he said. "Dead in his apartment in L.A."

"How did he die?"

"Gunshot in the mouth."

"Suicide?"

"We're working on it."

I followed up with this some more, but Greg seemed to have reached the limit of what he was willing to tell me.

Greg motioned to my half-finished drink. "You going to finish that?"

"Probably not."



“You want to head over to my place and, you know, talk some more about what it’s like giving yourself raises?”

I said, “When you say ‘talk’ don’t you really mean boff my brains out?”

He grinned and reddened. I reached over and patted his superheated face.

“You’ll just have to give yourself a raise tonight,” I said, and left him my card. “Call me if you hear anything new.”

“But I live right around the cor—”

“Sorry,” I said. “But your calculations were off.”

I smiled sweetly and left.

## Chapter Six

We were at the beach, sitting on the wooden deck of a lifeguard tower. The sign on the lifeguard tower said no sitting on the wooden deck.

“We’re breaking the law,” I said.

Kingsley Fulcrum turned his massive head



toward the sign above us. As he did so, some of the moonlight caught his cheek bones and strong nose and got lost somewhere in the shaggy curls that hung on his beefy shoulders.

"We are risking much to be here," he said. "If we get caught, our super secret identities may be discovered."

I said, "Especially if I show up invisible in the mug shot."

Kingsley shook his head.

"You vampires are weird," he said.

"This coming from a guy who howls at every full moon."

He chuckled lightly as a small, cold wind scurried over my bare feet. Before us, the dark ocean stretched black and eternal. Small, frothing whitecaps slapped the shore. In the far distance, twinkling on the curve of the horizon, were the many lights of Catalina Island. Between us and Catalina were the much brighter lights of a dozen or so oil rigs. The beach itself was mostly quiet, although two or three couples were currently smooching on blankets here and there. They probably thought they were mostly hidden under the cover of darkness.



They probably hadn't accounted for a vampire with built-in night vision watching them. A gyrating couple, about two hundred feet away up the beach, might have been doing the nasty.

Kingsley turned to me. I always liked the way the bridge of his nose angled straight up to his forehead. Very Roman. And very hot.

He said, "You became a private investigator after you were changed?"

"Yes."

"So that means you took your P.I. photo when you were a vampire."

"Yes."

"So how did you manage that?"

"I wore a lot of make up that day," I said smugly, proud of myself. I had wondered what to do about the photo, too.

"So the make up showed up, even though you didn't?"

"Yes, exactly. I even made sure I blinked when the picture was taken."

"Just in case your eye sockets came up empty."

"Exactly."

"You could have worn colored contacts," said



Kingsley.

"But then the whites of my eyes would have come up empty," I said.

He nodded. "So you sacrificed your vanity."

"I might look like a major dork in the picture, but at least I look human. Granted, if you look close enough, there is a blank spot somewhere near my throat, where I had missed a patch of skin, but not too many people are looking at my throat."

"No," said Kingsley. "They're looking at the dork with her eyes closed."

I punched him in the arm. The force of my blow knocked him sideways.

"Ouch!" He rubbed his arm and grinned at me, and the light from the half moon touched his square teeth. Kingsley was a successful defense attorney in Orange County. A few months ago, he had hired me to investigate a murder attempt on his life. His case had come at a difficult time in my life. Not only had I just caught my husband cheating, the bastard had the gall to kick me out of my own home.

A very difficult time, to say the least. The wounds were still fresh and I was still hurting.



*And I would be for a very long time.*

Not the greatest time to start a new romance with a hunky defense attorney with massive shoulders and a tendency to shed.

"There are two people boffing over there," said Kingsley, looking off over his shoulder. "I think one of their names is *Oh, Baby*."

Kingsley's hearing was better than mine, which was saying something.

I grinned and elbowed him. "Will you quit eavesdropping."

He cocked his head to one side, and said, "I was wrong. His name is *Oh, God*."

I elbowed him again, and we sat silently some more. Our legs were touching. His thigh was about twice as wide as mine. We were both wearing jeans and sweaters.

I sensed Kingsley's desire to touch me, to reach out and lay his big hand over my knee. I sensed him forcibly controlling himself.

*Down boy.*

I was still looking out over the black ocean, which, to my eyes, wasn't so black. The air shimmered with light particles which flashed and streaked across the



night sky. I often wondered what these streaking lights were. I didn't know for sure, but I had a working hypothesis. I suspected I was seeing the physical manifestation of energy itself. Perhaps I was being given a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the workings of our world.

Then again, I've been wrong before.

Kingsley was still looking at me, still fighting what he most wanted to do. And what he most wanted to do was ravage me right here and now on this lifeguard pier. But the brute held himself in check. Smart man. After all, I gave him no indication that I wanted to be ravaged.

"Not yet, Kingsley," I said calmly, placing my own hand lightly on his knee. "I'm not ready yet."

He nodded his great, shaggy head, but said nothing. I sensed his built-up energy dissipate in an instant. Hell, I could practically see it zigzagging away from his body, caught up by the lunar wind and merging with the silver spirits surfing the California night skies.

He exhaled and sort of deflated. Poor guy. He had gotten himself all worked up. He rested his own hand lightly on mine, and if my own cold flesh



bothered him, he didn't show it.

And while we sat there holding hands, with me soaking in the tremendous warmth of his oversized paw, I told him about my latest case.

When I was finished, he said, "Jerry Blum is a dangerous man."

"I'm a dangerous girl."

From far away, emerging from under the distant Huntington Beach Pier, was a lone jogger. Even from here, the jogger appeared to be a very big man. The man was easily a hundred yards away.

Kingsley, who had been looking down at my leg, suddenly cocked his head, listening. He then turned and spotted the jogging man. The man, as far as I could tell, wasn't making a sound.

I was intrigued. "You heard him?"

"Yes and no," said Kingsley, still looking over his shoulder at the approaching man. "But I could hear his dog."

I looked again. Sure enough, running along at the man's feet, about the size of a rat on steroids, was something small and furry. A dog, and it looked miniscule next to the running man. I smiled. For



some reason, I found it heartwarming to see such a big man running with such a little doggie.

Kingsley said, "So what, exactly, is your client hiring you to do? Does he want you to take down one of the most dangerous criminals on the West Coast?"

"Taking him down will be extra."

"Taking him down will be dangerous for both you and your family, Sam. Remember, this guy doesn't play nice."

"I won't put my family in harm's way," I said. "And besides, who says I play nice, either? I've been known to bite."

"Very funny. But I don't like this, Sam. This isn't your typical P.I. gig. Hell, the FBI still hasn't figured out a way to nail this guy, and you're just one woman."

"But a helluva woman."

"Sure, but why am I more concerned about your safety than you are?" he asked.

"Because you like me a little," I said, blinking daintily.

"I would like you more if you stayed away from this case."



Something small and furry and fat suddenly appeared in the sand beneath our feet. It was the same little dog, now trailing a leash. It was, in fact, a tea cup Pomeranian, and it was about as cute as cute gets. Maybe even cuter. It wagged its tail a mile a minute and turned in a half dozen small circles, creating a little race track in the sand. It never once took its eyes off Kingsley.

"It likes you," I said.

"Go figure."

Kingsley made a small noise in his throat and the little dog abruptly sat in the sand in front of him, staring, panting, wagging.

And from out of the darkness, sweating through a black tee shirt and rippling with more muscle than two or three men put together—that is, if those men weren't Kingsley—was the same tall man we had seen a few minutes earlier. He approached us with a small limp that didn't seem to bother him.

"Kill, Ginger," said the man easily, grinning. Ginger turned in two more circles and sat before Kingsley again. The man reached down and gently patted its little head. "Good girl." He looked up at us. "Were you two at least a little afraid for your lives?"



"Terrified," said Kingsley.

"I might have wet myself a little," I said.

The man stood straight and I might have seen his six-pack through his wet tee shirt. *Hubba, hubba.*

"She doesn't usually come up to strangers," said the man. "In fact, I'm fairly certain she's terrified of her own shadow. Of course, it's a pretty fat shadow. Scares me a little, too."

Kingsley slipped off the wooden platform, landing softly in the sand, too softly for a man his size. Ginger didn't move, although her tail might have started wagging at close to the speed of light. The attorney reached down and scratched the little dog between turgid ears. Ginger, if anything, looked like a star-crossed teenager at a rock concert. Or me at a Stones concert.

"Okay, that's a first," said the man, looking genuinely surprised. "Took me three months before I was anywhere near those ears."

Kingsley, still petting the dog, said, "She probably had a bad experience when she was a pup. If I had to guess, I would say she was beaten and abused before she found her new home. Probably by a man about your size, and so she



doesn't like men, but she does like you, even though you run too fast for her little legs, and you don't give her near enough treats." Kingsley gave Ginger a final pat and stood. "Like I said, it's just a guess."

"Good guess. And spot on. She had been abused before my girlfriend rescued her. Of course, there was no rescuing the man who abused her. Let's just say when I was done with him, he had a newfound respect for every living creature."

Kingsley and I grinned. I had no doubt that the man in front of us could have inflicted some serious damage on someone.

He went on, "And if I gave Ginger any more treats I would have to roll her on my runs."

I snickered and Kingsley laughed heartily. He reached out a hand. "I know you from somewhere."

"Not the first time I've heard that," said the man as he scooped up the little dog, who promptly disappeared behind a bulging bicep muscle that had my own eyes bulging.

Kingsley's eyes narrowed. His thinking face. "You used to play football for UCLA."

"Is there any other school?"



The attorney snapped his fingers. "You were on your way to the pros until you broke your leg."

"Don't you just hate when that happens?" said the man lightly. "And you are, of course, Kingsley Fulcrum, famed defense attorney and internet sensation."

Kingsley laughed; so did I. Indeed, a few months ago, someone had tried to kill the attorney outside of a local courthouse. It was a bizarre and humorous incident that had been captured on film and seen around the country, if not the world. *Kingsley, the man who couldn't die*. The world watched as his assailant shot him point-blank five times in the head and neck.

The two men chitchatted for a bit, and I realized, upon closer inspection, that both men were exactly the same height. Although the stranger was muscular and powerful-looking, Kingsley had a beefy savagery to him that no man could match. Even ex-football players.

After all the silly football talk, I soon learned that the tall stranger now worked as a private eye. I perked up. Kingsley mentioned I was one, too, and the man nodded and reached into his sweat pants



pocket and pulled out a brass card holder. He opened it, gave me one of his cards.

He said, "You ever need any extra help or muscle, call me. I can provide both."

I looked at the card. Jim Knighthorse. I might have heard the name before, perhaps on some local newscast or something. On his card was a picture of him smiling, really cheesin' it up for the camera. I had a very strong sense that Mr. Knighthorse just might have been in love with himself.

"Helluva picture," he said, winking. "If I do say so myself."

I was right.

## Chapter Seven

It was far too early in the morning for me, but I didn't care.

The sun was high and hot, and I was sitting in my minivan in the parking lot of my children's elementary school near downtown Fullerton, where I had parked



under a pathetic jacaranda tree. The tree was mostly bare but offered some shade.

*Beggars can't be choosers.*

I was huddled in my front seat, away from any direct sunlight, the shades pulled down on both the driver's side and passenger's side windows. My face was caked with the heaviest sunblock available on the market. Thin leather gloves covered my hands, and I was wearing another cute wide-brimmed sunhat, which sometimes made driving difficult. I had many such hats—all purchased in the last six years, of course—and all a necessity to keep me alive.

And what happens if I'm ever exposed to any direct sunlight?

I didn't know, and I didn't want to find out, either. All I knew was that the sun physically hurts me, even when I'm properly protected. I suspected I would wither and die. Probably painfully, too.

So much for being immortal.

Immortality with conditions.

As I huddled in my seat, I thought about those words again: *wither and die*.

You know, I used to lead a normal life. I grew up



here in Orange County, was a cheerleader and softball player, went to college in Fullerton, got a master's degree in criminal science, and then went on to work for the federal government. Lots of dreams and ambitions. One of them was to get married and start a family. I did that, and more.

Life was good. Life was fun. Life was easy.

If someone had told me that one day my daily To-Do List would consist of the words: 1) *Buy extra-duty sunblock.* 2) *Oh, and see if Norco Slaughterhouse will set up a direct billing...* well, I would have told them to go back to their Anne Rice novels.

I sat in my minivan, huddled in my seat, buried under my sunhat and sunblock, wary of any beam of sunlight, and shook my head and I kept shaking my head until I found myself crying softly in my hands. Smearing my sunscreen.

Damn.

I may not have known what lived in me, and I may not have known the dark lineage of my blood, but I knew one thing for fucking sure. No one was going to keep me from seeing my kids. Not Danny. And not



the sun.

I opened my van door and got out.

## Chapter Eight

I gasped and stumbled.

I reached a gloved hand out and braced myself on the hot fender of my minivan. Heat from the sheet metal immediately permeated the thin glove. Maybe Stephenie Meyer's vampires had it right. Maybe I should move up to Washington State, in the cold and rain, where gray clouds perpetually covered the skies.

Maybe someday. But not now. I had real-life issues to deal with.

I gathered myself together and strode across the quiet parking lot, filled mostly with teachers' and school administrators' cars. I'm sure I must have looked slightly drunk—or perhaps sick—huddled in my clothing, head down, stumbling slightly.

A small wind stirred my thick hair enough to get a



few strands stuck in the copious amounts of sunscreen caked on my face. I ignored my hair. I needed to get the hell out of the sun. And fast.

I picked up my pace as another wind brought to me the familiar scents of cafeteria food. Familiar, as in this was exactly what cafeteria food had smelled like back when I was in elementary school.

After crossing the hot parking lot, I stepped up onto a sidewalk and a moment later I was under an eave, gasping.

*Sweet, sweet Jesus.*

Keeping to the shade and sliding my hand along the stucco wall to keep my balance, I soon found myself in front of the main office door.

*Focus, Sam.*

I needed to look as calm and normal as possible. School officials didn't take kindly to crazy-looking parents.

My skin felt as if it were on fire. And all I had done was walk across a school parking lot. I wanted to cry.

*No crying.*

I sucked in some air, held it for a few minutes—yes minutes—and let it out again. My skin felt raw and irritated. I picked hair out of the heavy sunscreen



with a shaking hand, adjusted my sunhat, put a smile on my face, and opened the office door.

Just another mom here to see her kids.

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, I found myself in the principal's office; apparently, I was in trouble.

Principal West was a pleasant-looking man in his mid-fifties. He was sitting behind his desk with his hands folded in front of him. He wore a white long-sleeved dress shirt with Native American-inspired jade cuff links. As far as I knew, he wasn't Native American.

Principal West had always been kind to me. Early on, just after my attack, he had been quick to work with me. I was given special access to the front of the school when picking up my kids. Basically, I got to park where the buses parked—thus avoiding long lines and sitting in the sun longer than I had to. Good man. I appreciated his kindness.

That kindness had, apparently, come to an end.

"I can't let them see you, Samantha, I'm sorry."

"I don't understand."

"I got a call today from Danny. In fact, I got it just about a half hour ago. Your husband—or ex-husband



—says that the two of you have an unwritten agreement that you will not be picking the kids up anymore.”

“Yes, but—”

“He also says that you have agreed to supervised visits only. Is this true?”

Principal West was a good man, I knew that, and I could see that this was breaking his heart. I nodded and looked away.

He sighed heavily and pushed away from his desk, crossing his legs. “I can’t allow you to see them without Danny being present, Samantha. I’m sorry.”

“But I’m their mother.”

He studied me for a long time before saying, “Danny also said that you are a potential danger to the kids, and that under no circumstances are you to be alone with them.”

I was shaking my head. Tears were running down my face. I couldn’t speak.

Principal West went on, “You’re very ill, Sam. I can see that. Hell, anyone can see that. How and why you pose a threat to your children, I don’t know.



And what's going on between you and Danny, I don't know that, either. But I would suggest that before you agree to any more such terms, Sam, that you seek legal counsel first. I have never known you to be a threat. Outside of being sick, I have always thought you were a wonderful mother, but it's not for me to say—"

I lost it right there. I burst into tears and cried harder than I had cried in a long, long time. A handful of secretaries, the receptionist and even the school nurse surrounded me. Principal West watched me from behind his desk, and through my tears, I saw his own tears as well.

He wiped his eyes and got up. He put an arm gently around me and told me how sorry he was, and then escorted me out.

## Chapter Nine

*I hate all men, I wrote.  
Even me?*



*Are you a man, Fang?*

*Yes, but I'm a helluva man.*

Despite myself, I laughed. I was in my hotel room sitting in the cushioned hotel chair. I should have been comfortable, but I wasn't; the chair's wooden arms were bothering me. Come to think of it, the chair wasn't that comfortable, either. Maybe I should complain to hotel management.

*Or maybe I should just calm down,* I thought. Even better, maybe I should get myself an apartment somewhere and decorate it with my *own* chairs.

It was a thought, but something I would think about later.

*How do I know you're a helluva man?* I wrote. *I've never seen a picture of you.*

*You'll have to take my word for it.*

*The word of a man? Never! :)*

*Remember: A helluva a man.*

*So you say.*

*What's got you so upset tonight, Moon Dance?*

Fang was my online confidant. I had met him via an online vampire chatroom years ago, back when chatrooms were all the rage. Nowadays, he and I just chatted through AOL, although we kept our old



screen names. His was Fang321, and mine was MoonDance. To date, I had yet to tell him anything too personal, although he has probed repeatedly for more information. Admittedly, I have too. We were both deathly curious about each other, but I had my reasons to not reveal my identity, and, according to him, he did, too. Of course, my reason had been obvious: I admitted to him early on that I was a vampire. To his credit, or, more accurately, a ding to his sanity, he had believed me without reservations.

So I told him about my attempt to see my kids, and how Danny was stymieing me at every turn.

*You could always kill him,* wrote Fang.

*Sometimes I don't know when you're joking.*

There was a long pause, and then he wrote, *Of course, I was joking.*

*Good. You had me worried.*

*Still,* he wrote. *It would solve all your problems.*

*And create a ton more,* I wrote, and then quickly added: *I'm not a killer.*

*Thus wrote the vampire.*

*I'm a good vampire.*

*There are some who would say that's an oxymoron.*



Why can't I be good, too?

Because it's in your nature to kill and drink blood. Ideally, fresh blood from a fresh kill.

I won't kill anything. I would rather shrivel up and die.

But by not drinking fresh blood you are denying yourself the full powers of your being.

How much more powerful do I need to be? I wrote.

You have no idea.

And how do you know so much about vampires, Fang? You've told me long ago that you are human.

A human with a love for all things vampire.

And why do you love vampires so much, Fang?

I have my reasons.

Will you ever tell me what they are?

Someday.

But not on here.

Exactly, he wrote. Not on here.

If not on here, then where? I asked.

That's the million dollar question.

I changed subjects. So what am I supposed to



*do about Danny?*

Another long pause. I often wondered what Fang did during these long pauses. Was he going to the bathroom? Answering his cell phone? Sitting back and lacing his fingers behind his head as he thought about what he would write next?

Finally, after perhaps five minutes, his words appeared in the IM box: *Danny has all the leverage.*

I thought about that. Indeed, it had been something that occurred to me earlier, but I wanted to see what Fang had up his sleeve.

*Keep going, I wrote.*

*Maybe it's time for you to take back the leverage.*

*I agree. Any idea how?*

*Something will come to you. Hey, how psychic are you these days, Moon Dance?*

*More than I was a few years ago. Why?*

*Some psychics use automatic writing for answers.*

*What automatic writing?*

*It's when you sit quietly with a piece of paper and a pen and you ask questions. Sometimes answers come through and your pen just...starts writing.*



I laughed.

*You're kidding.*

*No, I'm not. It could be a way for you to find answers, Moon Dance.*

*Answers to what?*

*Everything.*

I thought about that, and a small feeling stirred in my solar plexus.

*So how do I do this?*

*Research it on the internet.*

*Okay, I will.*

*Good. And let me know how it goes. 'Night, Moon Dance.*

*'Night, Fang.*

## Chapter Ten

I did research it on the internet.

Normally, I would have scoffed at such nonsense (automatic writing? C'mon!), but my very strange existence alone suggested that I should at least



consider it.

And I liked the possibilities. Who wouldn't want spiritual answers, especially someone with my condition?

According to a few sites I checked out on the internet, the process of automatic writing seemed fairly simple. Sit quietly at a table with a pen and paper. Center yourself. Clear your mind. Hold the pen lightly over the paper...and see what comes out.

Then again, maybe I didn't want to know what might come out. Maybe I needed to keep whatever was in me bottled up.

With some trepidation, I found a spiral notebook and a pen. I switched off my laptop and slipped it back in its case.

It was just me, the table, a pen, and a pad of paper.

I stared at the pen. When I grew tired of staring at the pen, I cracked my neck and my knuckles. In the hallway outside my door, I heard two voices steadily growing louder as a couple approached in the direction of my door. The couple came and went, and now their voices grew fainter and fainter.



I picked up the pen.

A domed light hung from the ceiling directly above the table. The light flickered briefly. It had never flickered before. I frowned. One of the sites I had read mentioned that when spirits were present, lights flickered.

It did so again, and again. And now the light actually flickered off, and then on. And then off. Over and over it did this.

I sat back, gasping.

"Sweet Jesus," I said.

More flickering. On and off.

Nothing else in my room was flickering. The light near the front door held strong. So did the light coming in under my front door. It was just this light, directly above me.

And then the light went apeshit. On and off so fast that I could have been having an epileptic seizure.

"Stop!" I suddenly shouted. "I get it. I'll do it."

I brought the pen over to the pad of paper, and the flickering stopped. The light blazed on, cheerily, as if nothing had happened at all.

*Okay, that settles it, I thought. I really am going crazy.*



I set the tip of the pen lightly down on the lined paper. I closed my eyes. Centered myself, whatever that meant. I did my best to do what the article on the internet said. Imagine an invisible silver cord stretching down from each ankle all the way to the center of the earth. Then imagine the cord tied tightly to the biggest rocks I could imagine. Then imagine another such cord tied to the end of my spine, attached to another such rock in the center of the earth.

Grounding myself.

I briefly imagined these silver cords stretching down through nine hotel floors, plunging through beds and scaring the hell out of the occupants below me.

I chuckled. *Sorry folks. Just centering myself.*

When I thought I was about as centered as I could be, I realized I didn't know what to do next. Maybe I didn't have to do anything. It was called automatic writing for a reason, right?

I looked at the pen in front of me. The tip rested unmovingly on the empty page. The lights above me had quit flickering. No doubt a power surge of some sort.



Maybe I should quit thinking?

But how does one quit thinking? I didn't know, but I tried to think of nothing, and found myself thinking of everything. This was harder than it looked.

One of the articles said that focusing on breathing was a great way to unclutter thoughts. But what if someone didn't need to breathe? The article wasn't very vampire friendly.

Still, I forced myself to breathe in and out, focusing on the air as it passed over my lips and down the back of my throat. I focused on all the components that were necessary to draw air in and expel it out.

I thought of my children and the image of me strangling Danny came powerfully into my thoughts.

I shook my head and focused on breathing.

In and out. Over my lips and down my throat. Filling my lungs, and then being expelled again.

And that's when I noticed something very, very interesting. I noticed a slight twitching in my forearms.

I opened my eyes.

The twitching had turned into something more than twitching. My arm was spasming. The feeling



wasn't uncomfortable, though. Almost as if I were receiving a gentle massage that somehow was stimulating my muscles. A gentle shock therapy.

I watched my arm curiously.

Interestingly, with each jerk of my muscles, the point of the pen moved as well, making small little squiggly lines on the page. Meaningless lines. Nothing more than chicken scratches.

My arm quit jerking, and I had a very, very strange sense that something had settled into it, somehow. Something had melded with my arm.

The chicken scratches stopped. Everything stopped.

There was a pause.

And then my arm tingled again and my muscles sort of jerked to life and I watched, utterly fascinated, as the pen in front of me, held by own hand, began making weird circles.

Circle after circle after circle. Big circles. Little circles. Tight, hard circles. Loose, light circles. Sloppy circles, perfect circles.

Quickly, the circles filled the entire page. When there wasn't much room left at all, my hand grew



quiet.

Using my other hand, I tore out the page out, revealing a fresh one beneath.

My arm jerked immediately, tingling, and the pen wrote again, but this time not with circles.

This time words appeared. Two words, to be exact.

*Hello, Samantha.*

## Chapter Eleven

I stared at the two words.

Had I written them? Was I deluding myself into thinking that something beyond me was writing?

At that moment, as those questions formed in my mind, the gentle shocking sensation rippled through my forearm again and the pen began moving. Three words appeared.

*Does it matter?*

The script was flowing. Easy to read. Big, roundish letters. Completely filling the space



between the light-blue lines of the writing paper.

"You can read my mind?" I said aloud.

My hand jerked to life, and words scrawled across the page.

*Thoughts are real, Samantha. More real than people realize.*

I watched in amazement as the words appeared before me. I had the sense that if I wanted to stop writing, that I could. I wasn't being forced to write. I was allowing something to write through me. If I wanted this to stop it would.

"Who are you?" I asked. My heart, which averaged about five beats a minute, had increased in tempo. It was now thumping away at maybe ten beats a minute.

There was only a slight pause, and then my hand felt compelled to write the words: *I am someone very close to you.*

"Should I be afraid?"

*You should be whatever you want. But let me ask you: Do you feel afraid?*

"No."

*Then trust how you feel.*

I took in some air, and held it for a few minutes,



staring down at the pad of paper. I exhaled the air almost as an afterthought.

"This is weird," I said.

*It is whatever you want it to be. It could be weird. Or it could be wildly wonderful.*

Half the page was now full. My hand also moved down to the next line on its own, prompted by the gentle electrical stimulation of my arm muscles.

A weird, otherworldly sensation, for sure.

"So you are someone close to me," I said, and suddenly felt damn foolish for talking to my hand and a piece of paper. "But that doesn't tell me *who* you are."

There was a pause, and I had a strong sense that whoever I was talking to was considering how much to tell me.

*For now, let's just say I am a friend. A very close friend.*

"Most of my friends don't speak to me through a pen and paper," I said. "They use email or text messaging."

*Words are words, are they not? Think of this as spiritual instant messaging. A SIM.*

Despite myself, I laughed. Now I was certain I



was going crazy.

I looked down at the printed words. The fresher ones were still wet and gleaming blue under the overhead light. The printing was not my own. It was big and flowing. My own handwriting style tended to be tight and slanted.

Finally, I said, "I don't understand what's happening here."

*Do you have to understand everything, Samantha? Perhaps some things are best taken on faith. Perhaps it's a good thing to have a little mystery in the world. After all, you're a little mysterious yourself, aren't you?*

I nodded but said nothing. I was suddenly having a hard time formulating words—or even thinking for that matter. I was also feeling strangely emotional. Something powerful and wonderful was going on here and I was having a hard time grasping it.

*Then let's take a break, Samantha. It's okay. We made our introductions, and that's a good start.*

"But you didn't tell me your name," I blurted out.

A slight pause, a tingle, and the following words appeared:



*Sephora. And I'm always here. Waiting.*

## Chapter Twelve

At 7:00 p.m., and still a little freaked about the automatic writing, I called my kids.

Danny picked up immediately.

"I heard about the stunt you pulled today, Sam," he said.

In the background, I heard a female voice say quietly, "What a bitch." The female probably didn't know that I could hear her. The female was now on my shit list. And if it was the female I was thinking it was—his home-wrecking secretary—then she was already on my shit list. So this put her name twice on my shit list. I don't know much about much, but being on a vampire's shit list *twice* probably wasn't a good idea.

Danny didn't bother to shush the woman or even acknowledge she had spoken. Instead, he said, "That was a very stupid thing to do, Sam."



"I just want to see my kids, Danny."

"You do get to see them, every Saturday night," he said, breathing hard. Danny had a temper. A bad temper. He never hit me, which was wise of him, because even back when I wasn't a vampire I could still kick his ass. You don't smack around a highly trained federal agent with a gun in her shoulder holster. And then he added, "But not anymore."

"What do you mean *not anymore*?" I asked.

"It means you're no longer permitted to see the kids, Sam. How can I trust you anymore after that stunt you pulled today?"

This coming from the man who had been cheating on me for months.

"Stunt? Seeing my kids is a stunt?"

"We had an agreement and you broke it, and now I have an obligation to protect *my* children."

"And they need protection from me?"

There was no hesitation. "Yes, of course. You're a monster."

I heard little Anthony say something in the background. He asked if he could talk to me on the phone. The female in the room shushed him nastily. Anthony whimpered and I nearly crushed my cell



phone in my hand.

"Don't take away my Saturdays, Danny."

"I didn't take them away, Sam. You did."

I forced myself to keep calm. "When can I see them again, Danny?"

"I don't know. I'll think about it."

"I'm seeing them this Saturday."

"If you come here, Sam, then everything goes public. All the evidence. All the proof. The pathetic life that you now have will be over. And then you will never, ever see your kids. So don't fuck with me, Sam."

"I could always kill you, Danny."

"Awe, the true monster comes out. You kill me and you still lose the kids. Besides, I'm not afraid of you."

He had something up his sleeve. I wasn't sure what it was, but I suspected it was a weapon of some sort. A vampire hunting weapon, no doubt. Maybe something similar to what the vampire hunter had used on me last month. The hunter who came to kill me with a crossbow and silver-tipped arrow, and ended up on a one-way cruise ship to Hawaii. Long



story.

I looked at my watch. It was well past the ten minutes he allotted me each night. "Can I please speak to my children now?"

"Sorry, Sam. Your time for tonight is up." And he hung up.

## Chapter Thirteen

Fresh off my infuriating phone call with Danny, I soon found myself sitting outside Rembrandt's in Brea. I was drinking a glass of white wine. The woman sitting across from me was drinking a lemonade. Yes, a lemonade. Her name was Monica Collins and she was a mess.

We were sitting under a string of white lights next to a sort of makeshift fence that separated us from the heavily trafficked path to the 24-Hour Fitness behind us. While we drank, a steady parade of physical active types, all wearing tight black shorts, tank tops or tee shirts, streamed past our table and



looked down at us gluttons with scorn. Most carried a gym bag of some sort, a water bottle, and a towel. Half had white speaker cords hanging from their ears. There was a sameness to their diversity.

This wine was hurting my stomach and so I mostly ignored it. White wine, water and blood were the only items I could safely consume without vomiting within minutes. Wine, however, rarely settled well, but I put up with it, especially when meeting new clients. I doubted a glass of chilled hemoglobin would make them feel very comfortable.

Monica was on her second glass of lemonade. Correction, third. She raised her hand and signaled the waiter over, who promptly responded, filling her glass again with a pitcher of the sweet stuff. She looked relieved.

Monica was a bit of a mystery to me. She was a full grown woman who acted as if she was precisely fourteen years old. She had to be around thirty, certainly, but you would never guess it by the way she popped her gum, swung her legs in her seat, giggled, and drank lemonade as if it was going out of style. Her giggling was a nervous habit, I noticed, not because she actually thought anything was funny.



There was also something screwy about her right eye. It didn't track with the left eye, as if it had a sort of minor delay to it. It also seemed to focus somewhere over my shoulder, as if at an imaginary pet parrot.

She had been telling me in graphic detail the many incidents in which her husband of twelve years (now ex-husband) had beaten the unholy shit out of her. I didn't say much as she spoke. Mostly I watched her...and the steady procession of humanity coming and going to the gym.

Monica spoke in a small, child-like voice. She spoke without passion and without inflection. There was no weight to her voice. No strength. Often she spoke with her head and eyes down. She had suffered great abuse, perhaps for most of her life. Women who were abused as children often found themselves in abusive relationships as adults. No surprise there.

She stopped talking when she reached the bottom of the lemonade. She next proceeded to slurp up the remnants loudly. People looked at her, and then at me. I shrugged. Monica didn't seem to care that people were looking at her, and if she



didn't care, why the hell should I?

When she was done slurping, she then asked me if she could go to the bathroom.

Yes, *asked* me.

I told her that, uh, sure, that would be fine. She smiled brightly, popped her gum, and left. A few minutes later she returned...and promptly ordered another lemonade.

She went on. After she had left her husband, he had made it his life's purpose to kill her. She got a restraining order. Apparently he didn't think much of restraining orders. His first attempt to kill her occurred when she was living alone in an apartment in Anaheim.

As she paused to fish out a strawberry, I tried to wrap my brain around the thought of Monica living on her own, doing big girl things, doing adult things, and couldn't. Although thirty-something, she clearly seemed stunted and unprepared for adult life. I reflected on this as she continued her story.

He was waiting for her in her kitchen. After throwing her around a bit, he had proceeded to beat her into a bloody mess with a pipe wrench, cracking



her head open, and leaving her for dead.

Except she didn't die. Doctors rebuilt her, using steel plates and pins and screws. Today she still suffered from trauma-induced seizures and had lost the use of her right eye. That explained the eye. It was, in fact, blind.

After the attack, her husband had been caught within hours. But something strange happened on the way to prison. His attorney, who had apparently been damn good, had somehow gotten him out of jail within a few weeks, convincing a judge that her ex was no longer a threat to Monica.

Her ex-husband attacked again that night.

Still recovering from the first attack, Monica had been staying with her parents when her ex-husband broke into their home, this time wielding a hammer. I was beginning to suspect someone had given the man a gift card to Home Depot. I kept my suspicions to myself.

Anyway, her ex went on to kill her father and to permanently cripple her mother. And if not for the family Rottweiler, Monica would have been dead, too. Yes, the dog survived.

Monica grew silent. In the parking lot in front of



us, an older white Cadillac drove slowly by. The windows were tinted. The Caddy seemed to slow as it went by. She played with the straw. I told her I was sorry about her father. She nodded and kept playing with the straw. I waited. There was more to the story. There was a reason, after all, why she had called me this evening.

She pushed her glass aside. Apparently, she had reached her lemonade limit.

She said, "He was caught trying to hire someone to kill me."

"Who caught him?"

"The people at the prison."

"Prison officials?"

"Yes, them. But he wasn't, you know, successful."

Nervous giggles.

I said, "You're scared."

She nodded; tears welled up in her eyes. "Why does he want to hurt me so much? Hasn't he done enough?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

"He's horrible," she said. "He's so mean."

As she spoke her voice grew tinier and her lower lip shook. Her hands were shaking, too, and my



heart went out to this little girl in a woman's body. Why anyone would want to hurt such a harmless person, I had no clue. Maybe there was more to the story, but I doubted it. I think her assessment was right. He was just mean. Damn mean.

She spoke again, "So I talked to Detective Sherbet. He is so nice to me. He always helps me. I love him." She smiled at the thought of the good detective, a man I had grown quite fond of myself. "He told me to see you. That you were tougher than you looked, but I don't understand what he means. He said you would protect me."

I said, "In the state of California, a private investigator's license also doubles as a bodyguard license."

"So you are a bodyguard, too?" I heard awe in her voice. She smiled brightly. Tears still gleamed wetly in her eyes.

"I am," I said, perhaps a little more boastful than I had intended.

She clapped. "Do you carry a gun?"

"When I need to."

She continued smiling, but then grew somber. She looked at me closely with her good eye, not so



closely with her bad eye. "I don't have money to pay you. I haven't been able to work at the bakery since he hurt me, but maybe my momma can help pay you. Detective Sherbet said that you know what the right thing to do is, but I don't know what he's talking about."

I smiled and shook my head and reached out and took her hand, feeling its warmth despite its clamminess. She flinched slightly at my own icy touch. I held her gaze, and she held mine as best as she could.

I said, "Don't worry about money, sweetie. I won't let anything happen to you, ever. You're safe now. I promise."

And that's when she started crying.

## Chapter Fourteen

We were in my hotel suite.

Monica was walking around my spartan room as



if it were more interesting than it really was. I sensed some of her anxiety departing. In the least, she was giggling less, which I considered a good thing.

Finally she sat on the corner of the bed, near where I was sitting in the surprisingly comfortable desk chair. My laptop was next to me, closed. Somewhere, in there, was Fang. I wondered what he was doing tonight. I wondered what he did every night. I found myself wondering a lot about him.

And what about Kingsley? I wondered about him, too, but he was a little easier to wonder about, since I knew where he lived and I knew he had the hots for me.

On the round table near me was the pad of paper that contained my conversation with...something. At least, the beginning of a conversation.

"You really live here?" asked Monica.

"For now, yes."

"And your husband just kicked you out?"

"Something like that."

She shook her head and smiled some more, but it was a nervous smile. I sensed her about to giggle, but she somehow held it in check.

"I had the opposite problem," she said.



“As in, he never wanted you to leave.”

“Yes, exactly.” And now she did giggle. Sigh. As she sat there on the corner of the bed, her dangling feet didn’t quite touch the carpeted floor. She was so small and cute. And innocent. And sweet. And clueless. In the wrong hands, in the wrong relationship, I could see a brute of a man thinking she was his. A trophy. A little trophy. Something to possess and own. In the right hands, she would have been protected and loved and cherished.

She had found herself in the wrong hands.

Monica asked, “So why did he kick you out, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“I mind,” I said.

She giggled, turned red, and looked away. “I’m so sorry.”

I reached out and touched her knee. I had to be gentle with this one. Her social savvy wasn’t quite up to par, either.

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s just a very fresh wound that I don’t want to talk about right now. You did nothing wrong.”

She nodded vigorously. I patted her knee. She looked at me, nodded again, then looked down. She



was so unsure of herself. So lost. So helpless. How could anyone hurt this girl? God, I already hated her ex-husband with a fucking passion.

“Sam, can I ask you a question?”

I smiled. “Sure, sweetie.”

“Can I, you know, ask how you’re going to protect me?” Nervous giggle. “Is that okay to ask?”

“It’s okay,” I said, patting her knee reassuring, much as I would my own daughter. And the thought of my daughter—and the possibility of not seeing her or Anthony this Saturday night—nearly brought me to tears. I took a deep breath, steadied myself, and said, “You are either going to be with me, or with someone I trust. You will always be protected.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. She pursed her lips. “Who are your friends?”

“Good men. Honorable men. I trust them with my life. They will protect you when I’m not around.”

“Why would you not be around?”

“Sometimes I have...business to attend to.”

She nodded. She understood business. “And one of your friends is coming over now?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Because you are going out?”



“Right. I have work to do.”

“And I can’t come?” She sounded like a child asking her mother if she could go grocery shopping with her.

“Not this time,” I said.

“Okay.” Petulant. She didn’t like the idea of me leaving her so soon. I didn’t either, but what I had to do tonight she had no business seeing or being a part of.

“Chad is a good man,” I said. “You will like him.”

She nodded again. “Will you be back tonight?”

“Yes.”

She smiled and kicked her feet out again. She was wearing white shorts. Her legs were thin and tan. They were also crisscrossed with scars. I didn’t ask her about the scars, but I suspected she had been beaten badly with a belt.

“So how long will you protect me?”

“As long as it takes,” I said. Mercifully, she had no children and, apparently, was on extended leave at her baking job, which I discovered was a donut shop. No wonder why Detective Sherbet liked her so much.



There was a knock on my hotel door. Three rapid knocks, a pause, and then a fourth. It was Chad, using the coded knock we had been trained to use.

"That's my ex-partner," I said. I sat forward and patted her knee again. "You're in good hands, I promise."

She smiled and popped her gum. "I believe you," she said.

## Chapter Fifteen

I was sitting with Stuart Young three floors up on his balcony, overlooking a sliver of Balboa Beach. Stuart didn't quite have a water view from his balcony, but what I could see gleamed brightly under the waxing crescent moon.

Stuart offered me some wine, but my stomach was still upset from the wine I had earlier. I accepted some water instead, and now we sat together overlooking a mostly quiet street. The street ran between more condos. The condos all looked the



same. Row after row, street after street, of identical condos. How I found Stuart's condo was still a mystery, especially with my dismal sense of direction.

But I knew the answer. I sensed his building, and I sensed his apartment. My psychic abilities were gathering strength.

Anyway, Stuart looked like he had recently been crying. No surprise there. He also didn't seem to care that he looked like he had been crying and made no apologies for it. His eyes were red and swollen. His nose was red and swollen. A light film of sweat coated his perfect bald head. The sweat could have been from the alcohol, since the weather is always perfect. Which is why, water view or no water view, this condo probably cost a small fortune.

Stuart was drinking light beer that he had poured into a frosted glass. Beer was the one thing I didn't miss. Blech. Give me wine any day.

"How you holding up?" I asked.

"Couldn't be worse," he said, and actually smiled.

I sipped my water and leaned slightly to the right to get a better view of the tiny sliver of ocean.

"If you look hard enough, you'll find it," said Stuart.



"Believe it or not, I paid for that tiny speck of ocean you can see. Probably cost me another fifty grand."

"It's a nice speck," I said.

He chuckled and drank his beer. He seemed to be enjoying it. Go figure.

"I have it on good word," I said without looking at him, "that, unofficially, your wife's plane was sabotaged."

He stopped drinking.

I went on, "And if it was sabotaged, which appears likely, then that means your wife, along with everyone else on board, was murdered."

He sat back, stared down into his frosted mug. He didn't have much of a reaction. Then again, I wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know or suspect.

I continued, "We all know who stood to benefit from that plane going down. Jerry Blum has not only escaped prosecution, he is now a free man. With no witnesses and no case, all charges have been dropped against him."

Stuart nodded; his jawline rippled slightly.

"The plane crash investigation is still ongoing," I said after a few minutes. "The investigation could



take years. Even if the authorities do find out who took it down, or sabotaged it, I suspect there will be very little evidence linking the attack to Jerry Blum."

He set his frosted glass down on the dusty, round glass table that sat between us, and turned and looked at me.

Stuart said, "And even if evidence is found indicating Jerry Blum was responsible for my wife's crash, who's to say that the next batch of witnesses won't be killed as well."

"It's a sick Catch-22," I said.

"This could go on forever."

I nodded.

"I may never see justice," he added. "Ever."

"There is still a chance they could find damning evidence linking Jerry Blum to the downed aircraft," I said.

"Or not," said Stuart.

I nodded. "Or not."

"More than likely he's going to get off, again, and meanwhile my wife...." Stuart's voice trailed off and he suddenly broke down, sobbing hard into his hands. I reached over and patted his shoulder and



made sympathetic noises. He continued crying, and I continued patting.

When he finally got control of himself, he said, "I have something I want you to listen to."

## Chapter Sixteen

Stuart got up and went through the sliding glass door. He came back a moment later holding a Blackberry phone. He sat next to me again and pushed a few buttons on the phone. A moment later, the phone was ringing loudly on speaker mode. An electronic voice answered and asked Stuart if he wanted to listen to his voice mail. Stuart pressed a button. I assumed his answer was yes. The voice then asked if Stuart wanted to listen to his archive. He pressed another button, and he held the phone out between us, face up, above the round table and above his beer.

"Stu!" came a woman's frantic voice. "Stu, listen to me. Something very, very bad is happening. Oh,



God! Stu, the plane is having problems. Serious problems. I heard an explosion. It happened right outside my window. On the wing. It blew up. I can see it now. Flapping, burning, on fire. This isn't happening, this isn't happening. Oh, God, Stu!" The voice stopped. From somewhere nearby, I heard a woman screaming in the background. A horrible, gut-wrenching scream. "Stu, sweet Jesus, the plane is going to crash. Everyone knows it. The pilot can't get...can't get control of it." Another pause. A voice crackled loudly over a speaker. It was the pilot. He was telling everyone to sit in their seats, to buckle up, to remain calm. And then he told them to prepare for a crash landing. "Jesus, Stu. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Oh, good Christ. I wish I was talking to you, baby. I need you so bad. I need your voice. Baby, I'm so scared. So scared. This isn't happening." Someone screamed bloody murder in the background. "I heard your voice, Stu. I heard it when I got your voice mail. At least I heard it one last—one more time. I love your voice, baby. I love you, baby. I love you so much. I'm going to die now." Someone spoke to her rapidly, hysterically, but the woman on the phone didn't respond. "Everyone's losing it, Stu.



Everyone's freaking. Stu, the explosion. Something blew this plane up. Something blew the wing up. It's Jerry Blum, Stu. I know it. He did this, baby. Somehow. Somehow he got to us all. The motherfucker. Oh, God...." and now she broke down in sobs, briefly regained her composure, and into the phone, "I love you, baby. Forever."

And the line went dead.

\* \* \*

Stuart didn't bother wiping the tears that ran down his cheeks. He stared silently down at his cell phone, which still rested in his open hand. His hand was shaking. Finally, reluctantly, he used his thumb and pressed another button, and pocketed the Blackberry carefully in his light jacket.

He said, "I forwarded my wife's message to another voice mail account I have, and then forwarded the call to the FBI. They asked me to delete the original, which I did. I never told them that I still have a copy of it. Hell, I have a few copies of it, saved in various formats. How dare they ask me to delete my wife's last message to me. The motherfuckers."

We sat quietly for a long time, and I heard his



wife's panicked voice over and over again. My heart broke for her. My heart broke for him. My heart, quite frankly, broke to pieces.

"I'm so sorry," I finally said.

He nodded absently and stared off toward the beach and the muted sounds of crashing waves. I doubted Stuart's mortal ears could hear the waves. Probably a good thing, since hearing the sounds of crashing waves would have doubled the value of the condo. Just over the tiled rooftop of the condo across the street, two seagulls swooped down, their alabaster bodies clear as day to my eyes. As they flashed through the night sky, an ectoplasmic trail of crackling energy followed them like the burning tails of comets. The night was alive to my eyes. The night was alive to my ears, too.

Stuart said, "And even if the FBI eventually found the evidence to convict Jerry Blum, he still may never face punishment."

I nodded.

He shook his head. "It's...the worst feeling in the world, knowing that this motherfucker killed her, knowing that he let her burn to death." Stuart took



deep breaths. "He's a fucking animal and I hate him. You know, fuck the trial. Fuck the evidence. Fuck everything. All I want is ten minutes alone with the motherfucker. Just me and him. Ten minutes."

His wishful thinking got me to thinking.

Stuart went on, "But we can't touch him. No one can touch him. Not the police, not the FBI, not the courts. No one."

"I can touch him," I said, surprised as hell that the words came out of my mouth. I really hadn't thought this through. Not in the slightest.

Stuart snapped his head around. "What did you say?"

I plowed forward, what the hell. "I said I can touch him."

Stuart squinted at me.

"What exactly does that mean, Sam?"

"It means I can hand-deliver you Jerry Blum."

"I'm not following."

It was a crazy idea. Too crazy. But Stuart was hurting and furious and frustrated, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do. Unless....

I said, "Do you really want to face Jerry Blum alone, the man who killed your wife?"



"More than life itself."

"Then what would you say if I told you that I could bring you Jerry Blum?"

"I would say you're crazy."

"Yes, maybe a little."

"But you don't sound crazy."

"Good to know."

But my crazy idea had sparked something in him. In the very least, it had given him something to take his mind off his pain. He turned in his seat and faced me.

"How could you do this?" he asked.

"I have contacts," I said vaguely.

"And your contacts can get you Jerry Blum?"

"Yes," I said. "Sooner or later."

"And I would face him?"

I nodded. "Alone."

"Man against man?"

"*Mano y mano*," I said, which, I think, meant *man and man*, but what the hell did I know?

Stuart said, "What about all his bodyguards, his shooters, his hired killers?"

I shook my head. "It would just be the two of you. Alone."



"And would anyone else know about this?"

"Just me, you, and Jerry Blum."

Something very close to a smile touched the corners of Stuart's mouth, but then he shook his head and the smile was gone. "As much as I would like to believe you, Sam, I have to face the fact that this is nothing more than a fantasy—"

"I can get him," I said, cutting him off. "Give me two weeks."

Stuart stared at me long and hard, then finally he nodded and grinned. He looked good when he grinned; it made his perfect bald head look even more perfect.

"Okay, I believe you," he said. "Why I believe you, I don't know, but I do."

We both sat back in our patio chairs and I listened to the wind and the waves and the sounds of someone in the condo below us making a late night dinner. Shortly, the smell of bacon wafted up. God, I used to love breakfast for dinner.

Stuart rolled his head in my direction. "And what if I kill him?"

"Everybody's got to die sooner or later," I said.

"You're a tough woman."



“Getting tougher by the minute,” I said.

## Chapter Eighteen

It was midnight, and I was sitting in my minivan with my laptop near the Ritz Carlton in Laguna Niguel. No, I don't normally hang out at the Ritz Carlton, but this was as good a place as any for what I was about to do.

Orange County's only five-star hotel sat high on a bluff, which, if you asked me, looked exactly like a cliff. Anyway, I was parked in the guest parking lot in the far corner of the far lot. I doubted I had attracted much attention. Just a small woman in a big van.

A small woman who was about to get very naked.

My windows were cracked open and far below the steep cliff—I was going with *cliff*—was the pleasant sound of the surf crashing along what I knew were mostly smooth, sandy beaches.

I briefly thought about what I had gotten myself



into, and the further away I was from Stuart and his heartbreak, the more I realized how crazy my idea had been.

*Think about it, Sam: you promised to deliver one of the West Coast's most notorious gangsters to a mild-mannered widower—for a one-on-one smackdown.*

Yeah, I've had better ideas.

Of course, as things presently stood, Stuart would never see justice. Or, if he did, it might be years before Blum was locked behind bars again, and that's if the feds could pin anything on him, which I seriously doubted. After all, Blum had been in prison awaiting trial when the plane went down.

A hell of an alibi.

*And so what do you do, Sam? You offer to deliver a murderer to a man who's only outstanding physical attribute was perhaps the world's most perfectly bald head?*

Stuart was a slight man, to say the least. Jerry Blum would no doubt kill the grieving widower with his bare hands. In fact, Blum had probably done exactly that throughout his career in crime.

*And that's if you managed to somehow even get*



*to Blum.*

It's good business to under-promise and over-deliver. Well, in this case, I had over-promised...and might just very well deliver a murderer.

*Great.*

I shook my head. I've had better plans.

Jerry Blum needed to go down. One way or another. Having Stuart face the gangster was probably not my best idea, but it was the best I could come up with at the time. For now, I would let the details of the showdown percolate for a few days and see what else I could come up with.

I drummed my long fingers on the steering wheel. I might be a smidgen over five feet, but God blessed me with extraordinarily long fingers. Was it wrong to really love your own fingers?

Of course, now my fingers and thumbs were capped by very strong-looking nails. Not claws, per se, just ten very thick, and slightly pointed nails. Okay, fine. They were claws. I had fucking claws.

Sometimes I hate my life.

Earlier, I had made a few phone calls to my contacts and I had gotten the address to Jerry Blum's lavish Newport Beach fortress. The gangster



lived on a massive estate overlooking the ocean. In fact, it was a tiny island just off shore, but not too far offshore. A bridge connected the island.

Now, with my laptop glowing next to me, I used Google's satellite feature and studied the lay of the land from above, memorizing the various features of the island. There weren't many. The sprawling home spanned the entire north end of the island from side to side, leaving only a few acres of trees along the southern tip. For me, the trees were a good thing.

*Birds get lost in trees.*

*But do giant vampire bats?*

Once I had the images locked in my brain, I powered down the laptop and scanned the area. All was quiet in this remote section of the Ritz Carlton parking lot. I quickly stripped out of my jeans and blouse and everything in-between. It was the in-between stuff that left me feeling especially vulnerable. And although I had been sitting in my seat for nearly a half hour, the vinyl was still cold to the touch, probably because I was cold to the touch, since my body heat had gone the way of the dodo bird.

Just as I got down to the bare minimum, a family



of four pulled up in an SUV that was big enough to lay siege to Idaho with. I crouched low in my seat, willing myself invisible. A few minutes later, the family piled out and headed up to the hotel, and when they had disappeared from view, I cautiously stepped out of my minivan.

Naked as the day I was born.

I quickly padded across the smooth concrete, stepped over a guard rail, and worked my way through some scrubby bushes until I was standing at the edge of a very steep cliff indeed. Whoever calls these “bluffs” can bite my ass.

Up here, staring down, the ground looked impossibly far. A faint line of foaming waves crashed rhythmically against the polished beaches. I could see two people walking near the surf, holding hands. And if they should happen to look up, they might see something very, very bizarre. Something that would no doubt give them nightmares for the rest of their lives.

*Then let's hope for their sake they don't look up.*

I took a deep breath, filled my lungs with oxygen I really didn't need, closed my eyes, and leaped off



the cliff.

## Chapter Nineteen

I jumped up and out as far away from the cliff as I could.

For one brief second I was majestically airborne, face raised to the heavens, just your everyday naked soccer mom doing a swan dive off the Ritz Carlton cliffs.

The night air was alive with crackling streaks of light, flashes of energy and zigzagging flares of secret lightning. At least secret to mortal eyes.

I hovered like this briefly, suspended in mid-air, looking out over the black ocean....

And then I dropped like a rock—head first, arms held out to either side. An inverted cross.

The wind thundered over me. The face of the cliff swept past me in a blur—hundreds upon hundreds of multicolored layers of strata speeding by in a blink.

I closed my eyes, and the moment I did, a single



flame appeared at the forefront of my mind, in the spot most people call the *third* eye. The flame grew rapidly, burning impossibly bright, filling my thoughts completely, consuming my mind. And within that flame, a vague, dark image appeared. A hideous, ghastly image.

I continued to fall. Wind continued rushing over my ears, whipped my long hair behind me like a black and tattered cape. The sounds of the crashing waves grew rapidly closer. Too close. Soon, very soon, I was going to crash-land at the bottom of the cliff, splattered across the piles of massive boulders.

Would I die? I didn't know. I also didn't want to find out.

The shadowy image took on more shape, its grotesque lines sharpening. I felt an immediate and powerful pull toward the beastly image.

The image grew rapidly, consuming the flame. Ah, but it wasn't growing, was it?

No. Indeed, I was rushing toward it.

Faster and faster.

And then we were one, the beast and I.

I gasped and opened my eyes and contorted my body as great, leathery wings blossomed beneath



my arms. The thick membranes instantly snapped taut like a parachute. The gravitational force on them alone should have ripped them from my body.

But they didn't rip; indeed, they held strong. My arms held strong, too.

I slowed considerably, but not enough. The boulders were still rapidly approaching, the wind screaming over my ears, blasting my face. I instinctively adjusted the angle of my arms—and now I was swooping instead of falling.

And shortly after that, I was *flying*.

I swept above the boulders, just missing them, and now I was gliding over the smooth shore, flashing over the heads of the couple walking hand in hand.

They both turned to look, but I was already gone. Just a great, black winged mystery against the starless night sky.

I flapped my great wings again and gained altitude, and I kept flapping until I was high above the dark ocean.



## Chapter Twenty

I flapped my wings again and rose another couple hundred of feet. I had about ten miles to go to get to Newport Beach. Would have taken me about twenty minutes along the winding Pacific Coast Highway. But as the crow flies, only a few minutes tops.

*Or as the “giant vampire bat” flies.*

I soon found myself in a fairly warm jetstream that hurled me along with little effort on my part. Far below, as I followed the curving sweep of the black coast, an array of lights shown from some of the biggest homes Orange County had to offer.

Six years ago, just after dusk, I had been out jogging along a wooded path in Hillcrest Park in Fullerton. The wooded path was one of the few such paths in Fullerton. Probably not the best time to be jogging in the woods (or what passed as woods in Orange County), but I was a highly trained federal investigator and I was packing heat.

I never saw it coming. Hell, I never even heard it



coming.

One moment I was running, alert for weirdos and tree roots (in that order), and the next I found myself hurling through the air, and slamming hard against a tree trunk.

Close to blacking out, I sensed something moving swiftly behind me. I tried to reach for my gun in the fanny pack, but something was on me, something strong and terrifying.

Before my vision rapidly filled with black, I was aware of two things: One, that I was going to die tonight. And, two, the beautiful gold and ruby medallion that hung from my attacker's neck.

\* \* \*

The wind swept over my perfectly aerodynamic body. A foghorn sounded from somewhere. I was unaware that the beaches of southern California had foghorns, or even fog for that matter.

I banked slightly to starboard by lowering my right arm and lifting my left. A seagull was flying just beneath me. It didn't seem to notice me, and together we continued slightly northeast, following the coast.

I had been partly correct, of course. In a way I had



died that night.

Died and reborn.

And the medallion, through a series of unusual events that I'm still not quite sure what to make of, later came into my possession. As recently as six weeks ago, in fact.

*Vampires and medallions are such a cliché*, I thought, as I slowly began my descent. As I did so, I recognized the glittering Newport Bay and its equally glittering pier.

Then again, maybe the vampire who attacked me invented the cliché.

*Hell, maybe he was the reason for it.*

\* \* \*

Two joggers had found me in the woods. I learned later that the joggers had initially reported me as dead.

I awoke the next morning at St. Jude's Hospital in Fullerton, surrounded by friends and family and police investigators. Federal investigators, too, since these were my colleagues.

There had been a single ghastly wound on my neck. Whatever had attacked me had violently torn open my neck and nearly removed my trapezoid



muscle.

I should have been dead.

There was no sign of sexual assault. Nothing had been stolen. Even my gun was still in my fanny pack. I was also shockingly low on blood. The only explanation that seemed to fit was that I had been attacked by a coyote, which are fairly common in those parts of northern Orange County. The loss of blood was unusual, since there had been no large quantities of it found at the scene. Again, that was attributed to the coyotes, which could have easily lapped up my hemoglobin.

*And since when did coyotes prefer sucking blood to eating rawmeat?*

They didn't, but there was no other explanation. Yes, I reported seeing the medallion. I reported being thrown against a tree, too. These reports were largely dismissed. Sure, my detective friends joked lightheartedly about being attacked by a vampire, but the jokes were forgotten as soon as they were made.

The attack made the local papers, and there was a witch hunt on the local coyote population. Many were regrettably killed.



My neck and shoulder had required hundreds of stitches. Doctors had spent hours on it. They were expecting serious issues with infection, and I was placed in a rigid neck brace. Two days later they released me.

And that's when things started getting weird.

The morning after I was released, I noticed two things: the incessant itching under my bandages had stopped, and I was experiencing no pain in my neck at all.

With Danny watching cartoons with little Anthony, then only two years old, and Tammy at school, I went into the bathroom and shut the door and took my first look under the bandages.

And what I saw was the beginning of my new life.

I was healed. I was impossibly healed. I was *supernaturally* healed.

I had been sitting on the edge of the bathtub with the bathroom door locked, when Danny knocked on the door and asked if everything was okay, and I said yes. But I wasn't okay. Something was wrong, horribly wrong.

He paused just outside the door, where I could



clearly hear him breathing as if he was standing next to me. How could I hear him breathing from behind the door? And did I just hear him scratch himself? When he finally walked away, shuffling down the carpeted floor, I heard every step. Clearly. As if he been walking on hardwood floors.

Confused and alarmed, I crawled into the empty bathtub and hugged my knees tightly.

\* \* \*

And later that day, as I nervously hid my healed wound from Danny—and alternately wondered why I was feeling a very strong need to stay away from direct sunlight—I also had my first craving for the red stuff.

*What the hell was happening to me?*

## Chapter Twenty-one

From the sky, Jerry Blum's estate was easily one of the biggest for miles around. And in Newport Beach, that's saying something.



His estate was, in fact, an island all to itself, an island that was accessible via bridge from Balboa Island.

An island within an island. Cool beans.

Balboa Island wasn't a real island, though. It was just a long peninsula filled with inordinately large homes and hip bars and restaurants. I suppose calling it *Balboa Long Peninsula* just didn't quite have the same ring to it.

Still, those living on *Balboa Island* were living a lie.

*Just sayin'.*

Not so with Jerry Blum. He really did live on an island—an island all to himself, complete with a private bridge that arched from near the southern point of Balboa Island.

A handful of small planes buzzed around me, some beneath and some above. I doubted I was being picked up on any radar. A creature who didn't have a reflection, probably didn't return radar signals, either. And if a giant bat-like blip did show up on their radars, then that would certainly give the air traffic controllers something to chew on.

That, and nightmares.



I swept lower, tucking my arms in a little, angling down toward Jerry Blum's private island. Wind blasted me as I raced through the sky. A thin, protective film covered my eyes. Vampiric goggles.

Whoever had created this thing that I sometimes turn into had done a bang-up job. Someone, somewhere had put some serious thought into this thing.

Who that person was, I didn't know. Why I was created, I didn't know. From where this dark flying creature came from, I didn't know.

But I knew I wanted answers.

*Someday*, I thought.

For now, it was time to go to work.

Hey, even giant vampire bats have to make a living.

\* \* \*

I found a large tree on the grounds and settled upon a thickish branch. From here, I had a good view of the rear and east side of the house.

Sometimes I wondered if I had really died that night six years ago. Maybe this was death. Maybe death was living out a nightmarish fantasy that couldn't possibly be real. Maybe death was full of



wonder and fantasy.

The thick branch creaked under my considerable weight. How considerable? I didn't know, but if I had to guess, I would say that I weighed over five hundred pounds.

*Big girl.*

The massive estate was quiet, although men in shorts and Hawaiian shirts routinely walked the grounds. A high wall encircled the property, and barbed wire ran along the top of the wall. There were security cameras everywhere, but I didn't worry about security cameras. Two big Lincolns sat to either side of the main gate. No doubt men with guns sat in those cars. Beyond the backyard fence was the bay, and beyond that was Newport Beach itself. Wooden stairs led down from the backyard to a boat house and private pier. A sixty-foot yacht was anchored next to the boat house. The yacht looked empty, although there were a few lights on inside it here and there.

I sat unmovingly on the branch for a few more hours. My great, muscular legs never once went to sleep or needed adjusting. I suspected I could have



sat perched like that all night. Or until the sun came up or until the branch snapped off. Whichever came first.

But Jerry Blum's house was quiet tonight. No doubt he was off somewhere honing his racketeering and murder skills. Perfecting the fine art of gangstering.

*I'll be back*, I thought, and leaped off the branch and shot into the air.

## Chapter Twenty-two

I swooped around my minivan once, twice, waiting for a security guard to move on. When he finally did, I landed softly atop the rocky cliff nearby, tucking in my wings. As usual, my wings' thick, leathery membranes hung limply, this time in the dirt. And if I wasn't careful, I could step on my wings, which I had done before and it wasn't the most graceful thing to witness. A vampire stumbling on her own wings didn't exactly grace the covers of



supernatural romance novels the world over.

With the salt-infused wind hammering me atop the cliff, the flame in my mind's eye appeared again. But this time a horrific creature wasn't standing in the flame. (Unless, of course, you asked my ex-husband.) No, instead, a naked woman was standing in the flame.

A cute little curvy woman with long black hair.

It was one of the few times I actually got to see myself without heavy make-up on. Granted, it was a smallish image of myself, and perhaps only an avatar of myself, but it was me and I always loved looking at it.

And I didn't look half bad. Personally, I think Danny is crazy. Think about it, he could have had a young-looking wife for the rest of his life, a wife who never aged. Granted every decade or so we would probably have to move and make completely new friends, and he would have to put up with my cold flesh, and the fact that I drink blood, but still....

Okay, maybe I wasn't such a great prize, but I still think it's his loss.

The asshole.

And as I gazed on that image of myself, as I



stood on the edge of the cliff like a living gargoyle from hell, something occurred to me, something that had been bothering me for the past month or so.

Amazingly, I still cared for Danny.

Yes, the man had made my life an absolute living nightmare. Remember, until recently we had been trying to make things work. And if he hadn't cheated on me, I would still be with him. I had planned to be with Danny for the rest of my life.

Well, the rest of *his* life.

But he had turned into his own kind of monster, which is more than ironic, and even though he began to openly cheat on me, and even though he hurt me more than I had ever been hurt in my life, I still had feelings for the bastard.

Yes, I understood why he did what he did. I get it. I'm a freak. He wanted out. But did he have to be such an asshole about things? Couldn't he have treated me with compassion and love? Did he have to act like such a douchebag all the time? Did I want to hurt him often?

The answer, of course, was yes to everything.

I sat quietly on the cliff edge, surveying the beach below. There was no one behind me, or anywhere



around me for that matter. My hearing in this form was phenomenal.

Danny was the father of my children. As much as it pained me to admit it, I knew he was doing the best he could given the circumstances. How many fathers would have taken their kids from something like me? Probably many of them. How many husbands would have sought a warm body elsewhere? Probably many of them.

Yes, it would have taken an extraordinary man to get through this with me.

Danny wasn't him.

In my mind's eye, I studied the woman in the flame. She stood there passively, naked as the day she was born, watching me in return. I loved that woman. I loved her with all my heart. Life had dealt her a shitty hand, but she, too, was doing the best she could.

A moment later, I was moving toward the woman in the flame. She grew rapidly bigger, taking on much more detail. And then she was rushing at me, too, and a moment later I found myself standing on the edge of the cliff, naked, cold and crying, and



staring down into the churning dark depths below, where the surf pounded rocks into sand.

## Chapter Twenty-three

"I think I'm in love with her," said Chad.

It was nearly four in the morning, and we were standing just inside my hotel doorway. It had been a hell of a long night for Chad. Apparently, though, he had loved every minute of it.

"Thanks, Chad. I owe you."

"I'm not joking," he said. Chad was a tall guy, easily six-foot-three. Maybe taller. When you barely scrape five-foot-three, just about anyone looks tall as hell. Except for Tom Cruise, of course. Chad added, "There's something about her."

"She's vulnerable and cute," I said. "And you're a man. It's a simple equation."

We were whispering since Monica was asleep on my bed. We were also whispering because it was four in the morning and we were in a hotel and we



weren't assholes.

He glanced over at her sleeping form. I glanced too. Mostly under the comforter, she looked tiny and child-like. Just a little bump in a big bed. Say that five times in a row.

He said, "Sure, but there's something else." He stopped talking. Chad, I knew, wasn't used to expressing his emotions; he needed prodding, like most men. Well, those men not named Fang.

So I prodded. "You feel an overwhelming need to protect her, to help her, to save her."

Chad looked at me funny. "That's pretty much it, yeah. How did you know?"

"Because I had the same reaction," I said.

He nodded and looked back at her sleeping form. "How could anyone do that to her?"

"There are bastards out there," I said.

Chad didn't say anything at first. When Chad and I were partners we didn't talk much, but we always had a comfortable silence. When he spoke, his words weren't empty. They were full of a lot of forethought.

"I would kill him," he said. "If he ever came within a mile of her."



"That sounds like love to me," I said. "And just think, I was only gone for six hours."

"And we talked nearly the whole time."

"You mean she talked and you listened."

Chad grinned, but kept looking at her sleeping form. "Something like that."

"Get out of here and get some sleep, you love-struck puppy dog," I said. "Before you propose to her in her sleep."

"I guess I am being a little ridiculous, huh?"

I shrugged.

"This has never happened to me before," he said.

"Welcome to love-at-first-sight," I said. "Now go on."

He nodded and told me to call him anytime I needed help. I said I would and practically shooed him out of my hotel room. As I locked the door behind him, I resisted the urge to look out the peephole to see if my ex-partner was hugging and kissing the door.

With Monica sleeping nearby, I did some more work on my laptop. In particular, I got the visiting hours to Chino State Prison. On a whim, mostly



because the bastard was on my mind, I headed over to my ex-husband's law firm's website. Danny was your typical ambulance chaser. He screwed insurance companies...and anyone else, for that matter.

I broadened my search on Danny Moon, chaser of ambulances extraordinaire. His name was all over the net, usually in association with some case or another, usually a case that actually went to court. You see, Danny *didn't* like to go to court. Danny was a lazy SOB, and his firm did all they could to keep cases *out* of court. But sometimes the negotiations went bad and cases actually did go to court. When they did, Danny and his firm actually had to do real legal work. Which generally made him grumpy as hell to be around.

*Poor baby.*

I next went to his Facebook page. I generally don't go on Facebook. It's not like I have a lot of new pictures to post, right? Anyway, I do keep an account because my daughter has one and I like to see what she's doing. Besides, Farmville is a hoot.

No, Danny and I are not friends on Facebook;



apparently, divorcing someone is also grounds for dropping them as Facebook buddies. So I guess you could say I've been defaced.

Anyway, Danny kept his pictures public. Maybe he didn't know the intricacies of Facebook privacy, or maybe he didn't care.

He should have cared.

Although his pictures were very professional, everything a respectable attorney's pictures should be, there was one very *un*professional picture. Apparently Danny had been tagged at a party. And not just any party. A party at a strip joint in Riverside. And not just any party at a stripjoint, but a *Grand Opening* party.

Now, what was a respectable attorney doing at the grand opening of a cheesy strip club in Riverside?

I didn't know, but I was going to find out.

## Chapter Twenty-four



It was almost sunrise and I was feeling my energy fading.

I had already warned Monica of my “condition”. That is, she thought I had a rare skin disease that kept me out of the sun, which, of course, necessitated me keeping odd hours. She promised she would let me sleep during the days, and that she would not leave the hotel room on her own. I told her to wake me if she needed anything, but that I didn’t awaken easily; she would have to give me one hell of a good shove, or two. I told her she could do just about anything she wanted, other than leave the suite, open the curtains, or answer the door.

She agreed to my terms, and for her sake, I hope she honors them.

My body was shutting down. Quickly. I felt vulnerable and weak and easy to subdue. But even at my weakest, I still couldn’t be killed, unless someone drove a stake through my heart.

*And why would anyone want to do that to such a sweet little thing?*

Vampires might be immortal, but we sure as hell felt human about this time; that is, just before sunrise. (And, no, I didn’t sleep in a coffin. Just give me a



bed, darkness, and some peace and quiet.)

When I shut down, I do so in waves. The first, a draining of energy, always hits me about a half hour before sunrise. And ten minutes before the sun came up, the second wave hit.

That was always a rough wave. I was stuck between exhaustion and sleep. I usually lay down at this time, because within minutes I would be out cold. But when the third wave hit, I absolutely had to lie down and sleep. I was out of options.

For now I was in the middle of the second wave. The sun was minutes from rising and my body was exhausted. And that's when my IM window popped up on my laptop.

*Are you up, Moon Dance?*

*Yes, but not for long.*

*First or second wave?* asked Fang.

*Second wave. Almost third.*

*So I have only a few minutes.*

*Yes.*

*I like knowing that I'm sometimes the last person you think about before going to sleep.*

*You've said that before.*

When I was in the second wave, I was often short



and to the point and didn't feel very flirty. I felt exhausted. I felt as close to dead as a person could feel.

*I also like knowing that you might dream of me.*

*I rarely dream, Fang. And besides, what am I supposed to dream about? Words that appear in a pop-up window?*

There was a long pause. Almost too long. I felt myself going catatonic. If Fang didn't say something soon, it was going to take all my last energy to shut the computer down and crawl over to the couch in the pseudo-living room.

*Then perhaps we should meet someday, Moon Dance.*

Now it was my turn to pause. I sat back, and as I did so, I had the peculiar sense that something wanted to leave my body. What that something was, I wasn't sure. A part of me. Perhaps my soul, if I still had one. Within seconds I would be out cold.

Through a narrow gap in the curtain, I could see the sky lightening with the coming of the sun.

*Are you being serious, Fang?*

*Yes.*



I drummed my fingers on the wooden desk. My brain was fuzzy, thoughts scattered.

*Did you say meet?* I asked.

*Yes. Now, sleep, Moon Dance. Goodnight, even thought it's morning.*

*Goodnight and good morning, Fang.*

## Chapter Twenty-five

“You’re sure you’re okay?” I asked Monica for the tenth time.

She nodded but looked a little overwhelmed. I didn’t blame her. We were at Chino State Prison in Ontario, California, sitting in a stark waiting room with a few other people. I had made special arrangements with the warden for a late evening visit. Both he and the inmate agreed. Being an ex-federal agent has its advantages.

The plain waiting room was smaller than I thought it would be. We sat in plastic bucket seats that were covered with gang graffiti. Took some balls to carve



gang graffiti in a prison waiting room.

Monica looked lost and fragile, and I wondered again at my logic for bringing her here. Chad was busy tonight and I had had no one else to turn to. As I was contemplating calling the private investigator Kingsley and I had met at the beach, brainstorming out loud, Monica had volunteered to come with me, telling me she would be fine. "After all," she had said, "I'm just going to be in the waiting room, right? I won't be seeing him."

I reached out now and held her hand, forgetting for a moment that my own was ice cold. She flinched at the touch, but then gripped my hand back tightly.

"Sorry," I said. "My hands get cold."

"So do mine. Don't worry about it." She squeezed my hand again, tighter, and looked at me. "So what are you going to say to him?"

"I'm going to convince him to leave you alone."

She nodded and looked down. I didn't want to mention that maybe her ex-husband's next attempt to find someone to hurt her might slip past prison officials. Although all his calls were monitored, there is more than one way to smuggle information out of a prison.



“How are you going to convince him?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’m going to kind of feel my way through it.”

“He’ll want to kill you, too, you know.”

“I’m not worried about him.”

She kept holding my hand. Hers, I noticed, was shaking. I shouldn’t have brought her—

But maybe this was a good thing for her. Maybe on some level, she was facing her fears.

Just then the heavy main door into the prison opened and a young, serious-looking guy wearing a correctional uniform stepped into the room.

“Samantha Moon?” he asked.

I gave Monica’s hand a final squeeze before I released it. “I’ll be back,” I said.

## Chapter Twenty-six

Ira Lang was shown through a heavy metal door. Monica’s ex-husband was a medium-sized man



in his mid-forties. He was wearing an orange prison jumpsuit, and not very well, either. The clothing hung loosely from his narrow shoulders and flapped around his ankles when he walked. He looked like a deflated pumpkin. Ira was nearly bald, although not quite. Unlike my client, Stuart, Ira did not have a perfect bald head. In fact, his was anything but. Misshapen and oddly flat, it was furrowed with deep grooves that ran from the base of his skull to his forehead. What Monica had seen in the man, I didn't know.

I watched from behind the thick Plexiglass window as Ira was led over to a chair opposite me. I noticed the guard did not remove the handcuffs, which were attached to a loose chain at Ira's waist, giving him just enough freedom of movement to pick up the red phone in front of him and bring it to his ear, which he did now. I picked up the phone on my side of the Plexiglass.

"Who the fuck are you?" he asked.

I knew the warden was listening. The warden had agreed to let me speak to Ira, anything to make this problem go away. And Ira, with his hell bent desire to



kill his wife, was proving to be a huge problem for the prison.

"My name's Samantha Moon, and I'm a private investigator. I've been hired to protect your ex-wife."

"Protect her from what?"

"You."

I sometimes get psychic hits, and I got one now. I saw waves of darkness radiating from Ira. Wave after black wave. The man felt polluted. I sensed something hovering around him, something alive and something alien. I sensed this thing had its hooks in Ira. What this thing was, I didn't know. After all, it was only an impression I was getting, a feeling. Something I sensed but didn't really see. Anyway, this *something* was black and ancient and full of hate and vitriol, psychically hanging on to Ira's back, digging its supernatural claws deep within the man. I sensed that Ira had let this dark energy into his life through a lifetime of fear and hate and jealousy. And I knew, without a doubt, that whatever this thing was that had its hooks in Ira, it would never, ever let him go without a phenomenal fight. Whatever clung to Ira would cling to him until his death, and perhaps even beyond, a cancer of the worst kind.



These were all psychic hits. Impressions. Gut feelings. I get these often. Sometimes they're important, sometimes they're a waste of time. But I've learned that I should trust such feelings. And I trusted these.

A smirk touched Ira's lips. And something ancient and dark swept just behind his eyes. Whether or not Ira was possessed by something, I couldn't say for sure. But something foul and alive was eating him away from the inside out.

He asked, "So what are you, a body guard or something?"

"Or something."

He laughed, but his was a dry, raspy, dead sound. "Okay, fine, whatever. So who hired you?"

"That's none of your business."

He quit smiling and something passed behind his eyes again, a flitting shadow. Whether or not it was really there, I didn't know. And whether or not I was making it up, I didn't know, either. But there was something off about the guy. Something off, and something wrong. The moment passed and he smiled again. Amazingly, he had a hell of a smile. Perfect teeth. Okay, now I could see how he might



have been engaging to a young girl fresh out of high school, which was when Monica had first met him.

"So what the fuck do you want?" he asked.

"Gee, you have such a wonderful way with words, Ira," I said. "It's almost poetic. Maybe you should write a book of poetry in prison, rather than obsessing about your ex-wife. Call it, I don't know, *Poetry From the Pen* or, let's see, *Lock-down Limericks*."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I don't know," I said. "It was a poetry/prison riff. Not my best work, but not my worst either."

He looked at his phone as if there was something wrong with it.

"Lady, either tell me what the fuck you want or get the fuck out of here."

"Okay, now there's a slap in the face for you," I said. "Dismissed by a scumbag who has nothing better to do than to play with his willy."

"Fuck off, bitch."

And as he moved to stand, I said, "Leave Monica alone, Ira."

A long shot, of course, since I suspected Ira Lang spent most of his waking hours obsessing over his



wife's frustrating lack of dying. And playing with his willy.

He sat back down slowly. As he did so, he adjusted his grip on the phone, wrapping his surprisingly long fingers tightly around the receiver. His movements were all slow and deliberate, as if he had practiced them beforehand. He now placed the phone carefully against his ear and looked at me for a long, long time. I think I was supposed to be afraid. I think I was supposed to shrink away in fear. Perhaps he thought I would swallow nervously and look away. I didn't swallow, and I didn't look away. I also had the distinct feeling he was memorizing every square inch of my face.

"You want me to leave my wife alone?" he said evenly into the phone. He didn't take his eyes off me.

"Your ex-wife, and yes."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I said so."

He stared at me blankly, and then laughed. A single burst of sound into the phone. He laughed again, longer this time.

"You're funny."



"When I want to be."

"You've got balls coming in here," he said. "I'll give you that much."

"The world's worst compliment to a woman."

"What?"

"Never mind. So will you leave her alone?"

He stared at me some more. I heard guards talking to each other out in the hallway. Ira and I were alone in the visiting room, since it was after hours and I had been given special access. A clock ticked behind me. Somewhere I thought I heard someone scream, but that could have just been my imagination. Or my hypersensitive hearing.

Ira cocked his head a little, and then said, "It's too late."

"Too late for what?"

"Never mind that. The bitch shouldn't have left me. I told her to never leave me."

"Gee, you're such a sweetheart, Ira. How could anyone ever leave you?"

He barely heard me. Or heard what he wanted to hear. "Exactly. I gave her everything. The ungrateful bitch never had to work a day in her life."

"People leave each other every day, Ira. It



happens.”

“Not to me it don’t.”

Ira had gotten himself worked up. I knew this because the skin along his slightly misshapen forehead had flushed a little, and he was holding the phone so tight that his knuckles looked like some weird prehistoric spine running along the back of the receiver.

Breathing harder, he said, “I will do everything within my power to make sure the bitch dies. No one leaves me. Ever.”

I realized this was going nowhere fast. I honestly hadn’t expected anything different, but it had been worth a shot.

“I beg to differ,” I said, gathering my stuff together.

“You beg to differ what?”

“Monica very much left you, just as I’m doing now.”

“I’m going to remember you, cunt.”

“Lucky me.”

I was about to hang up when he added, perhaps fatally, “And not just you, Samantha Moon, private investigator and bodyguard. Everyone you know and



love. You have kids?"

I heard the sound of boots moving along the hallway outside. Apparently, someone listening to us had heard enough. I took in some air and closed my eyes and did all I could to control myself.

But dumbass wasn't done. He went on, saying, "I see I hit a nerve. So Samantha Moon *is* a mom."

"Did you just threaten my kids?"

"You catch on quick."

I opened my eyes and saw red. In fact, I couldn't really see at all. All I could see was a blurred image of the man behind the bulletproof glass. And I heard pounding. Loud pounding. In my skull.

The sun, I knew, had set thirty or forty minutes ago. I was at full strength. I sat forward in my chair and leaned close to the thick Plexiglass that separated us. I motioned with my index finger for Ira Lane to come closer, too. He grinned, cocky and confident, and as he leaned forward, something very dark and very twisted danced disturbingly just behind his dead eyes.

His face was inches from mine when he said, "Is there something you want to tell me, you stupid bitch? I bet you're wishing right about now you never



fucked with—”

I punched the bulletproof glass as hard as I could. My hand burst through in a shower of glass and polycarbonate and whatever the hell else these things are made out of.

Bulletproof but not vampire-proof.

Ira screamed and would have fallen backward if I hadn't grabbed him by the collar through the fist-sized hole in the thick glass. In one motion, I yanked the motherfucker out of his chair and over the counter and slammed into the clear glass barrier. His nose broke instantly, spraying blood over the glass, and two or three of his front upper teeth had broken back into his mouth. His lips were split clean through.

He flailed at my hand, struggling to free himself, but I wasn't done with him.

Not by a long shot.

Still holding him by the collar, as his warm blood spilled over the back of my hand, I proceeded to slam his face again and again into the glass, breaking more teeth, breaking his face, his skull, his cheekbones, anything and everything, and I kept



smashing him into the now blood-smeared glass until I was finally tackled from behind.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

*I nearly killed a man tonight.*

*Tell me about it.*

And so I wrote it up for Fang, telling him everything from my first impressions of Ira Lang, to the bastard being hauled off on a stretcher. It took three huge blocks of text to get the whole story written, and when I had posted the final segment, Fang answered nearly instantly. How he could read so fast, I had no clue.

*Were there any cameras in the visiting room?*  
he asked.

*No.*

*So there is no visual record of what you did?*

*Not that I'm aware of.*

*Don't most prisons have surveillance cameras in the visiting rooms?*



*Not all of them. It's up to the discretion of the warden.*

*So no one saw your little, ah, outburst?*

*No.*

*When you broke the bullet-resistant glass, did you leave behind any of your own blood?*

That was a good question. I had cut my arm while reaching through the shattered glass. However, I hadn't bled at all, as far as I was aware. I explained that to Fang.

*So you don't bleed?*

*Maybe, I wrote. But apparently not from cuts along my forearm.*

*Did the medical staff look at you?*

*They tried to, but I had wrapped my sweater around my arm, and since there wasn't any blood, they assumed, perhaps, I wasn't in need of any medical attention.*

*Was he in need of dire medical attention?*

According to the warden, with whom I had had a long meeting after the incident, the prison doctors had determined that I had broken Ira's jaw, nose, right orbital ridge, his sinus cavity, and broken out seven teeth. He was going to need countless



stitches in his mouth and hours of surgery. I related all this to Fang.

There was a long pause. I looked over at my hotel bed where Monica lay sleeping contentedly on her side. It had, of course, been a long and emotional night for her. She had visited her abusive and murderous ex-husband's prison. She had waited for me anxiously while the warden pieced together what had happened. She had been given snippets of news from the prison staff, and, she told me later, could hardly believe what she was hearing—that I had put the son-of-bitch in the hospital...even more than that, I had nearly killed him. Later that night, she sat staring at me during the entire ride home from the prison. At one point she reached out and held my hand tightly. She didn't ask me how I punched through the glass. Or how I had the strength to grab a grown man and bash his face repeatedly against the glass. She simply held my hand and stared at me, and I held hers for as long as I could before I became self-conscious of my cold flesh and gently released my grip. I saw that she was crying, but she didn't make a federal case of it. What those tears were for, I didn't know, but I suspected this had



been a hell of an emotional night for her. I didn't tell her the bastard had threatened my kids. She had enough to deal with.

*So what did the warden say?* asked Fang.

*He asked me why I didn't kill the bastard?*

*Was he joking?*

*I don't think so.*

*And what did you say?*

*I told him he should have given me another few seconds.*

*Jesus. What else did he ask?*

*He asked me how did I punch through bulletproof glass?*

*And what did you say?*

*That I was a vampire, and that if he asked me any more questions, I was going to suck his blood. (Insert cheesy Bela Lugosi impression.)*

*Not funny, Moon Dance. You have put yourself at grave risk. There's going to be legal implications to this. He can press charges. There's going to be an investigation.*

*Maybe, I wrote.*

*What do you mean, maybe?*



*The warden heard Ira Lang threaten me.*

*Still, it's only a threat.*

*A threat from a known murderer. A threat from a man who has also been known to do anything he could to carry out such threats.*

*So his threat is much more than a threat.*

*Yes, I wrote.*

*So if Ira Lang did press charges, a DA may likely decide not to prosecute.*

*Right.*

*So what did you really say when he asked how you punched through the glass?*

*I reminded him of all those stories of mother's lifting cars off their injured children and such.*

*He bought that?*

*Probably not. He was in a state of shock himself. Everyone was.*

*So is that the end of the case? asked Fang.*

*No. Ira Lang made it perfectly clear that he wouldn't rest until his ex-wife was dead.*

*I could almost see Fang nodding, as he wrote: Not to mention he could still try to carry out that threat on you and your kids.*

*Exactly, I wrote.*



*So what's the plan?* asked Fang.

*If he won't rest until he's carried out violent crimes against his wife, or even me and my kids, then I think there's only one answer.*

*Don't tell me.*

*I went on anyway: Perhaps I should hasten his rest.*

## Chapter Twenty-eight

The backyard to my old house abuts a Pep Boys.

When I say *old house*, I mean my house of just over a month ago, where I had lived with my kids and husband. A house, by some weird turn of events, I had been kicked out of, even though my husband had been the one caught cheating.

Since our house sits in a cul-de-sac, we have an exceptionally large and weirdly-shaped backyard. In fact, our backyard is bigger than most little league baseball fields, which was always fun for the kids and great for parties.



On the other side of our backyard fence was the parking lot to Pep Boys, with its massive, glowing sign of Manny, Moe, and Jack in all of their homoerotic glory. I hated that sign, and thank God they shut the damn thing off at closing time.

It was well after closing time and the lights were off. *Thank God.* Manny, Moe, and Jack were sleeping. Probably spooning. My ex-partner Chad was happily watching over a sleeping Monica—at least, I hoped he let her sleep. No doubt he was watching her in more ways than one. Let's just hope he didn't creep her out too much. Chad was a great guy, even if a little love-starved.

*We're all a little love-starved,* I thought.

I was sitting on our backyard fence, my feet dangling down, looking out across the vast sweep of our backyard, toward where I knew my children were sleeping.

Or where they *should have* been sleeping. A flickering glow in Tammy's room meant that she was up well past her bedtime since this was a school night. Her laughter occasionally pierced the air. At least, pierced it to my ears. Actually, I could tell she



was trying to laugh quietly, perhaps laughing into a pillow, but occasional bursts of laughter erupted from her.

Most remarkable, and surreal, was that my daughter was laughing at Jay Leno. I could hear his nasally laugh and wildly ranging voice—which went from high to low in the span of a few words—even from here.

Jay Leno? Seriously?

And since when did my ten-year-old daughter watch Jay Leno? And since when was Jay Leno ever laugh-out-loud funny? Perhaps a mild chuckle here and there, sure. But *ha-ha* funny?

At the far end of the house I could hear Danny's light snoring. His snoring never bothered me, since I was a rather deep sleeper. Supernaturally deep, some might say. Anyway, mixed with his snoring was something else. Another sound. Not quite snoring. No, a sort of *wheezing* sound, as if someone was having trouble breathing through one nostril. Along with the wheezing was an occasional murmur. A *female* murmur.

My heart sank. Jesus, his new girlfriend was sleeping with him, in our bed. The fucker. Probably



sleeping naked together, their limbs intertwined, touching each other intimately, lovingly. All night long.

Just a month earlier I had been sleeping in that same bed, although Danny had long ago stopped sleeping naked and had made it a point not to touch me.

*The fucker.*

I stared at my old bedroom window at the end of the house for a long, long time, and then I forced myself to find another sound, and soon I found it. The sound of light snoring. A boy's snore. Little Anthony was sleeping contentedly, and I found myself smiling through the tears on my face.

A small wind made its way through the Pep Boys parking lot, bringing with it the smell of old car oil, new car oil, and every other kind of oil. Living here, you get used to the smell of car oil.

I folded my hands in my lap and lowered my head and listened to the wind and my son's snoring and my daughter's innocent laughter, and I sat like that until her laughter turned into the heavy breathing of deep sleep.

I pulled out my cell phone and sent a text message: *I'm sad.*



The reply from Kingsley Fulcrum came a minute later: *Then come over.*

Okay, I wrote, and did exactly that.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

I drove east on Bastanchury, winding my way through streets lined with big homes and big front yards, the best north Orange County has to offer.

It was past midnight, and the sky was clear. The six stars that somehow made their way through southern California's smog shined weakly and pathetically. The brightest one might have been Mars, or at least that's what a date once told me in college.

*Probably just trying to impress me to get into my pants.*

Speaking of impressing me, Kingsley Fulcrum was an honest-to-God werewolf. Or, at least, that's what he tells me.

Maybe he just wants to get into my pants, as well.



Granted, I've seen the evidence of his lycanthropy in the form of excessive hair the night *after* one of his transformations, and so I tend to believe the big oaf. But Kingsley is a good wolfie. Apparently, with each full moon, he preferred to transform in what he calls a *panic room* in the basement of his house.

Probably a good thing for the residents of posh Orange County. After all, can't have a big, bad werewolf picking off the surgically-enhanced *Desperate Housewives of Orange County* one at a time like so many slow-moving, top-heavy gazelle. Would probably hurt the ratings.

*Or drastically help them; at least, until the show ran out of stars.*

*Stars?* I thought.

*Now don't be catty.*

Bastanchury was always a pleasant drive, made more pleasant these days because it led to a big, beefy werewolf. I hung a left onto a long, curving, crushed seashell drive, past shrubbery that really needed to be trimmed back; that is, unless Kingsley was purposely going for the creepy feeling they



invoked. Or maybe he just didn't want to make his home too inviting. I voted for both.

Soon I pulled up to a rambling estate home that sat on the far edge of north Orange County. The house was a massive Colonial revival, with flanker structures on either end, and more rooms than Kingsley knew what to do with.

I stopped in the driveway near the portico, in a pool of yellow porchlight. My minivan seemed inadequate and out-of-place parked before such an edifice. Hell, I seemed inadequate and out-of-place.

The doorbell gonged loud enough to vibrate the cement porch beneath my feet, and was answered a moment later by a very unusual-looking man. His name was Franklin and he was Kingsley's butler. Yes, *butler*. Yeah, I know, I thought those went the way of *Gone with the Wind*, too, but apparently the super affluent still had them.

*Must be nice.*

But in the case of Franklin, maybe not so much. There was something very off about the man. For one thing, his left ear was vastly bigger than the right. And it wasn't that it was bigger, it seemed to not, well, belong on his body at all. As if, and this is



clearly a crazy thought, it had actually belonged on another person's body altogether. Perhaps strangest of all was the nasty scar that ran from under his neck all the way to the back of his head. The scar, I was sure, wrapped completely around his neck.

My instincts were telling me something very, very strange was going on here, so strange that I didn't want to believe them.

He was tall and broad shouldered, and there seemed to be great strength contained within his very formal butler attire. He looked down at me from a hawkish nose, nodded once, and asked me to follow him to the conservatory. I spared him another "Clue" game joke. This time. Next time, he may not be so lucky. Also, he spoke in what I assumed was an English accent, although it could have been Australian. I could never get the two straight. But my money was on English.

I followed his oddly loping gate to the conservatory. No, I wasn't greeted by Mrs. Plum wielding a candlestick (whatever the hell that is). Instead, I was greeted by a great beast of a man who sprung from his oversized chair with a glass of white wine in hand. How he didn't spill his wine, I



didn't know. As he bounded over, exuberant as a puppy, I was half expecting him to jump up on me and lick my face clean. Good thing he didn't, since he would have crushed me. Instead, he set the wine down on an elegant couch table and gave me a crushing bear hug. I think a bone or two popped along my spine. He then led me over to the sofa where a glass of wine was already waiting for me. Along the way, he snatched his own glass.

Franklin waited discreetly near the doorway until Kingsley dismissed him. The gaunt man nodded, a gesture that was meant to be somewhat dignified; instead, it came across as sort of herky-jerky, as if the man didn't have complete control of his head.

*No surprise there*, I thought.

When the butler was gone, I turned to Kingsley and said, "Are you ever going to tell me Franklin's story?"

The attorney was gazing at me with heavy-lidded eyes. The air around him was suddenly charged. No, *supercharged*. His brown eyes crackled with yellow fire, and he looked, for all intents and purposes, like a creature stalking me from the deep woods.

"Maybe someday," he said. His voice was thick



and sort of husky.

"Was he in an accident?" I asked, suddenly a little uncomfortable. I quickly reached for the wine and sipped it, keenly aware that Kingsley was staring at me intensely.

"I'm sure parts of him were in an accident," said Kingsley. He had reached out and lifted some of my hair off my shoulder and was now stroking it delicately between his oversized thumb and forefinger.

I drank more wine, suddenly wishing like hell that I could get a serious buzz going.

"*Parts* of him?" I asked, suddenly more nervous than I had been in quite some time. "What does that mean?"

"It means...I will tell you later."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

He had slid closer to me, looming over me. I could feel his hot breath on my bare arm. I could feel his eyes on me. Crackling sexual energy radiated from him. I seemed to be caught up by it, sucked into it.



This wasn't meant to be a booty call. In fact, over the past month I had barely even kissed Kingsley. But now I felt myself curious about something more. Excited by the thought of something more. *Terrified* about something more.

But....

"I don't think I'm ready," I said, not wanting to meet his eyes. I loved those big brown eyes.

"You're trembling," he said.

"And you're breathing on me."

I saw him smile out of the corner of my eyes. He was still playing with my hair.

"How long has it been since you've had a man touch you?"

"A man? What's that? I've heard about those curious creatures."

He grinned some more. "How long has it been since you have made love, Samantha?"

"That's a little personal, isn't it?"

He laughed loudly, a sound that erupted from him with such force that I jumped. "And sharing our supernatural secrets *isn't* personal?"

"Don't use your attorney double-speak with me, Kingsley Fulcrum. I'm just not comfortable talking



about it.”

“Then I retract my question. I was out of line.”

But he didn't stop touching my hair. Didn't stop staring at me, but I sensed that some of his supercharged energy, which had been erupting like solar flares from the sun, had died down a little. Also, his breathing wasn't so ragged, either.

I set my wine down and curled up next to him, holding his waist tightly. Kingsley reached down, wrapped a heavy arm around me and softly kissed the top of my head.

Twenty minutes later, when I felt comfortable and safe, I said, “Six years.”

“Six years what?” he said groggily. I think he had been dozing lightly on the couch.

“It's been six years,” I said again.

He didn't say anything at first, but I heard his heartbeat quicken. Finally, he whispered, “Too long.”

I nodded and took in air I really didn't need.

Kingsley moved me aside gently and stood. His knees popped. He offered me his hand. “Come,” he said. “I'm exhausted. Let's talk in bed.”

“Bed?”

“Yes.”



I protested some more—or tried to—but he had already snatched my hand and was pulling me through his opulent home and up his staircase, and to his bedroom and bed.

The horny bastard.

## Chapter Thirty

We were in bed.

I was still wearing my jeans and tee shirt. Kingsley was in a pair of black workout shorts and nothing else. We were both on top of the covers. Kingsley had his hands folded behind his head and was staring up at the ceiling. I was on my side, propping my head up with my hand, watching him. In the night, I could see him clearly. He was a little static-y; meaning, there were some limits to my night vision. Light particles flitted through the air like snow flakes caught in a car's headlights. I was used to the light particles. I barely saw them anymore.

Kingsley was a beast of a man. His body was



thick and powerful and nothing like the men you see grace most muscle magazines. There wasn't a lot of definition. Meaning, he was just pure muscular mass. Maybe a few pounds overweight, but he wore the weight well. No, he wore it *perfectly*. In fact, I was certain his hulking frame would have looked emaciated if he was at his ideal weight. Tufts of hair ran down the center of his chest and spread over his flat-enough belly. I never much liked hair on men, but with Kingsley it came with the territory.

"So is that a line you use for all the girls you have over here?" I asked.

"What line?"

"I'm getting tired, talk to me in bed'. That line."

"No," he said. "But it's a good line, apparently. I'll have to remember it."

I slapped his chest. I could have been slapping a side of beef. "Asshole."

"So, has it really been six years, Samantha?"

"Yes."

"Your choice or Danny's choice?"

"His choice, but then again, that part of me sort of shut down and never came back, either. But if he



had wanted to make love to me, I would have done anything for him. What was mine, was his."

"But he didn't pursue it."

"Nope."

"Did he ever touch you again?"

"Not like that." I told Kingsley that sometimes Danny and I would get close. Sometimes we would kiss passionately. Sometimes we would be on the verge of making love, and then he would just pull back and shudder. Once or twice he vomited.

"Vomited?"

"Yes," I said. "Not something a wife wants to see after kissing her husband."

"I'm sorry."

"Me, too."

We sat quietly some more. Kingsley's eyes were open. He continued looking up at the ceiling, or at nothing. His chest reminded me of a powerful, idling truck engine.

"So, have you lost all interest in sex?"

"Well, I don't consider myself sexual," I said. "I consider myself, in fact, a monster. Monsters don't have sex."

"When was the last time you orgasmed?"



It was late. We were alone in bed. We were talking softly to each other. My innate need for privacy cringed at the question, but we were adults here, and it was a legitimate, if not too-personal question. I didn't have to answer it, but I did.

"See my comment above."

"Six years?"

I nodded. Kingsley, I knew, could see me in the dark. No doubt he saw my gesture, or sensed it.

"Hell of a long time," he said. "Do you miss it?"

"I don't think about it. Quite honestly, having orgasms is pretty far down there on my list of things to worry about. Besides, I don't think I can anymore."

"Why do you say that? Have you tried?"

I knew my face was red. A crimson-faced vampire. Go figure. But what can I say? I never talk about my sex life. Not even with my sister, who was one of the very few who knew my supersecret identity.

"No," I said. "I haven't tried."

"You haven't *wanted to* or haven't *tried*?"

"Both. I haven't wanted to even try."

"Because you feel you are a monster. And monsters don't have sex, or orgasms, or real lives of



any type.”

I said nothing. What was there to say? That part of me was dead, I was sure of it.

Kingsley rolled over on his side and faced me. “You have been punishing yourself a long time, Samantha, for something that wasn’t your fault.”

“I’m not punishing myself,” I said. “I’m dealing with it the best I know how. Besides, I don’t feel sexy. I feel cold and gross, and what man would ever want to touch me?”

Kingsley suddenly put his hand on my hip as if to answer my question. His hand nearly covered my entire left hip. Jesus, he was a big boy. And then he did something that even I wasn’t expecting. He gently nudged me to my back and as I fell backward, he slipped his hand between my thighs and opened my legs. His hand, through my jeans, felt remarkably hot.

I reached down and stopped him. “I’m not ready for sex,” I said. “I may *never* be ready for sex.”

“Who said I wanted to have sex with you?” he said, winking at me.

“Then what are you doing?”

“Just seeing how dead that part of you really is.” He ran his warm palm up the inside of my thigh, over



my jeans.

"I think you should stop."

"Yo u *think*?" he said quietly, perhaps even huskily.

His hand continued up my inner thigh and I heard myself gasp. The moment I gasped Kingsley smiled again. The light particles around him were zigzagging like crazy. Like moths on crack.

"Please," I said.

"Please what?"

And then his hand lightly touched me between my legs and I reached down and grabbed his hand. I made a half-hearted effort to push it away, but his hand wouldn't move. Still, I didn't release his hand even as his thick middle finger gently stroked the fabric of my jeans. I wasn't sure if he knew what he was stroking, but the big son-of-a-bitch had found the right spot.

*Lucky guess.*

I gasped again and made another effort to push his hand away, but this seemed to only inspire him to work his middle finger faster.

"You deserve happiness, Samantha Moon. You



are not a monster. You are a sexy woman who has been dealt a very strange hand. But I have a surprise for you.”

“What?” I heard myself ask. My hands were still on his hands. It had been so long since anyone had touched me down there. So long. Hell, I had forgotten what to do with my own hands.

“That part of you *didn't* die. In fact...” And now his one hand was expertly undoing my jeans, button by button, as if he had done this hundreds of times before, which he might very well have had.

Now he slipped his hands inside my jeans, and his strong, curious fingers found their way under my panties, and now they were moving down with a mind of their own, gently parting me open.

His middle finger touched me almost hesitantly, perhaps testing my readiness. Jesus, I was ready.

And then two things happened simultaneously.

Kingsley lowered his mouth to mine, kissing me harder than I have ever been kissed in my life, and his thick middle finger slipped deep inside me.



## Chapter Thirty-one

*I had an orgasm last night, I wrote.*

*Good for you, Moon Dance.*

*My first in six years.*

*Must have been a hell of an orgasm.*

*I cried, I wrote. I didn't think I would ever have another one.*

*I am happy for you, Moon Dance. But why would you think you couldn't have one?*

*Because I hadn't had one in six years.*

*Did you try to have one?*

*No, not really. Danny wouldn't touch me any more, and I lost all desire to touch myself. It's hard to feel sexy or sexual when your husband finds you repulsive.*

*And so you touched yourself last night?*

My fingers hovered over the keyboard. I knew what I was about to write next would hurt Fang. No, I wrote. *I was with the werewolf.*

There was a long pause. My IM box remained static, with no indication that Fang was even typing. Finally, an icon appeared in the box showing that he



was busy typing. A second later his response appeared on screen.

*I am happy for you, Moon Dance. He's a lucky man.*

A few months ago, after years of corresponding via chatrooms, Fang had expressed his love for me...even though we had yet to meet in person or even talk on the phone, for that matter. I wasn't sure what to think about that. I had never met anyone off the internet, let alone dated from the internet. Besides, Fang was my friend, wasn't he? He knew all the gory—and I do mean gory—details about me.

*I'm sorry if that hurt your feelings, Fang.*

*I'm okay. Really, I am.*

*Well, you're a big man.*

*You have no idea.*

*Are you flirting with me, Fang?*

*Me? Never!*

*I'm not so sure about that.*

There was a short pause. *I would never flirt with another man's woman.*

I snorted, although he couldn't see me snort. *And who says I'm another man's woman?*

*I assumed....*



*You assumed incorrectly. I am still not there yet. Still not ready.* I paused in my typing, thought about my words, then added: *I'm not even sure I'm close.*

*Do you still think of yourself as your ex-husband's wife?*

*Maybe a little. I still feel connected to him. Maybe it's the kids that make me feel connected to him.*

*Even though he has rejected you in every way?*

*Well, it's only been a few months, you know I guess I still need time to heal.*

We were silent some more. Lately, I had been thinking of taking up smoking. I hadn't yet, but what the hell? It's not like I was going to ever die of lung cancer, right? Anyway, right about now I could picture myself sucking on the end of a cig just to do something with my hands. I wondered how my body would react to the nicotine.

*Well, there was only one way to find out.*

Fang was writing something to me, and so I waited. As I waited I looked over at Monica, who was lying on her side and reading a novel. A vampire novel, no less. Maybe I should read one of those.



Maybe I could learn a thing or two.

Fang deleted his message and started over. What he deleted, I will never know. A moment later, his message appeared: *Promise me one thing, Moon Dance.*

*Okay, I'll try.*

*Before you commit to the werewolf—or any man, for that matter—please promise me that you will meet me first.*

*But I'm not committing to anyone, Fang.*

*Just promise.*

*Okay, I will consider it. But I have to admit, I'm confused. I thought we were friends.*

*For a friendship to work, both people have to want the same thing. Both people have to want to be friends.*

*I wrote, And if one of the friends suddenly wants something more than friendship?*

*It changes things, he wrote.*

*I don't want things to change, Fang. I like talking to you. You are my outlet. You are my friend and my therapist and my confidant.*

*I want to be more, Moon Dance.*

We were both silent for a long time. The hotel



made typical hotel noises: a door slamming somewhere, the ding of the elevator around the corner, the endless drone of hundreds of air conditioners working hard against the warm Orange County night. On the bed nearby, Monica licked her fingers and turned the page. As she did so, her shoulder flexed a little. A narrow cord stood out on her neck. I found myself absently staring at it. Even from here, I could see it pulsating.

*You there, Moon Dance?*

*Yes.*

*I want to meet you in two weeks.*

I sat up suddenly. My heart, nearly useless in my chest, slammed hard once or twice against my ribs. My mouth instantly went dry. *Two weeks??* I reached for a nearby bottle of water and sipped from it, staring at Fang's words. Finally, I answered him.

*Okay, I wrote. Two weeks.*

## Chapter Thirty-two



We were at our favorite bar in Fullerton, called Hero's.

I was with my sister, Mary Lou, and my client, Monica. The three of us were sitting on vinyl stools in front of a long, brass-topped bar. Our favorite mixologist was tending bar, a young guy of about thirty. The fact that he was also kind of cute contributed to the "favorite" part.

We were all sipping white wine. My sister Mary Lou was probably doing a little more than just sipping, since she was already on her third glass. It was Friday evening and the bar was hopping. This was also Casual Friday, apparently, and so Mary Lou, who worked for a small insurance agency in Placentia, was wearing jeans and a bright yellow tee shirt. For the uninitiated, Casual Friday is a sort of mini-national holiday for office workers everywhere. Occurring only four times a month, Casual Friday is commemorated by the wearing of jeans, tee shirts and sneakers, and the consumption of store-bought donuts and bagels. Homemade brownies are also acceptable. From what I understand, the day usually begins with a general air of optimism and hope, and deteriorates rapidly into a serious need to drink



something strong and hard. I often reminded my little sister that every day was Casual Friday for me. And I did so now.

“Are you *trying* to depress me?” she said.

“Not clinically,” I said. “But a tear or two is always nice. Besides, I have to gloat about something. There’s not much else to gloat about these days.”

Mary Lou didn’t like her job. Unfortunately, she never did anything about it, other than bitch. My philosophy is this: Life is too short to work another minute at a job you don’t love. Unless, of course, you’re a vampire. And then that philosophy goes out the window.

Anyway, with my client sitting with us, my sister and I kept our conversation to mundane topics. Just three fairly cute girls, sitting in a bar, wrapped in secrets and pain and heartache.

Good times.

Mary Lou knocked back drink number three and waved the bartender over. He caught her eye, nodded, and reached under the counter for the bottle of wine. As he did so, I caught my sister adjusting her bra.



"Why are you adjusting your bra?" I asked.

"I'm not adjusting my bra," she said. "I'm adjusting my boobs."

"Happily married women don't adjust their boobs in front of cute bartenders."

"Happily married women have boobs, too," she said.

"They also have husbands."

"He's coming over—shh, quiet!"

Indeed, he was, grinning at us easily. He had short brown hair. Big brown eyes. Dimples in his cheeks and chin. He wore a combination of metal and leather bracelets, which jangled as he filled Mary Lou's glass with more wine. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, revealing tattoos that went down to his wrists and beyond. Some of the tats crawled along the back of his hands. His ears were pierced with silver studs, and he wore a leather strap around his neck, anchored by two huge shark teeth.

"Just a little more," said Mary Lou, slapping his hand lightly. "Pretty please."

*Oh, brother,* I thought, and caught Monica's eye. She smiled at me and sipped her wine, enjoying my sister's retarded attempt at flirtation. Myself, I wasn't



enjoying it so much.

"If I give you more, young lady, then I have to give everyone else more," he said. "And if I give everyone else more, then my boss will fire me."

"Oh, poo. You're no fun."

He winked at me and left.

So far, Monica had remained silent and inexpressive. I sensed that her personality had been beaten out of her by her ex-husband. Sure, she had opened up to me, but not so much with other people. With that said, I suspected she didn't like my sister, either. The excessive drinking might have had something to do with it. Also, when someone laughed particularly loud, or brushed up against her, she jumped. And so she stayed close to me, like a trained puppy, never more than a foot or so away from my elbow. She felt safe with me. She *should* feel safe with me. Hell, I felt safe with me.

While we drank and talked, I stayed alert for any suspicious activity. Her ex-husband, prior to his unfortunate run-in with the bulletproof glass, had indicated that he had succeeded in hiring someone to carry out his threat on her.

Monica touched my forearm and leaned over and



whispered into my ear. "I need to use the restroom."

I patted her hand. "Okay." I turned to Mary Lou. "We're going to the restroom."

Mary Lou nodded and kept her eyes on the bartender. Monica and I left and I held her hand as I threaded our way through the crowded bar. She kept about as close to me as she possibly could. Inside the surprisingly uncrowded bathroom, I waited outside the stall for her to finish her business. As I waited, I had a very bad feeling I couldn't shake. I looked over my shoulder, but we were alone. I frowned.

Shortly, we were working our way back through the bar to where we found an ashen-faced Mary Lou staring at us. We took our seats on the stools next to her, and as I sat, Mary Lou leaned over and whispered in my ear: "There was a man here."

"Who?"

She shook her head. My sister looked completely shaken. "I don't know. He came up next to me and ordered a drink."

"So?"

"He looked right at me and smiled...the most horrible smile I have ever seen."



"You're not drunk are you?"

"No, dammit." She kept shaking her head. "He looked... wrong. Off. Evil. He looked what I would imagine a killer would look like."

"A killer?"

"A hired killer."

"Is he here now?"

"No, he ordered a Red Bull, paid cash, and left. Right before you two came back. He wanted me to see him. He wanted you to know he's watching."

"And you're not drunk."

"Goddammit, no."

My first instinct was to run out after the guy. Maybe that's what he wanted me to do. Maybe. The sun was still an hour or so from setting. I wasn't at my strongest, and I wasn't going to leave Monica.

"Okay," I said to Mary Lou. "Hang on."

I motioned for the bartender. He saw me immediately and, even though he was talking to someone else, said something to them, laughed, and came right over. He looked curiously at my mostly full drink.

"You need something else?" he asked.



I nodded. "The guy who ordered the Red Bull a minute ago. Have you ever seen him in here before?"

He shook his head. "No. Why?"

"How tall would you say he was?"

He shrugged. "Six foot maybe. Why?"

"How old would you say he was?"

He shrugged again. "Hard to say. Forty, fifty. Is everything okay?"

"We'll see," I said. "Can you tell me any more about him?" I wanted a description of the guy from someone who wasn't nearly three sheets to the wind.

The bartender studied me with his big brown eyes. His shark teeth glistened whitely at his throat. He had been working here for a few months, but he had never really spoken. Still, I often caught him catching my eye. I think he thought I was cute. Go figure. Finally, he said, "White guy. Thin. Black hair. Black eyes. Probably brown eyes, but they looked black in here."

"Anything else about him?" I asked.

"He was wearing a sign around his neck that said, 'I am exhibiting suspicious behavior.' Does that help?"



"I don't tip you to be funny," I said.

"The humor is free."

I looked away from him, scanning the room. I didn't sense any immediate danger. The sensing of danger is tricky business for me. Lots of things set off my warning bells. If the man honestly didn't intend any sort of physical violence at this moment, I probably wouldn't have picked up on anything. Now, had he been charging us with a pocket knife at this very moment, my spidey-senses would have sprung to life.

I turned back to the bartender, who was watching me curiously. "So that's all you remember?"

He grinned easily. "Hey, he just ordered a Red Bull to go. I think I did pretty good remembering what I remembered."

"Bravo. You get a biscuit."

"So what's this all about anyway?"

"Official undercover chick business," I said.

He nodded. "I see. Well, be safe under those covers, young lady," he said, and then moved quickly away to get another drink order filled.

I turned to Monica; she was staring at me, having heard everything of course. "Is he a bad man?" she



asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"Does he want to kill me, too?"

"I don't know," I said, frowning. "But no one is going to kill you or hurt you or anything. I promise."

She smiled, or tried to, and gripped my arm even tighter.

## Chapter Thirty-three

I called right at 7:00 p.m.

Danny picked up and told me to hold on. No other pleasantries were said. There were never any pleasantries said. While I waited and while I listened to him breathing steadily on his end, I thought of us standing together in the shade of the Fullerton Arboretum. It had been a small wedding. Just forty or so family and friends. It had been a beautiful, sunny day. Danny had looked so handsome and awkward in his suit. He kept folding his hands over and over at his waist, trying to look dignified standing in front of



everyone, but mostly looking nervous as hell. I had watched him the entire way as walked down the aisle with my father. Danny had watched me, too, and the closer I got the more his nerves abated. He quit fumbling with his hands. He then smiled at me brighter than he had ever smiled at me before or after.

I heard something akin to a hand covering the phone, heard muffled voices, then more scraping sounds and Danny spoke into the phone. "You've got eight minutes."

"Eight!?"

A second later, a squeaky little voice burst from the line.

"Mom!"

"Hi, baby!"

"Don't call me baby, mom. I'm not a baby."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Man."

"I'm not a man, either."

"Then what are you?"

"I'm a boy."

"You're my big boy."

He liked that. I could almost see him jumping up



and down on the other end of the line, pressing the phone into his ear with both hands, the way he usually does.

"Daddy says you can't come see us tomorrow. That you are too busy to see us."

"That's not true—"

"Yes, it is true, Sam," said Danny's voice. He had, of course, been listening in from the other phone, as he always does. "You're busy with work and you can't see them."

I took in a lot of air, held it. Let it out slowly.

"I'm sorry, angel," I said to my boy. "I'm going to be busy tomorrow."

"But we never get to see you—"

"That's enough, Anthony. Get your sister on the line."

A moment later, I heard Tammy say, "Give me that, jerk," followed by Anthony bursting into tears. Sounds of running feet and crying faded quickly into the distance, followed by a door slamming. He was probably crying now into his pillow.

"Hi, mommy," she said.

I was too broken up to speak at first. "Is Anthony okay?" I asked, controlling my tears.



"He's just being a baby."

"No, he's just being a little boy."

"Whatever," she said.

"Don't 'whatever' me, young lady."

She said nothing. I heard the pop of chewing gum. I also heard Danny making tiny shuffling movements on his end of the line. No doubt looking at his stopwatch. Yes, stopwatch.

"What did you guys do today?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said.

"How was school?"

"Boring."

"Did you do your homework?"

"Maybe."

"Is that a yes or a no, young lady?"

"It's a *maybe*."

I knew Danny was on the other phone, listening, hearing his daughter disrespect her mother, and not giving a damn. I let the homework go. She was right, after all. I presently had no say in whether or not the homework got done, nor did I have any way of enforcing any house rules. I knew it. She knew it. I also suspected she was deliberately hurting me, since my unexplained absence was hurting her.



"I miss you," I said. "More than you know."

"You have a funny way of showing it, mom."

"I'll figure out a way of seeing you guys more soon. I promise."

"Whoopee."

"That was rude," I said.

"So?"

"Don't be rude to your mother."

"Whatever."

I took a deep breath. I knew my time was running out fast. I suspected Danny sometimes cut our conversations short. Either that, or time disappeared when I spoke to my kids. Even when they were being impossible.

I said, "I promise, I'll see you as soon as I can."

"Tomorrow?" she asked, and I heard the faint hope in her voice. She was still trying for badass pissy, but the little girl who missed her mother was still in there.

"Not tomorrow, angel," I said, my voice breaking up. "But soon."

She was about to say something, probably something mean or rude or both. But something else came out entirely. A small, hiccuppy gasp. She was



crying.

"I love you," I said. "I love you more than you could possibly know."

"I love you, too, mommy," and then she really started crying, and I was crying, and Danny stepped in.

"Time," he said.

"Goodbye, angel," I said quickly. "I love you!"

She was about to say something when the line went dead.

## Chapter Thirty-four

Monica and I were sitting in my minivan down the street from my house. Very far down the street. In fact, we were at the *opposite end* of the street. Still, from here I could see my house—yes, *my* house. In particular, I could see anyone coming or going, especially Danny and his lame new Mustang.

Mustang? Weren't those for college girls?



Also from here, I could see the Pep Boys' sign rising above the house. Looming, might be a better word. The lights in the sign were currently out. The boys were asleep. Allegedly.

The night was young and some in the neighborhood were still out and about: pushing baby strollers, walking dogs, jogging, or, in one case, power walking.

My windows were heavily tinted for two reasons: The first was because I happened to be fairly sensitive to the sun. Go figure. The second was because I often used my nondescript minivan for surveillance. And when I was doing a lengthy surveillance, I would actually pull down a dark curtain from behind the front seat and hunker down in the back of the van, looking out through the many blackened windows. I even had a port-a-potty for long surveillances.

Tonight I didn't expect to need my port-a-potty. Tonight I expected the action to begin fairly quick. Call it a hunch.

"So is this a real stakeout?" asked Monica. She was sitting cross-legged in the passenger seat. She could have been a teenager sitting there next to me.



"Real enough," I said.

"And that's your old house up there?"

"Yes."

"So are we stalking your ex-husband?"

"I'm a licensed private investigator," I said. "I'm licensed to stalk."

"Really?"

"In most cases."

"What about this case?"

"In this case," I said. "We're stalking the hell out of him."

She giggled. If Danny spotted me following him, he could report me to the California Bureau of Investigative Services, where I would probably be heavily fined and face jail time, probably a year. The CBIS frowned upon investigators abusing their privileges.

Which was why I was parked *way down* the street. Back when I had first caught Danny cheating on me, I had been reckless and he had spotted me.

This time, I intended to play it safe.

"So what's it like having kids?" asked Monica. She was chewing some gum, occasionally popping bubbles inside her mouth, the way kids used to do it



back when I was in high school. I never did figure out how they did that, or how she was doing it now, and with that thought, something fairly exciting occurred to me.

*Hey, I can chewgum!*

At least gum that had no sugars in it at all. I asked Monica for a piece and she reached into her little purse and produced a rectangular square. It was cinnamon and sugar free. I had no clue what it would do to me, but I was eager to find out.

*God, I'm pathetic.*

I unwrapped the gum hastily and tossed the discarded paper in my ash tray. Saliva filled my mouth as the sharp bite of cinnamon tore through even my dulled taste buds. Cautiously, I swallowed my own saliva, now filled with cinnamon flavor.

I kept an eye on my dashboard clock. I would know in less than two minutes if my body would reject even this small amount of flavoring.

And while I waited, I chewed and chewed, savoring the flavor, savoring the smooth texture of the gum on my tongue and in my mouth. And, like riding a bike, I produced my first bubble in six years. It popped loudly and Monica giggled. And just as I



was scraping the gum off my nose and chin, something in my stomach lurched.

But that's all it did.

Lurched.

Nothing came up. No extreme pain. Nothing more than that initial, slightly painful gurgle. I grinned and continued happily chewing the gum.

So there you have it. Vampires can chew gum. Wrigley should consider a new slogan: "So good, even a vampire won't projectile vomit."

I asked Monica for the brand name of the gum, and she fished the package out again and told me. I grinned. Hell, I was going to buy stock in the company.

"Look," said Monica pointing through the windshield excitedly. "Someone's leaving your house."

I took my binoculars out and adjusted them on the medium-sized figure. It was Danny, and he was dressed to kill.



## Chapter Thirty-five

In his girly Mustang, he exited the driveway, drove briefly towards us, and then hung a left down a side road inside the housing track. I started the van and pulled slowly away from the curb. Like a good girl, Monica checked her seat belt. She was grinning from ear to ear. I'll admit, P.I. work can be fun.

Twenty seconds later, I made a right onto the same road Danny had made a left onto. As I did so I caught a glimpse of him making a left out of the track, and onto Commonwealth Avenue.

It was just past ten and I wondered who was watching the kids. Until I realized it was, of course, his slutty, ho-bag secretary.

I gripped the steering wheel a little tighter.

You probably don't want to piss-off a vampire. Just sayin'.

Anyway, I hung a left on Commonwealth, and easily picked up the shape of the Mustang's taillights about a half mile down the road. One thing about my current condition, my eyesight was eagle-like. And it only got better when I was in my, well, eagle-like



form. Or bat-like. Or whatever the hell I transformed into.

While tailing someone, I could hang back farther than most investigators could. Still, it was a fine balance of staying far enough back to not get spotted, but not so far that I hit a red light and lost him altogether. I should probably have rented a car for tonight, but it was too late now.

*Live and learn.*

Next to me, rocking slightly in her seat, Monica was chewing her nails nervously. From my peripheral vision, her mannerisms and sitting position suggested she was no older than ten years old. About the age of my daughter.

My cell rang.

Shit. I dreaded looking down. Was it Danny? Had he spotted me already? Impossible.

It continued ringing and finally I reached for it in the center console, where it had been charging. I looked at the faceplate. It was Kinglsey.

I unhooked the phone from the charging wire.

"Arooo!" I sang, "Werewolves of London...."

"Not funny," he said, his deep voice rumbling through my ear piece. "And please not over the



phone.”

“Big brother and all that,” I said.

“Something like that.”

“You sound like you’re in a pissy mood,” I said.

“I am.” He paused on the other end. Up ahead, Danny took a right onto Harbor Boulevard. He didn’t use his blinker. I should make a citizen’s arrest. Kingsley went on, “You nearly killed my client the other day.”

I turned onto Harbor as well. I wasn’t sure I heard Kingsley right. “Your client? What do you mean?”

“Ira Lang.”

I nearly dropped the phone. “Excuse me?”

“Ira Lang is my client, Samantha. And he’s been my client for the past few years, since his first arrest. Now he’s in the hospital, with a face full of metal pins and screws and staples.”

I looked over at Monica, who was still peering ahead, rocking slightly. From this angle, I could see where her left eye drooped badly, the result of her husband’s attack with a hammer, the attack which had resulted in Ira’s first arrest.

Kingsley’s words had sucked the oxygen from my lungs. I found myself driving on automatic, vaguely



aware that I was still following the Mustang far ahead. Danny was slowing for a red light. There were three cars between us, and he was still a quarter mile down the road.

"This is a problem," I said.

"Damn straight, Sam. My client's going to press charges."

"I'm not worried about that," I said. "Let's talk later, Kingsley. This isn't a good time."

"Swing by my place when you get a chance."

"Okay," I said, and hung up.

Monica was watching me curiously. She, like most people, was far more psychic than she realized. She had picked up something in my voice, something in my mannerisms. She knew something was wrong.

Hell, yeah, something was wrong. The guy I was seeing—the guy who had touched me more intimately than any man had touched me in a long, long time—had gotten her ex-husband out of jail on a technicality.

Who then went on to bludgeon her father to death.



*Sweet Jesus.*

Monica was still watching me. I looked over at her and gave her the brightest smile I could muster. It seemed to work. She smiled back at me sweetly, reminding me of a child all over again, a child eager for good news.

I reached out and held her hand; she held mine in return, tightly. I continued following Danny at a distance, and holding Monica's hand.

## Chapter Thirty-six

We were sitting outside a strip club. A filthy, disgusting, vomituous, vile strip club.

We had followed Danny down the 57 Freeway, and then east along the 91 Freeway. He had gotten off in the city of Colton, a tough little area in Riverside County. We were about 60 miles east of Orange County. Here, they did not make reality shows about super-enhanced married women. Here, there was crime and gangs and a sense that



something, somewhere had gone very wrong with this city. So wrong that it was beyond hope to fix.

Danny had worked his shiny Mustang along the dark and dirty streets, far removed from our cute little neighborhood, and had ended up at a small strip joint at the far edge of the city.

By the time we had pulled up to the club, Danny was already inside. I circled the packed parking lot, found his car, and then parked as far away from it as I could, all while keeping an eye on the club's front door.

We parked and cracked our windows. Music thumped through the club's open door. Two rather large black men stood on either side of the door. In a raised truck about five cars away, I was pretty sure two people were having sex. Already I felt I needed to shower.

Monica had seemingly shrunk in on herself. She pulled her feet up on the passenger seat and wrapped her arms tightly around her knees.

I was, admittedly, confused as hell. I had never known Danny to be the type to go to strip clubs. Of course, I had never known Danny to be a cheater and a liar and royal piece of shit, either, until recently.



I was tempted to look inside the club, but I wasn't going to bring Monica with me, and I sure as hell wasn't leaving her alone.

And so we sat, staring at the entrance to the strip club. Amazingly, I still felt a pang of jealousy that Danny would find pleasure in looking at other women. That is, until I reminded myself that he had been sleeping with another woman for the past few months.

I felt sick. I felt disgusted. I felt a massive wave of revulsion.

Monica was rocking now. The thumping music and the trashy cars and the trashy guys were all too much for her. She reminded me of a child sitting in her bedroom and listening to her parents fighting downstairs. Listening and rocking and suffering.

I waited another half hour, watching Monica, watching the door, watching the waves of men coming and going. Danny remained inside.

I was having a hard time believing Danny had come all this way to a strip club. There were clubs a lot closer than this. Not as sleazy, certainly, but a lot closer. So why had Danny driven nearly an hour to



go to this shit hole? I didn't know, but I was going to find out.

I started the car and left.

Monica rocked in her seat nearly the entire way home.

## Chapter Thirty-seven

I comforted Monica with hugs and hot tea.

When she seemed stable again, I called my ex-partner. He was more than up to the challenge of watching over Monica again. In fact, I suspected he might have been waiting eagerly by his phone, since he had snatched it up on the first ring.

Thirty minutes later, with Monica in good (if not adoring) hands, I made my way over to Kingsley's massive estate. Franklin the Butler did not seem pleased to see me this late, and I once again followed his slightly off-kilter, loping gait. This time to the kitchen, where I found Kingsley sitting at a round corner table, working on a double-stuffed ham



sandwich. Sitting across from him was a glass of red wine. Mine, I assumed, although I rarely drank red wine since it gave me stomach cramps. Too many impurities.

Kingsley thanked the butler, who expressed his love of servitude with words dripping with sarcasm, and disappeared down a side hallway. To where, I had no clue. No doubt a servant's quarter.

Or perhaps a stone slab with straps and thick cables attached to some sort of medieval antennae on the roof.

Or not.

As I stepped into the kitchen, Kingsley set aside the heavy-looking sandwich and got up and gave me a hug and a light kiss on the lips. The light kiss was my idea. I turned my head, since I wasn't in much of a kissing mood. Kingsley indicated the chair across from him, and as I sat, I realized the glass wasn't full of wine, it was full of something else.

It was full of blood.

Saliva burst instantly from under my tongue. I might have even licked my lips. *Might have.*

Kingsley was watching me. "You don't have fangs."



"What an odd thing to say to a girl," I said, keeping my eyes on the hemoglobin-filled goblet. Say that three times in a row.

"I noticed it the other night, in bed, when we were kissing. Your teeth are normal."

"Gee, thanks."

"But I thought vampires had fangs," he pushed.

"And I thought vampires existed only in teen romance novels."

He chuckled lightly and let it go. I noticed the blood in the goblet was beginning to congeal a little along the surface, sticking to the inside of the thick glass. It was just blood. Disgusting blood. But it was the only thing I could consume comfortably. It was the only thing that gave me nourishment. And now, over the course of six years, blood had become my comfort food. Hell, it had become my only food, My everything. My stomach was doing back flips.

*God, I was such a fucking ghoul.*

"Drink, honey," he said. As he spoke, he used some strange German accent. Oh?

"Who's blood is it?" I asked.

"Does it matter?" His voice was back to normal.

He was right, of course. I had discovered that the



source of the blood mattered not at all. Human, animal, warm, cold. It all had the same effect on me: it nourished me deeply.

I picked up the glass and drank deeply. The blood was warm. It was fresh, too. Something had recently died. Blood has a unique texture and I have grown to both love and loathe it. Good blood, fresh blood, is heavenly. The blood I normally drank, blood provided to me from a local butchery, was filled with all sorts of disgusting “extras”, which I constantly found myself spitting out.

*Yum.*

My account with the butchery was more or less a secret account. The butchery was in Chino Hills, and six years ago, I had convinced the owner I was a vet assistant and that I was involved with animal blood research. He hadn't asked questions, and I hadn't provided any more info other than that. The blood arrived monthly and I paid the exorbitant bill. Meals on wheels.

With that said, this blood was flawless, minus one or two coagulated lumps. I drank from the goblet steadily, briefly unable to pull away from it. Salty and



metallic, it coated the inside of my mouth, filling the spaces between my teeth. I didn't need to come up for air because I really didn't breathe.

I drank steadily, greedily, happily.

When the goblet had been half-drained, I forced myself to set it down in front of me, and burped.

"Hungry?" asked Kingsley.

"Usually," I said.

"So how often do you eat?" asked Kingsley, and I silently thanked him for not using the word "feed". The word rubbed me the wrong way. Animals *feed*. Monsters *feed*. Ladies with degrees in criminal justice, who had two wonderful children and a successful private eye firm didn't *feed*. We drank, even if our food was liquified.

*A smoothie from hell.*

"I'm hungry every night," I said, shrugging. "Like most people."

"Most people eat during the day."

"You know what I mean," I said, picking up the glass again. "Asshole."

He grinned. "Do you eat every day?"

"No."

"Why not?"



"Because the packets of animal blood disgust me."

"I've seen your packets," he said, shuddering. "Revolted." He looked at me some more, his sandwich looking miniscule in his oversized hands. "So, then, is it safe to say that you go as long as you can without eating?"

"Yes."

"And how long can you go without eating?"

"Three or four days."

"And then you have to eat."

I nodded, tilting the glass up to my lips, reveling in the purity of the blood, letting it coat my tongue, the roof of my mouth.

"Do you ever worry that you will go too long between meals, and find yourself so hungry that you might do something stupid?"

"Like kill someone?" I asked.

"That would be something stupid, yes."

"I'm not worried," I said. "Not really. I'm generally always close to a source of blood. When I'm hungry enough, I just pop open a packet."

"There might come a day when you don't have such a ready source of blood."



“Maybe,” I said. “But I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.”

And with that, I finished the glass of blood. I brought it over to the sink and immediately washed it out. When I wasn’t hungry, the site of blood made me want to vomit.

About that time, Kingsley stuffed the rest of his sandwich in his mouth, chewed a half dozen times—surely not enough to fully masticate such a large section of sandwich—and then swallowed it down like a whooping crane, tossing back his head.

We both sat back, looking at each other.

“We have a problem,” I said.

Kingsley nodded. “Is it that I’m too sexy?”

I didn’t feel like smiling. I felt like clawing his eyes out, if you wanted to know the truth. “You got Ira Lang out of jail the first time around,” I said.

“Sure,” said Kingsley, shrugging. “And he didn’t even have to pay me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was his court-appointed attorney.”

“But I thought you were one of the most expensive defense attorneys around.”

“I am. But sometimes when there are



emergencies or the other attorneys are swamped, a judge will ask me to take over a case.”

“So you took over the case.”

He winked. “Of course. You don’t say no to a judge.”

“But Ira tried to kill his wife,” I said. “And not just *tried*. The piece of shit did everything within his power to kill her.”

“Right. And I got him out of jail,” said Kingsley evenly. “It’s what I do best.”

I searched for words, fought to control myself.

As I did so, Kingsley continued, “Look, Sam. Don’t take this so personally, okay? If it wasn’t me getting him out of jail, any other defense attorney worth his salt would have done the same. Ira had no previous record. He was a first time offender. He was ordered to stay away from his wife—”

“And I am sure you are proud of yourself for getting him out.”

“I did my job well.”

“And how did you feel when you heard the news that he had gone after her again, but this time killing her father, who fought to protect her?”



"It was unfortunate."

"And you couldn't have seen that coming?"

"I saw it coming."

"But you did nothing to stop it."

"It's not my job to stop it, Sam. It was my job to get him out of jail."

"You're an animal," I said.

He folded his arms over his great chest. His black tee shirt was stretched to the max over his biceps and shoulders and pectorals and even his slightly-too-big gut. His deep voice remained calm; he never once took his eyes off me.

He said, "You are emotional because you have grown close to the victim."

"I am emotional because I let an animal put his hands on me."

"I seem to recall that you liked my hands on you."

I stood abruptly. "I can't talk to you right now."

He stood, too, and grabbed hold of both my shoulders. He towered over me. His shaggy black hair hung down over over his face. He smelled of pastrami and good cologne. He had put the cologne on for me, I realized. He had wanted more tonight, perhaps to sleep with me. I shuddered at the thought.



"Don't go," he said. "I'm not the enemy."

"No," I said. "But you might as well be."

He tightened his grip on my shoulders, but with one swipe of my hand, I easily knocked them off. Shaking, I turned and walked out of the kitchen.

"Don't go," he said after me.

I didn't look back.

## Chapter Thirty-eight

I sat on the same thick tree branch and watched the crime lord's regal estate. Just a giant black raptor with a love for cute shoes.

The massive island home was ablaze with lights as Jerry Blum did his personal best to accelerate global warming. Activity had picked up since the last time I was here a few days ago. Now there were more guys with big guns, more beautiful women, and more cars coming and going. The cars looked armor plated. Once, a man and a woman strolled beneath the very tree I was perched in. The man lit a



cigarette. The woman was wearing a blouse cut so low that I could see straight down it to her belly button. Probably a good thing neither of them thought to look up.

As I watched them, sitting motionless and squatting on the thick branch, I wondered if I emitted an odor of some sort. I had read years ago that Bigfoot sightings were often preceded first by a horrific stench. Well, I had showered just a few hours earlier, thank you very much. Granted, I had showered as a *human*. Either way, neither crinkled their noses and looked at each other and asked, "Do you smell a giant vampire bat?"

*Again, probably a good thing.*

The man finished his cigarette and mentioned something about being off in a few hours and why didn't she come up to his room then? She said sure.

He nodded and flicked his cigarette away, and Mr. Romantic and Slutty McSlutbag drifted off over the grounds, to disappear in the controlled mayhem of the estate house. Something seemed to be up, but I didn't know what. I caught snatches of conversation, but couldn't piece anything together. Once I saw Jerry Blum himself, surrounded by a



large entourage of men. Big men. Dark-haired men. They moved purposely through the house, and I watched them going from window to window, until they slipped deeper into the house and out of view.

Jerry was going to be hard to get alone. But I was a patient hulking monster.

As the wind picked up and the tree swayed slightly, I adjusted my clawed feet, stretched my wings a little, and hunkered down for the night.

## Chapter Thirty-nine

I turned off Carbon Canyon Road, which wound through the Chino foothills, and onto a barely noticeable service road.

Stuart Young, my beautifully bald client who was sitting in the passenger seat next to me, looked over at me nervously. I grinned and winked at him.

“Um, you sure you know where you’re going?” he asked.



"No clue," I said.

"Of course not," he said good-naturedly. "Why should you? We're only driving through the deep dark forest in the dark of night."

"Fun, isn't it?"

I doubted we would get lost since there was only about a quarter mile of wilderness between the road and the grass-covered hill before us. Even a soccer mom could get her bearings here. We had been driving down the twisty Carbon Canyon Road, a road some think of as a sort of shortcut from Orange County to Riverside County, but, if you ask me, it's just a more scenic way to fight even more dense traffic.

The van probably wasn't made for dirt roads, but it handled this one well enough. We bounced and scraped through shrubbery until we came across a metal gate that consisted of two horizontal poles.

"It looks locked," said Stuart.

"Hang on," I said.

I put the van in park and hopped out, brushing aside a thorn covered branch with my bare hand. A thorn or two snagged my skin and drew blood. By the time I reached the gate, my hand was already



healed.

*Cool beans.*

A thick chain was wrapped around a rusted pole driven deep into the ground. The chain was padlocked with a heavy-duty lock. I often wondered who carried keys to these random city and county locks. Somewhere out there was a guy standing in front of some obscure park gate with a big wad of keys and going crazy.

This lock was a big one, and heavy, too. As I picked it up, the chain clanked around it. I turned my back to Stuart. I hooked my finger inside the lock's rusted loop and with one quick yank, I snapped the lock open.

"We're in luck," I yelled, letting the lock drop. "It's open."

\* \* \*

We were now in a clearing at the edge of a ravine, where a small river flowed twenty feet below. The gurgling sound of it was pleasant. The chirping of the birds was even more pleasant. Darkness was settling over what passed as woods in southern California, which amounted to a small grove of scraggly elderberry trees, deformed evergreens,



beavertail cactus, and thick clumps of sagebrush and gooseberry, and other stuff that wasn't taught in my junior college environmental biology course.

We were in a sort of clearing, surrounded by a wall of trees. My sixth sense told me that this place had been used before, for something else, for something physically painful, but I didn't know what. My sixth sense was sketchy at best. Still, I heard the crack of something breaking, perhaps bone, and I heard the crash of a car. I walked over to the edge of the ravine and looked down. Sure enough, deep within the soft soil around the lip, I saw deep tire tracks. Someone, at sometime, had taken a nose-dive off the edge here and down into the river below.

I turned and faced Stuart. "This is where I will bring him."

Stuart had walked to the center of the clearing, and was taking in the area, perhaps envisioning himself fighting a crime lord to the death in this very spot. Like gladiators in an arena.

"It's a good place," he said, nodding. He looked slightly sick.

A bluejay shot through the clearing, flashing through the shadows and half light, disappearing in



the branch high overhead, reminding me of the old George Harrison song, "Blue Jay Way", about fogs and L.A. and friends who had lost their way.

I stood in the clearing with a man who had lost his way, too, his life completely derailed by pain and grief and the burning need for revenge. He stared up into the darkening sky, which filled the scattered spaces above the tangle of trees. His bald head gleamed dully in the muted light.

*We all lose our way, I thought. Some of us just for longer than others.*

*Perhaps even for all eternity.*

"A part of me doesn't believe you can get him here," said Stuart, still looking up, his voice carrying up to the highest, twisted branches.

I said nothing.

"But another part of me believes you can. It's a small part, granted, but it believes that you can somehow, someday, deliver Orange County's biggest son-of-a-bitch to me."

I was quiet, leaning my hip on the fender of the minivan, my hands folded under my chest. A small, hot wind blew through the clearing.



“So then I ask myself, ‘What will you do if he does show up? What will you do if Samantha Moon really can deliver him?’” He lowered his head and looked over at me, his face partially hidden in shadows. I could mostly see through shadows, but I doubted he could. I’m sure to him I was nothing more than a silhouette. A cute silhouette, granted. “But that’s the easy part, Sam. If you deliver him to me, I will hurt him. I will do everything within my power to make him feel the pain he has made me feel. But first I will play my wife’s last message to him. I want him to hear her voice. I want my wife’s voice to be the last thing that son-of-a-bitch hears.”

A single prop airplane flew low overhead, its engine droning steadily and peacefully. A bug alighted on my arm. A mosquito. Now there’s irony for you. I flicked it off before I inadvertently created a mutant strain of immortal mosquitoes, impervious to bug spray or squishing.

Stuart went on. “But I’m going to give him a fighting chance, more than he gave my wife, the fucking coward. I’m not sure what sort of fighting chance I will give him, but I will think of something.”

We were quiet. The woods itself wasn’t so quiet.



Tree branches swished in the hot wind, and birds twittered and sung and squawked. A quiet hum of life and energy seemed to emanate from everywhere, a gentle combination of every little thing moving and breathing and existing. Sometimes a leaf crunched. Sometimes something fast and little scurried up a trunk. A bird or two flashed overhead, through the tangle of branches. Insects buzzed in and out of the faint, slanting half-light.

Stuart was looking down. A bug had alighted on his bald head, threatening its perfection. He casually reached up and slapped his head, then wiped his palm. Whew! Disaster averted. Stuart, I saw, was crying gently, nearly imperceptively.

I waited by the van. He cried some more, then nodded and wiped his eyes. His whole bald head was gleaming red.

“Let’s do this,” he said, nodding some more.

“You don’t have to do this,” I said.

“No, this is the best answer. This is the *only* answer, Sam. I want justice, but the courts won’t give it to me.”

“Jerry Blum is a professional killer. He’s going to know how to fight. And he’s going to kill you the first



chance he gets.”

“I have been taking boxing lessons these past few weeks, since our last talk.”

“Boxing lessons where?” I asked.

“A little Irish guy. Says he knows you. Says you’re a freak of nature.”

“Jacky’s always exaggerating,” I said.

“Says you knocked out a top-ranked Marine boxer.”

“The top-ranked Marine boxer had it coming to him.”

Stuart looked at me. The red blotches that had covered his head were dissipating. He looked so gentle and kind and little. I couldn’t imagine him taking on a crime lord single-handedly. “You are a fascinating woman, Ms. Moon.”

“So they say,” I said, and decided to change the subject, especially since the subject was me. “Stuart, there’s a very real chance you aren’t walking out of this grove alive in a few days.”

That seemed to hit him. He thought about it. “Well, this is a good place to die, then, isn’t it?”

“You don’t have to die, Stuart,” I said.

“No,” he said. “I suppose I could always just shoot



him before he knows what hits him. Or have a whole array of weapons at my disposal.”

I said nothing. I was liking this plan less and less.

“But he killed my wife, Sam. He put fear in her. He put terror in her. He made the woman I love feel *terror*. Think about that. He made the woman I loved, the woman I had committed my life to, the woman I was going to start a family with, die in a fiery crash. I hate him. I hate him more than you could ever know. Yes, I suppose I should just step out of the shadows with a gun. I suppose I should just level it at him, and blow his fucking brains out. Maybe I still will. I don’t know. But I want to beat him, Sam. With my fists. I want to hear his nose break. I want to see his blood flow. I want to punch him harder than I have ever punched anything in my life. I want to see the terror in *his eyes* when he realizes he will never get up again, that he will die in that moment.”

“And when you kill him?” I asked. “What then?”

Stuart turned to me and looked perplexed by the question. He hadn’t, of course, thought much beyond this. A red welt was blistering on the side of his head, where the mosquito had gotten to him a



fraction before he had gotten to the mosquito. The blood-sucking little bastard.

"I don't know, Sam. I don't know." He paused, then looked me directly in the eye. "Will you still help me?"

I was never much for vigilante justice. I had taken an oath years ago to uphold the law. This was very much outside the law. This was also crazy.

*These are crazy times*, I thought.

"Yes," I said. "Of course."

"Thank you, Sam."

And when he said those words, a dull tingling sensation rippled through me, and something very strange happened to the air around Stuart. A very faint, darkish halo briefly surrounded his body. The black halo flared once, twice, and then disappeared.

## Chapter Forty

There was a knock on my hotel door.

Monica, who had been lying on her side and



reading, snapped her head around and looked at me.

I stepped away from my laptop and moved over to the bedside table. I quietly pulled open the top drawer and removed my small handgun from its shoulder holster. Then I slipped quietly over and stood to one side of the door. Never directly in front.

"Who's there?" I asked.

"Detective Sherbet."

I grinned. I was quite fond of the detective, who was an aging homicide investigator here in Fullerton. A few months back, Sherbet had helped me solve Kingsley's attempted murder case. And spending long nights sitting together in the rain on stakeouts had gotten us close. But not so close that I had revealed to him my super-secret identity.

I unlocked and opened the door to find the big detective standing there holding a greasy bag of donuts. He was also breathing loudly through his open mouth, and I realized just the effort of walking down the hallway had been a bit much for the old guy. The donuts didn't help.

"Got a minute?" he asked.

"Do I have a choice?" I asked.



“Not really.”

“In that case, come in, detective.”

He came in, nodded at me, spotted Monica on the bed, and went straight over to her. He took both her hands in his one free hand. The other, of course, was holding the donuts. Monica sat up immediately when she saw him, and now she looked a bit like a teenage girl talking to her grandfather.

“Hello, Monica,” he said warmly. “Are you keeping Samantha out of trouble?”

She smiled—or tried to smile—and then she burst into tears. Detective Sherbet calmly set the greasy bag on the night table, then sat next to her and put an arm around her. He made small, comforting noises to her, and they sat like this for a few minutes.

Sherbet squeezed her shoulders one more time, patted her hands, and then stood. He grabbed the bag of donuts and led me out onto the balcony. He closed the sliding glass door behind me. He then sat on one of the dusty, cushioned chairs, calmly opened the oily bag, peered inside, and selected a bright pink donut.

“I thought you didn’t like the color pink,” I said.



"Or, for that matter, pink anything."

"I'm coming around," he said, and held up the effeminate-looking donut.

"Speaking of pink," I said. "How's your son?"

Sherbet paused mid-chew, breathing loudly through his nose. He finished the bite and looked at me sideways. "That was a low blow, Ms. Moon."

"You know I adore your son."

"I do, too," he said. "The kid's fine. I caught him trying on his mother's pantyhose the other day. Pantyhose."

"What did you do?" I asked, suppressing a giggle.

"Honestly? I went into my bedroom, shut the door, and sat in the dark for an hour or two."

"So you took it well."

"About as well as any dad would."

"You love him, though."

Sherbet reached inside the bag again. "In a weird way, I think I love him more."

"Oh?"

He pulled out an apple fritter. Remnants of the pink frosting donut were smeared on the fritter.



Sherbet licked the remnants off.

He said, "The kid's going to have it tough in school, and everywhere else, for that matter. He's going to need someone strong by his side."

I patted his roundish knee, hidden beneath slacks that were stretched tight. I think Sherbet had gained 10 or 15 pounds since I'd last seen him. He didn't sound very healthy, either. As he ate the donut, I reached over and gently took the greasy bag from him. He watched in mild shock as I held my hand over the balcony railing.

"Sam, don't," he said.

"You're gaining weight, detective. And you sound like you need a respirator. These things aren't helping."

"You sound like my wife."

"You should listen to her."

I let the bag go. Five seconds later, I heard it splat nine floors below.

Sherbet winced. "I should give you a ticket for littering."

"Then give me a ticket."

He went to work on the rest of the fritter. "My hands are too sticky to write. Besides, I've got some



news for you.”

“Go ahead.”

“We got a call from a guest staying here at the hotel.”

Sherbet licked his fingers. I waited.

“She reported that a strange man had been watching the hotel for a few days now. So we sent one of our guys around and talked to him. The guy’s story didn’t sound kosher, and so we picked him up for questioning.”

“And did he answer your questions?”

“Not at first, but, believe it or not, I can play bad cop pretty damn well.”

“Bad cop? You? Never!”

Sherbet grinned. There was pink frosting in his cop mustache. I should have told him there was pink frosting in his cop mustache, but he looked so damn cute that I decided not to. “So I shake this guy down and he finally tells me his story.”

“He’s a hired killer,” I said.

“You know the story?”

“I can guess some of it.”

“So what else can you guess, Sam?”

“He was hired by Ira Lang.”



Sherbet raised his thick finger and shot me. The finger glistened stickily. “Bingo.”

## Chapter Forty-one

Detective Sherbet sat back and folded his hairy arms over his roundish stomach. I mostly wasn't attracted to roundish stomachs and hairy arms—or, for that matter, hairy anything. But on Sherbet, the longish arm hair and extra stomach padding seemed right. On him, oddly, both were attractive. If he had been single and I had been another twenty years older, there was a very good chance I would have had the hots for him.

He seemed to be noticing me looking at his stomach and unconsciously adjusted his shirt over, not realizing that his padded stomach was adding to his manliness. At least for me. I can't vouch for every woman.

I suspected I had daddy issues, whatever that meant.



“He also said something else,” said Sherbet. As he spoke, he looked through the sliding glass door at Monica, who was sitting on the edge of the bed and wringing her hands and rocking slightly. I couldn’t be sure, but I think she was mumbling something, or singing something. The woman was tormented beyond words, and my heart went out to her.

I looked back at Sherbet, “What else?”

“He told me that Ira Lang would never give up trying to kill her, that Lang had approached many, many people in prison, and that just because we caught him once, didn’t mean we were going to catch the next killer that Ira hired, or the next, or the next.”

“He’s going to keep coming after her,” I said. “Forever, until one or the other dies.”

“Which, for him, is sooner rather than later, since he’s on Death Row.”

“Still a few years away, though.”

“Or longer,” said Sherbet. “Unless, of course, you visit him again, in which case he might not survive the meeting.”



"He threatened the kids."

"You are a mama grizzly."

"I'm a mama something."

Sherbet looked at me, seemed about to say something, paused, then seemed to go a different direction. "Anyway, he's out of the hospital and back on Death Row."

"Where he belongs."

"I couldn't agree more."

We were silent. Sherbet's overtaxed digestive system moaned pitifully as it went to work on the greasy donuts.

"Which reminds me," said Sherbet, reaching down and opening his briefcase. He extracted a smallish electronic gizmo thingy. "I want to show you something."

"Your new DVD player?" I asked.

He grinned. "Sort of. It's a loaner from the department."

I watched with mild amusement as his sausage-like fingers tried to manipulate the small piece of electronic gadgetry. He picked it up and examined it from every angle.

"Everything's so damned small," he grumbled.



"Let me have a look, detective," I said. He gratefully handed it to me. I took it from him, and flipped a switch on the side and the player whirled to life.

"Should I press 'play'?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

I set the player on the table between us and pressed 'play', and a moment later I saw a sickening scene. It was footage from a security camera, looking down on two people conversing in a jail visiting room. Both were on the phone, speaking to each other through a thick, bulletproof glass window.

Sherbet was watching me closely as the video played on the little screen. I hate being watched closely. My first instinct was to turn the damn thing off and fling it over the balcony railing like I had with the donuts.

My next instinct was to make a joke or two about the video, perhaps something about the camera adding ten pounds. But there was no joking my way out of this.

I had been wrong: there ~~was~~ a camera in the jail's visiting room, perhaps hidden.

Besides, I felt too sick to joke, so instead I



watched the tape with horror and curiosity. After all, it was a rare day that I actually got to see myself.

Of course, I had worn a lot of make-up that night, knowing there would security cameras everywhere, and wanting to make sure I didn't show up as partially invisible. In fact, anytime I was anywhere that had heightened video security, I made it a point to wear extra make-up.

Anyway, the video was grainy at best. No sound, either. On the tiny screen, I watched as I sat forward in the chair, speaking deliberately to Ira. Ira was leaning some of his weight on his elbows and didn't seem to blink. Ever. I hadn't noticed that before. Then again, that could have been a result of this grainy image. The camera had been filming from above, in the upper corner of the visitor's side of the room.

From this angle, I could see some of my profile, and I watched myself, fascinated, despite my mounting dread over what was about to come.

In the video, I looked leaner than I had ever looked in my life. A good thing, I guess. I also looked strong, vibrant. I didn't look like the stereotypical sickly vampire. But I knew that wasn't always the



case. This was early evening. I always looked better in the early evening. Or so I was told.

And, if I do say so myself, I looked striking. Not beautiful. But striking.

As the video played out, I must have said something with some finality because I ducked my head slightly and reached for my purse. As I did so, Ira said something to me, and I immediately sat back down again. I leaned closer to the window. Ira did, too, grinning stupidly from behind the protective glass.

Now my face looked terrible. I suddenly didn't look like me. Truth be known, I didn't recognize the woman in the video clip at all. She seemed strange, otherworldly. Her mannerisms seemed a little off, too. She moved very little, if at all. Every movement controlled, planned, or rehearsed. In fact, the woman in the video seemed content sitting perfectly still.

But now I wasn't sitting still. Now I was motioning with my finger for Ira to come ever closer. And he did.

One moment I was sitting there, and the next I was reaching through the destroyed glass, grabbing



Ira, slamming his face over and over into the glass. What I saw didn't make sense, either. A smallish woman reaching through the glass, manhandling a grown man, a convict, a killer. Slamming him repeatedly against the glass as if he were a rag doll.

None of it made sense; it defied explanation.

It defied *normal* explanation.

A moment later the guards burst into the room. The final clip was an image I had not seen since I was struggling under a sea of guards. It was an image of Ira's face, partially pulled through the glass, his skin having been peeled away from his forehead like a sardine can. Also, the glass was cutting deeply into his throat, and he was jerking violently, gagging on his own blood, which flowed freely down the glass, spilling over both sides of the counter, dripping, dripping. He would have surely died within minutes if he had not been given emergency help.

Sherbet reached over and easily turned off the player and sat back, watching me some more. He said, "The guards reported that you were nearly impossible to tackle to the ground. That it took three of them to do so, and even then you wouldn't go down easily."



I said nothing. For some reason, I was remembering what I had looked like in the security video. My passive expression. My inert features.

Sherbet went on, "As you can see in the video, you punched through the glass so fast that there was little or no indication that you moved at all. One moment you're sitting there, and the next you are reaching through the glass. We were certain the digital video had skipped a few seconds ahead, but the timer on it never missed a beat. One second you are sitting there. Two-tenths of a second later you are reaching through the glass. Two-tenths of a second, faster than a blink of an eye. And during those two-tenths, you are seen flinching only slightly. The broken glass itself can be seen hurling through the air at the same time you are holding Ira by the neck." Sherbet shook his head. "It defies all explanation. It defies natural law."

Beyond my hotel balcony, the sky was alive with streaking particles of light, flashing faintly in every direction. Thank God I can mostly ignore these flashing lights, or I would go crazy. Vampirism and OCD do not mix.

Sherbet looked at me. "Do you have anything to



say about this, Samantha?"

I continued looking up at the night sky, at the dancing lights. No jokes, no nothing. I needed this to go away. "Obviously there was something wrong with the video, Detective."

He nodded his head as if he had expected that answer. "And the fact that you broke through the security glass?"

"The glass was already broken."

"We can't see any breaks in the image."

"You yourself said the image is not the clearest."

He nodded again. Now he turned his head and looked in the same direction I was looking. I doubted he could see the zigzagging lights.

I asked, "Why were you shown the video?"

Sherbet chuckled lightly. "Are you kidding, Sam? The video has made its way through our entire department. Hell, half the police in the state have seen it by now. You're lucky it's not on BoobTube."

"YouTube," I said, and thought I was going to vomit. So much for keeping things on the down-low.

Sherbet went on, "You can imagine my surprise when I discovered the freak in the video was, in fact, you."



“Probably so surprised that you nearly dropped your donut,” I said.

“I’m never that surprised.”

“So why are you here?” I asked.

“Just chatting with an old friend.”

“I’m not so old,” I said.

He nodded as if that somehow answered a question he had. Now we were both silent. Inside the hotel, Monica had turned on the TV—a comedy show judging by the sudden bursts of laughter. Monica giggled innocently.

“I’m your friend, Sam.”

“I know.”

“Anything you tell me will remain between us.”

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

“That’s good to know,” I said.

“I worry about you, Sam.”

The surprising tenderness in his gravelly voice touched me deeply, and I found words temporarily impossible to form. I nodded. My vision blurred into tears.

“If you ever want to talk,” he said. “If you ever



need a friend. If you ever need help of any kind, I'm always here for you. Always."

And now I was weeping.

He reached over and hugged me tight, pulling me into him, and I smelled his after shave and the donut grease and the smallest hint of body odor. The body odor went with the manliness. After all, this was the end of a long day of crime fighting. A man *should* have a hint of body odor at the end of a long day.

His hairy arms smothered me completely and for a few seconds, a few rare seconds, I felt safe and comfortable and cared for.

Then he pulled away and carefully packed up his mini-DVD player in his scuffed briefcase. He then gave me the softest jab you could ever imagine on my chin, smiled sadly at me, and left me on the balcony.

Inside the hotel room, through the sliding glass door, I watched as he quietly spoke to Monica. As he did so, he held both of her hands in one of his. He said something else, jerked his head in my direction, and she nodded. He was reassuring her, I knew. Letting her know she was in good hands.

When the door shut behind him, Monica came



out and sat beside me. She reached over and took my hand, and we sat like that for a few minutes.

Finally, I said, "They caught a guy hanging around downstairs."

"The guy Ira hired to hurt me." Her voice sounded so tiny and lost and confused. Her simple, sweet, innocent brain was trying to wrap itself around why a man she had loved at one time would actually hire another man to hurt her. To kill her.

And as we sat out there together, as we held hands and watched the quarter moon climb slowly into the hazy night sky, I suddenly knew what I had to do.

## Chapter Forty-two

I was flying. I was free. Life was good.

The moon, still about a week from being full, shone high and bright. Any thoughts of the moon automatically conjured images of Kingsley. And any thoughts of Kingsley automatically conjured images



of the beast he was, or claimed to be. Admittedly, I had never actually seen Kingsley transform into a werewolf, and a part of me still wanted to believe that, in fact, he *wasn't* a werewolf, that this was all one crazy hoax. Or that he was delusional.

*I mean, come on, an honest-to-God werewolf? Really?*

This, of course, coming from a creature flying slowly over Orange County.

Actually, a part of me—a big part—still hoped that I was in the middle of one long, horrific nightmare, and that I would wake up at any moment, in bed, gasping, relieved beyond words that this had all been one bad dream.

*I'm ready to wake up*, I thought. *Please.*

I banked to port and caught a high-altitude wind. I flapped my wings easily, smoothly, comfortably, sailing along in the heavens like an escaped Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade float from Hell.

Still, just because one monster (me) existed, that didn't necessarily mean all *other* monsters existed.

Or did it? Maybe there was some truth to everything that goes bump-in-the-night. If so, where did it end? Were there fairies? Angels? Aliens?



Demons? Keebler elves? And weren't elves, in fact, fairies? Or was it the other way around?

I didn't know.

More than likely Kingsley was exactly what he claimed to be: a werewolf. I had seen the excessive hair on his forearms a few times now. I had also seen him survive five bullet shots to the head. Not to mention, he didn't even bat an eye when he found out that I was, in fact, a vampire.

Still, that didn't a werewolf make.

The moon burned silver above me. I wondered if I could fly all the way to the moon. I wondered if I could fly to other worlds, too.

*Maybe someday I will fly to the moon.*

Dance on the Moon.

I hadn't spoken to Kingsley in a few nights now, not since I had discovered that he was, in fact, responsible for getting Ira out of jail. Jesus, how do you respect a man who does that for a living?

An icy wind blasted me, but I held my course. I flapped steadily, powerfully into the night.

Granted, not all of Kinglsey's clients were killers. Some were innocent. Some he legitimately helped.



Others, not so much. Others were evil and wretched and should stay in jail. Kingsley knew damn well that he was releasing animals back into society, that he was putting killers back onto the streets.

But I had known this about Kingsley already, hadn't I? It hadn't really bothered me until now. *Until it hit close to home*. So why should I hold it against him now? Kingsley had done nothing wrong. Hell, he was just doing his job. Like he said, if it hadn't been him, it would have been another defense attorney getting Ira out of jail.

So perhaps I should be angry at the system, not Kingsley.

Perhaps.

Below me was my destination. It was a massive multi-storied structure in Chino, California. It lay sprawled before me in a hodgepodge of auxiliary wings and isolated buildings. My target was one of those isolated buildings, located on the north side of the prison.

The Death Row Compound.

It was a large, grim, three-story structure that housed hundreds of condemned inmates. A lethal, electrified fence encircled the compound. Guard



towers were everywhere.

I circled the bleak structure once, twice, getting a feel for the place. I circled again a third time, and as I did so, I felt a pull for a particular area. I focused on that area as I circled the structure again.

The pull grew stronger.

I rarely used my new-found psychic ability in this way. In the past, I just sifted through various hits as they came, rarely directing my heightened senses.

Now I directed them.

I was searching for one inmate in particular. One inmate currently housed in Death Row. One inmate who's time had come.

As I circled the structure a fifth time, I felt a very strong pull toward a corner wall on the second floor.

*There he is*, I thought.

I knew it. I felt it. I believed it.

*But what if I was wrong?*

I let the question die in me unanswered; I didn't have the luxury of being wrong.

As I circled back from my fifth fly-by, I tucked in my leathery wings and dove down, fast, the wind howling over my flattened ears.



## Chapter Forty-three

As I rapidly approached the building, I was suddenly filled with doubt. Was I doing the right thing? Should I veer off now and forget this whole crazy, horrific, stomach-turning plan? Was I even heading toward the right section of prison?

I shook my head and blasted aside the self-doubt.

The decisions had been made hours ago, and I knew, in my heart, they were the right ones.

Now, of course, it only remained to be seen if I was heading towards the correct section of prison wall.

*We'll see, I thought.*

I flew faster. The west side of the wall grew rapidly before me. I adjusted my wings slightly, a flick here, a dip there, and angled toward a particular spot on the second floor, near the corner of the building.

*It just feels right.*



I picked up more speed. The massive, oppressive structure grew rapidly in front of me. Behind those walls were the worst of the worst. Killers, cutthroats, and the not very kind. Wind thundered over me, screeching across my ears.

There was a final moment when I could have chosen to veer away, and avoid the building altogether.

I didn't veer away.

Six years ago, I was busting loan swindlers and thieves and low lives. Now I was hurling my nightmarish bat-like body at a maximum security prison.

Would this kill me? I didn't know, but I was about to find out.

My last thought before I struck the wall were: *I love you Tammy and Anthony...if I don't make it, I'll see you on the other side.*

The gray wall appeared directly before me. I could see the fine details of thick cinder blocks and heavy bricks. I lowered my head and turned my body slightly and struck the building with such force that I suspected the whole damn building shuddered.



I sat up in a pile of rubble.

My thick wings were draped around me like a heavy, dusty blanket. Chunks of wall continued to fall and clatter behind me. I should have been dead many times over. I should have been flattened outside on the wall itself. I should have been many things...but here I sat, in a prison cell, surrounded by massive chunks of cement, bent re-bar, and bricks that looked better suited for a medieval dungeon.

As I sat up, and as the dust still settled around me, I closed my eyes and saw the single flame in my forethoughts. I next saw the woman in the flame, standing there impatiently, and quickly I felt the familiar *rush* towards her....

And when I opened my eyes, there I was. My old self again—completely naked in a maximum secure prison in a cell on Death Row.

Outside, through the massive hole in the prison wall, I heard dozens of men shouting and a cacophony of running feet. A moment later, a siren wailed, so loud that it hurt even my ears.

I stood slowly. Dust and debris slid off my flesh.

Had I guessed right? Was this the right cell? Had



my sixth sense led me to the man I wanted?

My eyes needed no time to adjust to the darkness.

There, huddled at the far end of the single cot, was Ira Lang, staring at me with wild, disbelieving eyes. *Believe it, buddy boy.* Ira was a royal mess. His face and forehead were nearly covered in bandages, and if it weren't for his signature bald head, with its deep grooves and odd lumps, I might have wondered if I had the right room. His face, what little of it I could see puffing out between the bandages, was horribly swollen and disfigured. A multitude of pins and bolts and screws were holding the whole thing together.

*What a waste,* I thought, *of all that work.*

There was no way of knowing what Ira was thinking. Hell, what could he be thinking? One moment he was lying in bed, no doubt plotting his ex-wife's death, or perhaps sleeping, and dreaming of her death, and the next a massive hole appears in his jail cell, filled by a hulking, nightmarish creature. A creature who then turned into a woman. A woman he loathed.

I didn't know what he thought, nor did I care.



I brushed off some dirt and smaller chunks of concrete from my shoulder and shook out cement dust from my hair. A small, grayish cloud briefly hovered around me, and then drifted to the floor.

People were shouting within the prison itself, their voices echoing along what I assumed was a long hallway just beyond. Lights were still out. No one could see me. No one, but Ira.

Now he was blinking at me hard. He then sat forward a little, straining to see through the dark and dust. He breathed raspily through his misshapen and swollen mouth.

Footsteps pounded from somewhere nearby. Sirens blasted from seemingly everywhere. A spotlight flashed through the opening, catching some of the swirling dust.

Ira's eyes widened some more. "You!" he suddenly hissed. His swollen lips never moved, and the sound itself seemed to come from somewhere in his throat. "How the fuck did you get in here?"

I said nothing. There was nothing to say. Things were about to end badly for Ira and there was no reason to joke or elaborate or waste time.

I stood there, waiting, naked as the day I was



born. I was certain most of my body was silhouetted by the lights coming in through the large opening in the wall behind me. How much Ira could see of me, I didn't know, nor did I care.

I don't think he cared either.

He reached underneath his flimsy bed mattress, and then hurled himself at me. As he did so, I spotted something flashing in his hands. Growling with what could have been demonic rage, he drove the metal object—which turned out to be a sharpened spoon wired to a wooden stick—as hard as he could at my chest. Whether or not the shank qualified as a stake, I didn't know, nor did I want to find out. I caught his slashing wrist as he slammed into me hard. I stumbled back a foot or two and nearly tripped on a block of cement, but mostly I held my ground. Ira brought his knee up hard into my stomach. Air burst from my lungs. He redoubled his effort with the shank, and I might have squeezed his wrist a little too hard, because I felt bones crunching. As Ira screamed, I spun him around and reached up with one hand and grabbed his already broken jaw and turned his head as hard and fast as I could. I



nearly ripped his head off. His neck broke instantly, sickeningly, the vertebrae tearing through his skin and his orange prison jumpsuit like jagged shards of broken glass. Ira shuddered violently, and then went limp. His head fell grotesquely to one side.

More sirens. More running feet. Now lights were turning on in the prison itself.

They were coming for me. At any moment, someone was going to burst into this cell. I had to leave now. But I didn't. Not yet. Instead, I found myself staring down at Ira's broken neck. I wanted to drink from him so bad that I was willing to risk getting caught. I was willing to give it all up for one drink of fresh blood.

More footsteps. Just outside of the door.

I tore my gaze away, gasping, and dropped Ira's lifeless body to the debris-strewn floor. I moved quickly over to the hole in the wall, took a deep breath, and jumped.



Separating Chino and Orange is Chino State Park, which really isn't much of a park. Mostly it's a long stretch of barren hills. The hills are full of coyotes, rabbits, and the occasional mountain lion. And tonight, at least, one giant vampire bat.

I alighted on the roundish summit of the highest hill. From here I could see the lights of North Orange County twinkling beautifully. I folded my wings in and hunkered down on the lip of a rocky overhang.

The wind was strong up here, buffeting me steadily, slapping my wings gently against my side. Something small scurried in the grass nearby. That something popped its little head up and looked at me. A squirrel. It studied me for a moment, cocking its head, and then scurried off in a blink.

*Well, excuse me.*

The cool night wind carried with it the heady scent of juniper and sage, and I sat silently on that ledge and stared down into Orange County and remembered the feeling of the man's neck breaking in my hands.

Grass rustled in the wind. My wings continued flapping. Grains of sand sprinkled against my thick



hide. A hazy gauze of clouds crawled in front of the moon, nudged along by the high winds.

In my mind's eye, I summoned the leaping flame, summoned the woman within. I opened my eyes a few seconds later and found myself squatting over the ledge, my long dark hair whipping in the wind, my elbows tucked against my sides.

I buried my face in my hands and wanted to cry, but I couldn't cry. I couldn't cry because something had changed within me tonight, something so damn frightening I could barely acknowledge it.

But I had to acknowledge it.

Tonight, as I had held Ira's broken body close to me, I had loved every minute of it. Every fucking second of it. It had been such a thrill killing him.

*Fuck.*

*Double fuck.*

The scariest part of tonight was that his killing had felt incomplete. Foreplay, without the pay-off. I had wanted to drink from that broken neck. Desperately. Passionately. Endlessly. Draining every drop of blood.

*Sweet Jesus, help me.*

I reached down and picked up a handful of cool



desert sand. I let the fine granules sift through my fingers and catch on the wind, to be carried off to distant lands and far shores, even if those distant lands were just Orange County and those far shores were heated pools.

I reached up with both hands and covered my head and closed my eyes and listened to the wind and the critters and the swishing grass, and stayed liked that for a long, long time....

## Chapter Forty-five

*I killed a man tonight.*

There was a long pause, then Fang wrote: *Are you sure you want to tell me about this here?*

*Big Brother?*

*Big something. You've stirred things up enough that someone, somewhere, might be watching and listening.*

*I doubt it, I wrote.*



*Your sixth sense?*

*Something like that.*

*You don't feel like anyone's watching?*

*No, I wrote. Not yet. Maybe someday I will have to be more careful.*

*But not now?*

*No.*

*Can we be careful for my benefit? he wrote.*

*Sure. We can pretend I killed a man tonight.*

*That's better. Pretend is better. Why did you pretend to kill him?*

*Because he was a bad man.*

*You can't kill all the bad men, Moon Dance. What did he do that was so bad?*

I told Fang about it, writing up the case quickly, hitting just the high notes. Two seconds after I hit "Send", Fang was already writing me back.

*Someone had to die, Moon Dance. Better him than your client.*

We were both silent for a long, long time. I tried to imagine what Fang was doing at this moment. Probably sitting back and studying my words. Probably drinking from a bottle of beer, although he had never mentioned if he drank beer or not. *Call it a*



*hunch. I imagined Fang taking a long pull on his beer, maybe crossing one leg over the other, maybe reaching down and scratching his crotch, as guys are wont to do.*

*He wrote, Does your client know about the killing?*

*Not yet.*

*Where is she now?*

*With me in bed, sleeping.*

*You sleep together?*

*Get your mind out of the gutter. This is the first time she has slept so deeply since I have been protecting her.*

*People are more psychic than they realize. Perhaps a part of her knows she is finally safe.*

*But I had to kill a man to keep her safe.*

*Better him than her.*

Tonight I had bought a pack of cigarettes. I opened the package and tapped one out and lit it with a lighter. The tip flared and the acrid smell of burning paper and tobacco reached my nose nearly instantly. I loved the initial scent of a freshly lit cigarette, even if I wasn't smoking it. I looked down at the burning cancer stick. It was my first cigarette



since before I was pregnant. I had given up smokes completely, being a good preggo. I had thought I had given them up for good, but with the fear of cancer removed, well, what the hell? Why not? I just wouldn't smoke them around my kids. Or if I was about to kiss a man.

*I've never killed before, I wrote.*

*How do you feel?*

I sucked on the cigarette and thought about that. *I feel nothing.*

*No guilt?*

*No. Not right now, but it might hit me later.*

*How did you feel when you were killing him?*

*Why do you ask?*

*It is commonly believed that vampires enjoy the kill, that vampires sort of get-off on taking another's life.*

I took another hit, inhaling deeply, and came clean. *I enjoyed it so fucking much that it scares the shit out of me.*

*Because you might want to do it again?*

*Exactly.*

*Did you feed from him?*



*No. I didn't have time. But I think I would have. I paused, then added: And now tonight feels incomplete.*

*Because you didn't feed?*

*Right.*

*You hunted your prey...and then lost him to the hyenas.*

*I shuddered at the imagery. Something like that.*

*Can you control yourself, Moon Dance?*

*I nodded, even though he couldn't see me nod. Yes, the feeling passed as soon as I left the cell.*

*A good thing it passed.*

*I nodded again. I knew what Fang meant. If the hunger hadn't passed, if it still gripped me, there was a very good chance that something else—or someone else—would be very dead tonight.*

*Do you think of me differently, Fang?*

*Do you think of yourself differently?*

*I finished the cigarette, stubbed it out in the glass ashtray on the night stand next to me. I've never killed before. Anyone or anything. I always had that to fall back on. Now I don't.*

*Now you're a killer.*

*Yes.*



*You killed a bad man who, if given a chance, would have hurt or killed your client.*

*Yes.*

*So, in effect, you acted in self-defense of your client.*

*You could say that.*

*You had asked him politely to leave her alone, and what did he do?*

*He threatened me and my children.*

*So, in effect, you also protected your children.*

*I'm not sure how serious his threats were.*

*The man was on Death Row, Moon Dance.*

*But I still killed him in cold blood, Fang.*

*That is something you will have to live with, Moon Dance. Can you live with it?*

*I guess I have to.*

*An eternity is a long time to carry guilt, Moon Dance.*

Our fingers were both silent. I contemplated another cigarette, then decided against it. Now Fang was busy writing something, and so I waited for his response. A minute later, it came.

*You did what you had to do. You acted in the best interest of yourself, your kids and your client.*



*You rid the world of an animal who made it his life's goal to destroy other people's lives. You ask me, you had a pretty good night's work.*

We were silent for a long time. I gazed out the sliding glass window at the rising moon. I turned back to my laptop.

*Get some sleep, Fang.*

*You know I'm a night owl, Moon Dance.*

*Yeah, I know.*

*See you in a week?*

My heart pounded once, twice in my chest.

*Yes, in a week.*

*I can't wait, Moon Dance.*

I bit my lip. *Neither can I.*

## Chapter Forty-six

I was boxing with Jacky.

It was late afternoon and I was tired and my hands kept dropping. Jacky hated when my hands



dropped and he let me know it. I was working on a punching bag while he stood behind it, absorbing my blows. Each punch seemed to knock the little Irishman off balance a little more. I had learned not to hit the bag with all my strength, or even half my strength, as such blows would send the little man rebounding off the bag as if it had been an electrified fence.

Even in the late afternoon, with the sun not fully set and my strength nowhere near where it could be, my punches had a lot of pop behind them.

*I'm such a freak.*

And as Jacky worked me in three minute drills—equivalent to boxing rounds—I was pouring sweat. I sometimes wondered what my sweat would look like under a microscope. Was it the same as anyone else's sweat? Was my DNA vastly different? Would a lab technician, studying my little squiggles under the lens, shit his pants if he saw what I was really made up of?

And what was I made up of? *Who knows.*

Still, it gave me an idea. A very interesting idea. Hmm....

“Hands up, wee girl. Hands—”



I hit the bag hard, so hard that it rebounded back into Jacky's face and caused him, I think, to bite his lip. Oops. He cursed and held on tight, but at least he shut the hell up about my damn hands.

*Easy girl. He's just doing his job.*

I was in a mood. A foul mood. I needed to punch something and punch it hard, but I didn't want to hurt Jacky. A conundrum, for sure.

And as I wrapped up the fourteenth round, finishing in a flurry of punches that made Jacky, no doubt, regret taking me on as a client, Detective Sherbet stepped into the gym. The heavy-set detective looked around, blinking hard, eyes adjusting to the gloom, spotted me, and then motioned for me to come over. I told Jacky I would be back, and the little Irishman, wiping the blood from his lip, seemed only too relieved to be rid of me for a few minutes.

I grabbed a towel and soon the detective and I were sitting on a bench in the far corner of the gym. I was sweating profusely and continuously drying myself. Sherbet was wearing slacks and a nice shirt. There was a fresh jelly stain near one of the buttons. The buttons were doing all they could to contain his



girth.

"You sweat a lot for a girl," he said.

"I've heard that before."

Sherbet grinned. "It's not necessarily a bad thing."

"I've heard that before, too. So how did you find me, Detective?"

"I happen to be an ace investigator. That, and Monica told me."

I nodded. "And to what do I owe the honor?"

Sherbet was looking at me closely, and perhaps a little oddly. If I had to put a name to it, I would say he was looking at me *suspiciously*.

He said, "Ira Lang is dead."

"What a shame."

"You don't seem surprised."

"I'm too tired to seem surprised," I said. "There's a reason for all this sweat, you know."

"Don't you care how he died?"

"No."

"His neck was broken."

I made a noncommittal sound. Sherbet interlaced his fingers and formed a sort of human cup with the palms of his hands. He tapped the tips of his thumbs



together. Nearby, somebody was kicking a heavy bag with a lot of power.

“It happened last night, in his cell.”

I kept saying nothing. Sweat continued to drip, and I continued to mop my brow. I didn’t look at Sherbet.

The detective said, “There was an explosion of some type, which blasted a hole into his cell. Crazy, I know, but someone broke into his cell.”

“You’re not making sense, Detective.”

“None of it makes sense, Sam. Whatever broke into his cell appears to have killed him, as well. Nearly ripped his head clean off.”

I listened to a woman *hi-yah-ing!* with her trainer, grunting the word with each kick or punch. I wanted to *hi-yah* her face.

“Prison officials don’t know what to make of it. The explosion rocked the whole building. Everyone felt it, even those a few buildings away felt it. But there was no evidence of an explosion. It was as if a massive cannonball had been launched at the wall.”

“Detective, if I didn’t know better, I would say you’ve been sneaking in some of the hard stuff



during your lunch breaks.”

He mostly ignored me, although he might have cracked a smile. “They’re keeping it out of the press. They have to. Something like this can’t get out. Besides, what do they report?”

“So Ira is really dead?”

“Yes.”

“And this story of yours is real?”

“So far, it’s not much of a story. The warden and his men have no clue what happened.”

“And there were no witnesses?”

“Oh, there was a witness.”

“What did he see?”

“A guard working the tower heard the explosion. Everyone did. He started looking for the source and found the gaping hole in the Death Row wing. A moment later, he sees what he claims is a naked woman jump from the opening.” I burst out laughing, but Sherbet ignored me and continued on. “The guard had been in the process of reporting the hole to the warden when the woman jumped out of Ira’s cell. The guard was a fraction of a second too late getting back to his light. The woman disappeared and the last he reports is something quite large and



black flew directly over the tower. The woman was never found."

"Was she seen on video?"

"The video they have shows the wall caving in from an unknown impact. An invisible impact. Nothing else can be seen. Nothing inside, since the angle was wrong. And not the woman or whatever the guard had seen flying overhead."

"Did he say what the woman looked like?" I asked.

"He did. Slender. Long black hair. Pale skin. Did a swan dive out of the hole in the wall."

"Any DNA evidence left behind at the scene?"

"None so far, but they're working on it."

I nodded. "And how do you know all of this?"

"Warden is a friend of mine. Ira was my business. And I'm an acquaintance of yours, a woman who had physically assaulted Ira just a week and a half earlier."

"I'm just an acquaintance? I'm hurt."

Sherbet had been watching me closely during this whole exchange. I had been watching two women sparring in the center ring. Both women looked like they would have trouble punching through



a wet paper towel. One of them actually turned and ran, squealing.

“There was something else on the video.”

Uh, oh. “Please tell me you didn’t bring another portable DVD player,” I said.

Sherbet chuckled. “No. I learned my lesson with that damned thing. I’ll summarize for you. Just after the explosion, the video captured something else. Granted, the camera was only partially facing the wall—and at this time, the spotlight wasn’t yet on the hole in the wall—but we can see what appears to be broken bricks and rocks rising in the air and falling on their own.”

“Maybe the prison is haunted,” I said.

“If I had to guess, I would say it looked like someone—or something—was getting up from the floor. And the chunks of wall were falling away from the body.”

“An *invisible* body,” I reminded.

That stopped him. He ducked his head and rubbed his face and groaned a little. He turned and looked at me a moment later, and the poor guy looked truly tortured. The confident detective was gone, replaced by a man who was truly searching for



answers.

"What do you make of all that, Sam?" he asked.

"I think someone invisible might have killed Ira," I said.

"Maybe. Is there anything else you would like to add?"

"It's a wild story, Detective," I said, standing. "You boys might want to keep it to yourselves. You wouldn't want the rest of the world thinking that invisible assassins are killing prisoners at Chino State Prison."

I hated lying to the detective, but I had been lying for so long now about my condition it truly came as second nature for me. Still, I hated to see the confused anguish on his face.

Sherbet nodded and looked at his empty hands. I think he was wishing a big fat donut was in one of those hands. Or both hands. The detective nodded some more, this time to himself, I think, and then stood. As he stood, his knees popped so loudly that a girl walking by snapped her head around and looked at us.

The detective looked down at me and said, "I still



have questions for you, Sam.”

“And I’m still here, Detective.”

He nodded and left, limping slightly.

## Chapter Forty-seven

Monica and I were in my hotel room, sitting crossed-legged in the center of the bed, holding hands. I had just told her that her husband of thirteen years, a husband who had twice tried to kill her and who, in fact, succeeded in killing her father, was dead. I left out the facts of his death. I told her only that her ex-husband had died suddenly.

*Very suddenly*, I thought.

Amazingly, Monica broke down. She cried hard for a long, long time. Sometimes I wondered if she even knew *why* she was crying. I suspected that emotions—many different emotions—were sweeping through her, purging her, one set of emotions blending into another, causing more and more tears, until at last she had cried herself out, and



now we sat holding hands in the center of the bed.

“So there’s no one trying to hurt me anymore?” she finally asked.

“No one’s trying to hurt you,” I promised. In fact, Detective Sherbet had just sent me a very choppy and error-filled text message (I could just see his thick sausage fingers hunting and pecking over his cell’s tiny keyboard) that he had had a heart-to-heart with the accused hitman. The hitman, currently awaiting arraignment for conspiracy to attempt murder, understood that his employer—in this case Ira Lang—was dead.

The hotel was oddly quiet, even to my ears. No elevator sounds. No creaking. No laughing. And no squeaking bed springs.

After a moment, Monica said, “I can’t believe he’s dead.”

I remembered the way Ira’s head had dropped to the side, held in place by only the skin of his neck. I had no problem believing he was dead.

“So I guess you’re done protecting me?” she added.

“Yes,” I said. “But I’m not done being your friend. If you ever need anything, call me. If you’re ever



afraid, call me. If you ever need help in any way, call me. If you ever want to go dancing, call me."

She laughed, but mostly she cried some more and now she leaned into me and hugged me, and when she pulled away, she looked at me closely.

"Your hands are always cold," she said, her tiny voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes. I'm always cold."

"Always?"

I thought about that. Yeah, I was usually cold, except when I was flush with blood, especially fresh blood. I kept that part to myself.

"Is that part of your sickness?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry you're sick, Samantha."

"So am I."

She held my hands even tighter in a show of solidarity. And like a small child who's always looking to make things better, she swung my hands out a little. "Did you really mean the part about dancing?"

"Sure," I said. "I haven't been dancing in a long time."

"I'm a good dancer," she said.



“I bet you are.”

There was a knock on the door, and I got up and checked the peephole and let Chad in. He came bearing flowers and wearing nice cologne. I mentioned something about the flowers being for me and he said in my dreams. My ex-partner was in love, but certainly not with me. I looked over at Monica who brightened immediately at the sight of Chad, or perhaps the flowers. Whether or not she was in love, I didn't know, but, I think, she was in a better place to explore such feelings. In the least, she was now free to love.

Chad pulled me aside and we briefly discussed Ira's crazy death. He wanted to know if I had any additional information and I told him I didn't. We both agreed Ira's death was crazy as hell and both wondered what had happened. We concluded that we may never know, and it was doubtful the prison was coming clean with all the facts. We both concluded that there was some sort of cover-up going on. The cover-up idea was mine, admittedly.

Chad looked at me, but I could tell he was itching to get back to Monica, who was currently inhaling



every flower in the bouquet. Chad said, "She'll be safe with me. Always."

"That's good."

"I won't let anyone ever hurt her."

"You are a good man."

"I love her."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Do you think she loves me?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I think the two of you are off to a great start."

He nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, I do too."

The two of them left, together, arm-in-arm, and I suddenly found myself alone in my hotel room for the first time in a few weeks. I went out to my balcony and lit a cigarette and stared silently up at the pale, nearly full moon.

My thoughts were all over the place. I was hungry. Starving, in fact. I hadn't eaten in days. I thought of the chilled packets of blood in my hotel refrigerator and made a face, nearly gagging at the thought.

My scattered thoughts eventually settled on Stuart, my bald client. And I kept thinking about him even as my forgotten cigarette finally burned itself out.



## Chapter Forty-eight

I was taking a hot shower.

No doubt it was too hot for most people, but it was just right for me. In fact, if I didn't know better, I would say that I could almost smell my own cooking flesh. Anyway, such hot showers were some of the few times that I could actually feel real heat radiating from my body. The heat would last all of twenty minutes after stepping out of the shower, granted, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

I did my best thinking in the shower, and I was thinking my ass off now. Danny had two things on me: First, he had a vial of blood he had supposedly drawn while I was sleeping (the piece of shit), and, second, he had pictures of me *not* showing up in a mirror, or on the film itself.

*Allegedly.*

Both items were currently with an attorney friend of his—*allegedly*—who kept them God-knows-



where. How much his attorney friend knew about me and my condition, I didn't know, but I doubted Danny told him very much, if anything. Danny was good at keeping secrets. Anyway, according to my ex-husband, his attorney friend had been given strict instructions to make public the files should Danny meet an unfortunate end.

Briefly distracted by picturing Danny's unfortunate end, I allowed the image to play out for exactly six seconds before I forced myself back to reality. However much I hated my ex, he was still the father of my children.

For that, he has been given asylum.

For now.

Anyway, Danny had also threatened to go public with his evidence should I fight him on anything. And so I didn't fight him on anything. And so I accepted his harsh terms, his mental anguish.

I took it, and I took it, and took it.

*I was sick of taking it.*

So what could I do about it? I thought about that, turning my body in the shower, letting the spray hit me between my shoulder blades. Danny's evidence was centered around my blood. Danny assumed,



wrongly or not, that my blood would be different, and that I could be proven to be a monster. He also had the pictures. I wasn't worried about those. Hell, anyone could manipulate such pictures nowadays, and I doubted anyone would take them seriously. Danny would look like a complete idiot waving those pictures around and would be laughed out of a job.

So I could dismiss the pictures.

But could I dismiss the blood? I didn't think so. At least, not yet. The blood worried me. I needed more information. And as the superheated spray worked its way over me, I thought about what I had to do.

A few minutes later, dried and dressed, I grabbed my car keys and headed for the elevator.

It was time for a Wal-Mart run.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, I was back in my bathroom, this time pouring the contents of a plastic bottle of organic juice down the toilet. Wasteful, I know, but what the hell was I going to do with it? Anyway, I flushed the whole shebang down the pooper, as Anthony would call it, and spent the next few minutes thoroughly cleaning out the container in the bathroom



sink. I used my hair dryer to carefully dry the plastic without melting it.

Once done, I carefully cleaned my right index fingernail, running hot water over it and using some hand soap. I next swabbed some rubbing alcohol on my forearm, blew the spot dry, and then carefully pressed my right fingernail into the skin of my arm. I didn't bother to look for a vein. A phlebotomist would have been horrified. Which, by the way, would be a good job for a vampire.

*Except you would probably be fired for drinking on the job.*

I laughed nervously at my own lame joke while I continued to work my nail deeper into my flesh. A knife would have been good, except I didn't have one handy. Besides, my nail worked just fine.

The first thick drop of blood appeared around my naturally sharpened nail. I kept pushing and slicing, and soon I opened up what I thought was a sizable incision.

Blood flowed. Languidly, granted, but flowed nonetheless. I positioned the empty juice bottle beneath the cut and caught the first drop of blood as it dripped free. The red stuff flowed free for precisely



ten seconds before the wound completely healed. No scar, nothing. Just a dried trail of vampire blood.

I repeated the cutting process, caught the fresh flow of blood, and did this eight more times before I was certain I had enough hemoglobin. Eight cuts, no marks. My arm completely healed.

*Yeah, I'm a freak.*

I swirled the contents of my blood in the container. A smoothie fit for Satan himself, minus the wheat grass and bee pollen, of course. As I swirled the contents, I thought hard about what I was doing. I even paced the small area in the bathroom and rubbed my neck and debated internally, and in the end, I packed the sealed juice bottle full of my dark plasma into a small Styrofoam container.

I had a friend at the FBI crime lab in D.C. A good friend. I was going to have to trust him, especially if my blood came back...*irregular*. And if it didn't come back irregular? Well, I had nothing to worry about, then, did I?

*I'll cross that bridge when I get there.*

Most important, I needed answers, and this was the best way I knew of to get them.

I next checked on the packets of Blue Ice that I



had stashed in my mini-fridge's mini-freezer an hour or so earlier. The packets were hard as a rock. Good. I placed one under the bottle of blood, one each on either side, and finally one on top. I closed the Styrofoam container, taped it shut, and placed the whole thing in a small cardboard box. I next went online and found the lab's address in D.C. Once done, I placed an order for UPS to swing by the hotel tomorrow morning for a same-day delivery. The same-day delivery was going to cost me \$114. I shot off an email to my friend in D.C., telling him to expect a super-sensitive package from yours truly. I ended my email with a smiley face, because I like smiley faces.

When that was taken care of, I switched outfits. I stepped out of my sweats and tee shirt and into something decidedly more slutty. Interestingly, the slutty outfit was something I had borrowed from my sister and never worn.

Anyway, I was now showing more cleavage and shoulder and back, and when I was certain I looked like a skank whore, I grabbed my freshly packed box of blood and my car keys and headed out.

No Wal-Mart run his time.



At the front desk, I dropped off my package and filled in the front desk clerk—whose eyes had bugged out of his head and onto my boobs—to expect UPS tomorrow morning. He nodded distractedly. I wonder what he was distracted about? I made him repeat what I said twice before I headed out.

It was kind of fun being slutty. I think every woman should dress like a slut once in a while. It was very liberating.

Now, acting like a slut was something else entirely.

*Maybe that would be liberating, too.*

Giggling, I gunned my minivan and headed off to Colton. I had a stripper job to apply for, after all.

## Chapter Forty-nine

I parked in the far corner of the dirt parking lot, near where a van was currently a-rocking. I



considered a-knocking, just because I hate being told what to do, but ultimately I decided against it, since I really didn't want to know what was going on in there.

And besides, I had a job interview.

Of sorts.

Feeling ridiculous and self-conscious, I strode across the parking lot and up to the front entrance. I didn't see Danny's car, which was a damn good thing.

The bouncer was big and black and scary as hell, even to me. Suddenly insanely self-conscious, I reminded myself that my body still looked like a twenty-eight-year old.

"Excuse me," I said.

"Yeah?" He barely looked at me.

"I hear you're hiring."

He jerked a thumb behind him, toward the inside of the club. "Talk to Rick."

I winked and stepped past him and as I did so, his hand dropped down and grabbed my ass. I convulsed slightly and continued on into the dark club. I entered a small hallway, with an opening at the far end. I passed through the opening and was met



by thumping music, losers, and boobs. To my left was the raised stage, which was brightly lit with hundreds of little white light bulbs. The stage was made of dark wood and was heavily scuffed. A single brass pole rose up from the center of the stage, and a single white stripper was currently cavorting around said brass pole. At the moment, just her breasts were out. Her breasts were nothing to write home about, if you ask me. They were fake and probably three or four years past their expiration date. *Don't be catty.* Glitter sparkled between her breasts and over the upper half of her chest. I wondered if any of the men cared about the sparkles. I wondered if any of the men even saw the sparkles.

The place was only half full. Men in varying degrees of drunkenness and physical deterioration sat around the raised stage. Most were drinking beer. Some were drinking shots of the hard stuff. All were staring at the woman with her glittering breasts.

I stood where I was and took in the scene. So why did Danny keep coming here? So what's the draw? Glittering fake breasts?

Maybe. Men have fought for far less.



I continued scanning, realizing I was going to need another hot shower tonight. Smoke filled the air, even though it was illegal to smoke in such establishments. I continued scanning. No one acknowledged me. No one cared that I was standing there at the entrance. A man to my left was currently getting what I assumed was a lap dance, although it looked like a lot of hard grinding. We called that dry humping in my day.

My stomach turned.

Other strippers were making their rounds, running their hands over customer's shoulders and through their hair, offering them some sort of service or another. The men smiled and politely deferred. Many wanted to touch the women, and seemed to forcibly control themselves. Touching the women, I was certain, was highly illegal in such an environment. And, of course, this strip joint was a model in adhering to local laws. *Minus the smoking and the dry humping.* One man actually took a stripper up on her offer, and she promptly led him by the hand into a back room. Another very large man stood outside the door to this room. I shuddered to think what was going on in that back room.



*Oh, don't be such a prude, I thought. It's just sex and lots of it.*

I went over to the bar. A Hispanic bartender was talking to a customer with a thick neck. The bartender didn't look at me. I finally got his attention and told him I wanted to speak to Rick.

The bartender motioned with his jaw, and the customer with the thick neck apparently wasn't a customer at all. The man turned slowly and looked at me. "Waddya want?"

"Are you Rick?"

"Sure."

"I'm looking for a job."

Rick looked me over and somehow held back his excitement. "We ain't hiring, sorry, toots."

Toots? Feeling oddly rejected, I took a gamble. "Danny told me to talk to you about a job."

"Danny, huh?"

"Yeah."

Rick took in a lot of air, which somehow made his thick neck swell out even more. He studied me some more, lingering on my chest. I took in some air and puffed it out a little. Finally, he said, "Come back



tonight at eleven when Danny gets here. Then we can all talk to him. But the last I heard, we ain't hiring."

I took another shot in the dark. "But Danny said he was the owner and what he says goes."

"Look, whatever. Come back tonight and we can all have a pow wow." His gaze lingered on me some more. "Let's see your tits and see what we're working with."

I sucked in some air despite myself. I've been undercover before, but not like this. "You can see them tonight, with Danny."

He shrugged and said, "Whatever," and turned back to the bartender, and as I left, I realized that any feelings I had had for Danny, any lingering connection to the man that I had felt, had completely dried up and disappeared in that moment.

## Chapter Fifty

I was sitting at a Denny's in the city of Corona,



drinking a glass of iced water. There was a hot cup of black coffee sitting in front of me, too, but I didn't touch the black coffee. The coffee was there for show, and just to be ordering something.

I idly wondered how many vampires hung out at Denny's. Maybe none. Maybe most vampires were out running through graveyards or having blood orgies, or whatever the hell else real vampires do.

The waitress came by and glanced at my full cup of coffee and asked if I needed anything else. I smiled and said no. She smiled and dropped off the check and left. I smiled just for the hell of it.

I had a notebook in front of me, open to a blank page. I was loosely holding a pen near the top of the blank page. As I sat there, I remembered the grounding steps from last time, and performed them now. In my mind's eye, I saw myself securely tethered to the earth with glowing silver cords. Then I took in some air and held it for a few minutes and then let it out slowly.

A now familiar tingling appeared in my arm. The pen jerked in my hands. It jerked again, and now the tip was moving, writing. Three words appeared.

*Good evening, Samantha.*



I stared at them, knowing I should probably be freaked out, but I wasn't. Whatever the hell was going on, I didn't know, but I was game to go along for the ride.

I spoke by subvocalizing the words, that is, speaking them with barely a whisper, just loud enough for me to hear, and hopefully loud enough for my new friend to hear. But, of course, not so loud that I would get thrown out of Denny's.

"Good evening, Sephora," I said. "How are you?"  
*I'm well. And I can hear you just fine.*

I smiled. "I'm sorry I haven't gotten back to you earlier."

*There is no reason to feel sorry, Samantha. Remember, I'm always here.*

"Yes, you said that. And where is here?"  
*Where do you think it is?*

"Heaven?"

*Close. Let's call it the 'spirit world'.*

"And what's that like, the spirit world?"  
*Oh, you know it well.*

"I do?"

*Indeed, a very significant part of you still resides in the spirit world.*



"You totally lost me."

*You are much more than your physical body, Samantha. Do you understand the concept of a soul?*

"Yes. I just don't know if I believe in the concept of a soul."

*I understand. You live in this physical world of time and space. There isn't, admittedly, a lot of evidence of a soul. Then again, there isn't a lot of evidence for vampires, either. But both exist.*

I nodded and sipped my ice water. The coffee had quit letting off steam. Quickly, when no one was looking, I poured a little out onto the table and then mopped it up with my napkin. Now the coffee at least appeared to have been sipped. I wrapped another napkin around the sopping wet napkin. The things I do to appear normal. Sigh.

"So some things are taken on faith, is that what you're saying?"

*Something like that, Samantha.*

"You can call me Sam."

*I'll do that...Sam.*

"So what did you mean that a significant part of



me still resides in the spirit world?"

*The easiest way to describe this, Sam, is to say that not all of your soul is focused in your current physical body. Some of your soul—a large portion of your soul, in fact—still resides in the spirit world.*

"And what's it doing in the spirit world?"

*Watching you, closely.*

"This is a lot to take," I said. "And weird."

*I understand. So take things slowly. There's time. There's no rush.*

"And who are you, exactly?"

*Just a friend, Sam.*

"A good friend?"

*The best.*

"Okay, that makes me feel better," I said, and as I said those words quietly, I felt a slight shiver course along the entire length of my body. Oddly, it was a comforting sensation. There was a good chance I might have just been hugged.

*I'm glad you feel better, Sam.*

"I want to ask you more about me, about what I have become, but maybe that can wait until another night."

*I'm always here, Sam.*



And just like that, the electrified sensation left my body. I closed the notebook, put the pen back in my purse (along with the sopping napkin, which I had wrapped another napkin around), and paid my bill and left.

## Chapter Fifty-one

The more I thought about delivering Orange County's most notorious crime boss into the hands of the mild mannered Stuart Young, the more I realized I had given my perfectly bald client a death sentence.

And so I spent a lot of that night thinking about what I could do about this dilemma. I thought long and hard, and somewhere near the break of dawn, I came up with an idea.

\* \* \*

I spent all the next evening researching the plane crash; in particular, the victims on board. Because this was a military crash and because most of the



victims were key witnesses to an important trial, getting the names wasn't easy. I used every available contact I had in the federal government until finally a list was provided to me.

And once I had the list I went to work.

\* \* \*

Two days later, on the night of the full moon, with Kingsley howling away deep inside his safe room—I hoped—I alighted on Jerry Blum's wonderfully ornate alabaster balcony.

I tucked in my massive, leathery wings, focused my thoughts on the woman in the dancing flame, opened my eyes, and found myself standing naked on his stone balcony.

Naked but not without a plan.

My talons might be hideous and scary as hell, but they were good at carrying smaller objects. And one of them, this time, had been my daughter's extra backpack. The backpack was full of, let's just say, crime fighting gear.

Below me, I heard the muted sounds of men talking quietly among themselves. So far, I hadn't been seen. The sliding glass door in front of me was wide open. Apparently, Jerry Blum never expected a



giant vampire bat to alight on his balcony. From within the room, I heard the sounds of muffled snoring.

I stepped into his darkened bedroom. My eyes did not need adjusting. His spacious room was electrified with shining filaments of zigzagging light. Ghost light. Vampire light. There was a lone figure sleeping in a massive four poster bed. White gossamer sheets hung from the bed's cross beams. Very *uncrime* lord-like.

The figure sleeping in the center of the bed was snoring softly, peacefully, contentedly. There was no evidence that this son-of-bitch stayed awake over the crimes against humanity he had committed.

There was a white cotton robe hanging over the wooden sleigh bed footboard. I slipped it on and assessed the situation. I was certain there were guards somewhere nearby, although none seemed directly outside the door. I didn't hear them, nor was my sixth sense jangling. My sixth sense was telling me that, for now, I was safe.

Carrying the backpack, I went over to the side of the bed and looked down at the man who had



presumably killed Stuart's wife, a man who was powerful enough to bring down a government-owned airplane. There was a reason why I didn't confront him directly and openly. He would have gone after me and everything I loved, too. I had to hunt him from afar.

I had another reason for being here. Before I condemned the man to death, I had to know if I had the right man. Sure, Jerry Blum was a bastard. But was he the bastard I wanted?

*Well, let's find out.*

"Wake up, asshole," I said.

Jerry Blum's eyes popped open instantly. His hand snaked beneath his pillow, a practiced motion. He was fast, but I was faster. In a blink, his arm was pinned up over his head, driven into the mattress by my own hand, and I found myself leaning over him, staring down into his startled face. It was a face I had seen often: in the news, in books, and even in magazines. He was a celebrity crime lord, if ever there was one. Celebrity or not, he was a son-of-a-bitch. He was also quite handsome. Blum was in his late fifties, but he could have passed for his early forties. There was some gray at his temples, and



there were fine lines that creased from the corners of his eyes and reached down to the corners of his mouth. These were not laugh lines. Worry lines, no doubt. Jerry Blum was not a big man, but I could feel his muscular body beneath me. Shockingly, amazingly, I found myself slightly turned on by the position I found myself in: pinning down a handsome devil in his bed in the middle of the night.

I shook off the feeling as soon as it registered.

He quit struggling, perhaps realizing it was doing him no good, and we stared at each other for a heartbeat or two. Ambient light made its way in through the open French doors. Laughter reached us from somewhere on his grounds, but not very close. A girl giggled. An airplane droned high overhead.

Jerry Blum had thin lips. Too thin for me. He breathed easily, his nostrils flaring slightly. He smelled of good cologne and something else. Lavender. But the scent wasn't coming from him. It was coming from his bed; in fact, it was coming from his pillow. I knew something about aromatherapy. One sprinkled lavender on one's pillow to ensure a good night's sleep. No doubt Mr. Blum had been plagued by a lifetime of nightmares. Or not.



"Who the fuck are you?" he finally said.

"Your worst nightmare," I said, and somehow managed to keep a straight face.

"Yeah, well, you look like a whore."

He next tried to throw me off. *Tried* being the operative word here. He grunted and grimaced and bucked, but I didn't go anywhere. Finally, he lay back, gasping, face contorted slightly in pain. I think he might have pulled something.

"You're a very bad man, Mr. Blum."

"And you're a dead woman."

"You're closer than you think," I said.

He opened his mouth to yell or scream and I used my other hand to slap his face hard. It was a nice slap, harder than I intended, but I didn't care. His eyes literally crossed, then settled back into place. A moment later, he was staring up at me in a daze.

"No yelling or screaming," I said.

Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. My stomach lurched. I purposely had not eaten tonight.

"Did Danny Boy send you up?"

"No."

"So you ain't no whore?"



“That’s a double negative, Mr. Blum.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

I found myself staring down at the fine trickle of blood that glistened at the corner of his mouth. Blood was food for me, sure, but it was also something else. The right blood—fresh blood—satisfied more than hunger.

I said, “Do you want the bad news, Jerry, or the really bad news?”

He fought me again, this time harder than before, doing his damndest to buck me off him. But I didn’t move, and he quickly tired of this game, gasping. And that’s when I punched him. Hard. It was a straight jab into his left eye. I put a lot of strength behind the punch. I wanted it to hurt. The sound of bone hitting bone was sickening, and the punch drove his head deep into the pillow, where the goose down bloomed around him like a white flower, no doubt dousing him in peaceful lavender.

A very small voice protested what I was doing, as it had been doing all night long. It reminded me that I was a mother, a sister, a friend, an ex-federal agent, an ex-wife, a woman with a conscience and a heart.



It reminded me that I was not a killer or a murderer.

And as Jerry Blum shook his head, as a deep cut along the edge of his orbital ridge dripped blood into the corner of his left eye, I listened to that voice. I listened to its arguments and I listened to its reasoning, and I decided, in the end, that Jerry Blum had to die.

But not yet. First, I needed information. First, I had to know.

I said, "You sabotaged an airplane carrying a half dozen government witnesses. The airplane crashed killing everyone on board."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I punched him again, harder than before, driving his head deeper into the pillow.

"Fuck," he said. Blood was now staining his pillowcase, no doubt adding a nice coppery smell to the lavender.

I didn't come here to beat up Jerry Blum. I didn't come here to intimidate him. I came here to get a confession from him. And what happened after that, well, I was going to play that by ear.

"Tell me about the plane, Jerry," I said.

"Do you have any idea who I am?"



"You're Jerry Blum. Orange County's biggest crime lord. You are untouchable. Your enemies shudder in your presence. You've destroyed lives and businesses and spread fear far and wide. Did I miss anything?"

"Yeah, I'm rich. I can triple whoever's paying."

"Paying me to do what?"

"To kill me."

"They didn't pay me to kill you, Mr. Blum. I tossed that in as a freebie. Pro bono, so to speak."

He lay back in his bed, bleeding. His nose was perfect, probably surgically altered. His teeth were perfect, probably dentally enhanced. He let out a long breath. His breath was tinged with the scent of blood. In fact, blood wafted up from him everywhere. He wasn't bleeding a lot, granted, but a little bit of blood registered deeply with me.

*I'm a shark, I thought, smelling blood in the water dozens of miles away.*

"Tell me about the plane," I said. The blood, quite honestly, was driving me fucking crazy.

"Go to hell, cunt."

"Tell me about the plane, Jerry."

He threw his face at me, lips pulled back, cords



standing out on his neck. His eyes veritably bulged from their sockets. He fought and fought and screeched in frustration and anger and pain, and when he spoke spittle shot from his mouth in a steady stream. "Of course I killed them, you fucking freaky bitch! Just like I'm going to kill you. You can't stop me, no one can stop me. I'm invincible. I kill who I want, when I want, and how I want. You understand, you crazy bitch? You understand? You're a dead woman. Dead! And so is your client and anyone else you fucking know! And that's after I fuck you every which way, you fucking whore! How dare you come into my house, how dare you come in here and—"

And that's as far as he got.

"Enough," I said.

I flipped Jerry Blum over and pulled his hands behind his back. I reached into my bag of tricks and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. I cuffed the bastard and then pulled a black, breathable hood over his face. I cinched it tight. He fought me like a demon on crack, bucking and twisting, but it did him no good.

When I was finished, I hauled him to his feet and threw him over my shoulder. I carried him to his beautiful alabaster balcony, where I set him down,



along with my backpack, and ditched the robe. I closed my eyes and saw the flame and the hulking winged creature. When I opened my eyes again, I was easily five feet taller than I had been just seconds before. Jerry was still pinned beneath me, this time beneath one of my massive talons.

My hands in this form are quite dextrous; unfortunately, they're also attached to my wings, just like a bat. Still, I used my hands to drape the backpack over one of my talons. Once done, I gripped Jerry Blum by his shoulders. No doubt my claws hurt like hell.

I flapped my wings hard, causing a thunderous downdraft that whipped Jerry's hair crazily. He screamed and fought me some more, but had no clue what was happening to him. And as I got a little air under me, I adjusted my grip on the crime lord, using both talons now. I flapped my wings harder and now I was rising up into the night sky, Blum dangling beneath me like a kangaroo rat.



## Chapter Fifty-two

We were in the predetermined clearing in Carbon Canyon. One of us unwillingly.

Still wearing the black hood, Jerry Blum was handcuffed to a tree branch, his hands high above him. He had cussed and hollered the entire twenty minute flight here. I flew on, ignoring him, catching a high altitude current that made flapping my wings a breeze. Once we had arrived in the clearing, I had transformed again and slipped into a little black dress that I had included in my bag of tricks. Blum was full of questions and vitriol and hate. I ignored all of his questions as I cuffed him to the tree branch.

Now from my bag of tricks, I removed my cell phone. I selected eleven recipients and sent out a single text message. I next made a call to my client, Stuart Young. In so many words, I told Stuart that the eagle had landed. I had our man. Stuart had paused, swallowed hard, and said he would be here as soon as possible.

I left Jerry Blum alone, secured to the tree. Jerry Blum, as far as I was concerned, had dug his own



grave. From my backpack, I fished out a pack of cigarettes and fired one up and inhaled deeply. I had stepped out of the clearing and into a thicket of twisted trees. As I exhaled, I looked up at the full moon, now just a silver mosaic through the tangle of branches. My thoughts were empty. My heart was empty. I felt empty and cold. I listened to the sounds the forest made, and the sounds of my own distant beating heart. I finished the cigarette and immediately lit another just to be doing something. Jerry Blum bellowed angrily from the clearing behind me, but I ignored him. *He dug his own grave.* I finished the second cigarette but decided against a third. I finally leaned a shoulder against a dusty tree trunk and closed my eyes and stayed in that position until I heard the crunch of tires from somewhere nearby.

\* \* \*

I met Stuart on the dirt road, about a hundred yards away from the clearing. Stuart did not look good. He looked sick and scared and probably had to go to the bathroom.

"I have to go to the bathroom," he said.

I nodded and he dashed off. A moment later, he



came back, zipping up. He said, "So he's really here?"

I nodded, watching him. "Yes."

"I want to see him."

I nodded again and led Stuart through the forest and into the clearing, which was dappled in bright moonlight. Jerry Blum heard us coming and raised his head.

Seeing a man chained to a tree was no doubt unnerving to Stuart. He immediately stopped in his tracks. "Oh, my God."

Blum shouted, "Who's there, goddammit?"

I ignored Blum. Instead, I took Stuart's hand and walked him over to the shackled crime lord. I removed the hood and Blum shook his head and squinted. I handed Stuart a flashlight from the backpack and he clicked it on and shined it straight into Blum's face, who turned away, blinking hard and spitting mad.

"Goddammit! Who the fuck are you two? What the fuck is going on? How the fuck did I get here?"

"Shut the fuck up, Jerry," I said.

"Fuck you, cunt." He spit at me, tried to kick me. He succeeded in only losing his footing and hanging



briefly by the cuffs.

Stuart said nothing. He simply stared in open-mouthed wonder at the man hanging from the tree. Still open-mouthed, Stuart then turned to me.

"You really did it," he said.

I said nothing. I was watching Stuart. My client still did not look good. He looked, in fact, a little hysterical. I covered Jerry's head again and led Stuart away. Blum screamed and repeatedly threw his body against the tree trunk. Stuart looked back but I pulled him along through the high grass to the far end of the clearing. Once there, we stopped.

"And no one knows he's here?"

"No one who matters."

Stuart nodded. His wild eyes were looking increasingly erratic.

"Are you okay?" I asked Stuart.

"I don't know if I can do this, Sam."

"I understand."

Stuart was shaking. He ran a hand over his bald head. "I hate him so much, so fucking much. I still can't believe he's here. How did you do it?"

I shook my head; Stuart nodded. The wind



picked up considerably, swishing the branches along the edge of the clearing and slapping the tall grass around our ankles.

And through the wind, I heard many more vehicles driving up along the dirt road. One after another. Stuart didn't hear them. Stuart was lost in his own thoughts. Stuart also didn't have my hearing.

"You don't have to do this," I said.

Stuart nodded. Tears were in his eyes.

"I hate him so fucking much."

We were silent some more. The wind continued to pick up, moaning through the trees. I heard footsteps coming. Many footsteps.

I said, "What if I told you that you didn't have to do this alone, Stuart?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if I told you that Jerry Blum had wronged many people the day he killed your wife? What if I told you that many, many people share your desire for revenge."

"I don't understand."

I waved my hand and in that moment ten figures stepped out of the woods. Ten solemn, white-faced figures. I recognized the faces, all of whom I had met



in the past few days. All of whom I had easily convinced to be here tonight. Not one needed prodding. All had jumped at the opportunity.

“Jerry Blum is a bad man, Stuart. He would have hurt you tonight. He would have killed you.”

“Who are they?”

“People like you, Stuart, all victims of Jerry Blum.”

“What’s going to happen tonight?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m leaving that to all of you.”

Stuart looked at me with impossibly wide eyes. He then looked at the others, most of whom nodded at him. They were all here. Mothers, wives, husbands, and children. All had lost loved ones in the crash.

I squeezed Stuart’s hand and then left him there with the others. I went over to Jerry Blum and uncuffed him. I took his blindfold off and led him over to the center of the clearing.

“Who the fuck are those assholes?” said Jerry. He only fought me a little.

I didn’t answer him. Instead, I turned and walked away, leaving Jerry alone in the light of the full moon. Off to the side of the clearing, I quickly slipped out of



the dress and shoved my cell and cuffs and keys inside the backpack.

I had just transformed when I heard the first gunshot. And as I leaped high into the air and flapped my wings hard and flew away from the isolated canyon, I heard shot after shot after shot.

\* \* \*

I asked Stuart a few days later what had happened on the night of the full moon, but he wouldn't give me an answer. And neither would the others.

I had been wrong about Jerry Blum. He didn't dig his own grave. I very much suspected the others had done it for him, leaving Orange County's notorious crime lord buried deep in that forgotten clearing.

## Chapter Fifty-three

I don't get exhausted, but I get mentally fatigued, and tonight had stretched me thin. I was looking forward to coming home to my empty hotel room,



closing the curtains tight, and sleeping the day away, dead to the world.

But as I unlocked the door to my room with the keycard and stepped inside, I was immediately met by two things: the first was a fresh breeze that was blowing in through my wide open balcony door, and the second was a nearly overwhelmingly foul stench.

Last time I had been surprised in such a fashion, a vampire hunter had been waiting for me. And what was waiting for me now, stunned even me.

\* \* \*

Alert for silver-tipped arrows or silver ninja stars or silver anything else hurling at me, I cautiously entered my hotel room.

I moved cautiously down the very small hallway. To my left was a closet. The door was partially open. I knew immediately there was no one inside. No, whoever was in my suite was in my living room or sleeping area.

The lights were out. Squiggly, rapidly-moving prisms of light shot wildly through the air. These super-charged particles of light illuminated my way, as they always did.



I took another step into my suite.

I was approaching the end of the short hallway. Around the corner to the right would be my bed and the desk. Around the corner to my left were sitting chairs and a round table. Presently, from my position, I could not see very far around either corner.

Directly before me, at the far end of my suite, I could see the sliding glass door. Or what had once been the sliding glass door, as most of the glass was presently scattered across the carpet. The heavy curtains shifted in the breeze, swaying slightly.

I took another step.

My sixth sense was buzzing. The fine hairs on my neck were standing on end. The foul stench grew stronger. Something rancid was in my hotel room.

No, something *dead* was in my room.

I took another step. I was now at the end of the hallway. To my right, I could see the foot of the bed. To my left, was a section of the round table. The stench, I was certain, was coming from my right, on the side where my bed and desk were located.

I paused, listening.

Someone was breathing around the corner.



Deep breaths, ragged breaths. My heart thumped fast and hard. I suddenly wished I had a weapon.

*You are a weapon*, I reminded myself.

I continued listening to the breathing. A slow sound. A deep sound. A rumbling sound. Something big was in my living room. Either that or someone parked a Dodge Charger on my bed.

I stepped around the corner.

\* \* \*

The thing standing in the corner of my room was horrific and nightmarish, and if I wasn't so terrified, I would have turned and ran or peed myself. Instead, I stopped and stared and still might have peed myself a little.

The thing was watching me closely, almost curiously, its head slightly angled, its pointed ears erect and alert. Its lower face—or muzzle—projected out slightly, but not quite as long as a traditional dog, or wolf. More like a pug.

Standing there in the corner of my room, the thing looked like a long-forgotten Hollywood movie prop.

Except this movie prop was breathing deeply and growling just under its breath. A low growl. A warning growl. The same kind of growl a guard dog



would give. Except this growl was terrifyingly deep.

Blood was dripping from its face. Blood, and something else. Something blackish. Something putrid. I suddenly had a very strong sense that it had dug up a body and feasted on it. In fact, I was certain of this. How I was certain of it, I didn't know. Maybe my sixth sense was evolving into something more.

*Or maybe because this thing smells like the walking dead.*

I made sure my back was to the open glass door. I wasn't sure what I would do if the thing attacked, but having a readily available escape route seemed like a damned good idea. And if I had to take flight, well, I could kiss these clothes goodbye. They would burst from my body in an instant.

A part of me felt like this was a dream. Hell, *a lot* of me felt like this was a dream.

We continued staring at each other. I continued wanting to pee. The creature continued breathing deeply, throatily. I could have been standing next to a tiger cage.

And that's when the beast took a step toward me.

Every instinct told me to run—and to keep



running until I had put hundreds of miles between me and this *thing*. But I didn't run. Something kept me in that room. That something was curiosity.

*Curiosity killed the cat. Or, in this case, the vampire.*

It took another step toward me. A very long step. One that spanned nearly the entire length of my bed. As it walked, it sort of tucked in its shaggy elbows.

The thing, I was certain, was a werewolf. And that werewolf, I was certain, was Kingsley.

When I transformed, I was all there; meaning, I was still me, and I could control all of my actions and emotions. I doubted Kingsley would have chosen to dig up a grave and feast upon a corpse, if that was, in fact, what he had done. So that alone suggested Kingsley was not all here. Meaning, something else was controlling this beast. But enough of Kingsley was in there to find his way to my hotel room tonight.

What happened to the panic room? And where was Franklin the Butler who, I knew, looked after Kingsley during these monthly transformations?

*You ask a lot of questions, vampire.*

The words appeared in my thoughts, directly



inside my skull, as if someone had whispered them straight into my ear cavity. I didn't jump, but I did step back.

"Who said that?"

As I spoke, the creature cocked its head to one side, its pointed ears, moving independently of each other, shot forward. Cute on a dog, not so cute on a hulking, nightmarish creature.

*Who do you think said it, vampire?*

The creature stepped forward. Its movements were graceful and surprisingly economical. It only moved when it had to. Nothing wasted.

"Kingsley?" I asked.

*Kingsley's not home.*

"Then who is this?"

The werewolf stepped closer still, and the wave of revulsion that emanated from it nearly made me retch.

I reminded myself that I was a terrifying creature of the night, able to strike fear in the hearts of even the most hardened criminals.

*You look afraid, vampire,* said the voice in my head.

Up close, the creature looked even more



hideous. And up close, it smelled even worse.

"Who are you?" I asked again. My voice shook.

*Does it matter?*

"Yes. I want to know where my friend is."

*Oh, he's in here, vampire.*

"Where is here?"

*In the background, vampire. Watching us.*

Moonlight reflected off the creature's thick brow and slightly protruding muzzle. Long, white teeth gleamed over black gums. A low, steady, rumble came from its throat and chest. The creature seemed incapable of remaining silent. A low growl seemed to continuously emanate from it. I fought a nearly overwhelming desire to step back. But I didn't.

*You are brave, vampire.*

"And you smell like shit."

The werewolf tilted its head. One of its ears revolved out to the side, hearing something that was beyond even my own keen hearing.

*Kingsley has been wanting to see you, vampire. Very badly. But he has refused to do so out of pride. But I thought I would take it upon myself to visit you tonight. I thought it was time to make your acquaintance. There are, after all, so few of us.*



“Us?”

*The undead.*

“Fine, so you’ve met me. Now who the fuck are you?”

The werewolf growled a deeper growl, a sound which seemed to resonate from deep within its massive chest.

*I am called Malthus.*

I did my best to wrap my brain around what I was hearing. “You are a separate entity that lives within Kingsley?”

*Not always within, no. But I do visit him once a month. He’s such a gracious host.*

I sensed sarcasm. “And what, exactly, are you?”

*I am many things, vampire.*

“How is it that you can take possession of Kingsley? How is that you can turn into this *thing*?”

*This thing, as you call it, is my physical incarnation. And I took possession of my dear fellow Kingsley because he allowed me inside him.*

“He wanted to be bitten by a werewolf?”

*No. He wanted death. He wanted revenge. He was full of hate and despair and emptiness.* The voice paused; the werewolf stared down at me,



breathing heavily through a partially open mouth. Its lips were pure black. *I exist to fill that emptiness.*

"I don't understand."

*You will someday, vampire. And we will meet again. Of that, you can be sure.*

In a blink of an eye, moving faster than any creature that size had a right to move, the werewolf turned its massive shoulders and dashed through the shattered door and leaped off the stucco balcony.

I ran over to the edge and watched as it dropped nine stories, landing softly and gracefully. It didn't throw back its head and let loose with an ear-splitting howl, nor did it dash off into the night on all four legs.

No, it simply sniffed the air, scratched behind its ear, and walked calmly away.

## Chapter Fifty-four

It was late and my IM chat window was open. So



far, there was no sign of Fang.

I had spent the past three hours cleaning my room, picking up glass and scrubbing clean the blood and other bodily fluids that had been dripping from Kingsley. With the place clean, now all I had to do was come up with a convincing story about the broken glass. I decided on going the drunken, divorced mother route. I had been drinking on the balcony, when I stumbled through the glass door. Could happen to anyone.

Now, with my hotel suite smelling like coconut butter and rotted corpse, I was sitting in front of my computer, waiting for Fang to log on.

I buzzed him again.

And again.

Twenty minutes later, I saw what I wanted to see: a flashing pencil had appeared in the message box. Fang was writing me a message. I felt overjoyed and relieved. I had come to rely on Fang more than he realized.

More than I realized.

A moment later, his words appeared: *You are persistent tonight, Moon Dance.*

*I have news.*



*Of that, I have no doubt.*

*Were you asleep?*

*I might have been dozing, but I always have time for you, Moon Dance.*

*My heart swelled. Thank you, Fang.*

*He typed a smiley face and then asked: So what's your news?*

*I saw a werewolf tonight.*

*Your old client and newlover?*

*I hesitated. Yes.*

*Tell me about it.*

*And so I did. I relayed everything that had happened and what was said to the best of my ability. As I typed, Fang waited patiently. Then again, he might have fallen back to sleep.*

*Nope. I had barely sent my message, when his response appeared nearly instantly.*

*I'm not surprised. It is commonly believed that werewolves feast on corpses.*

*Well, if he thinks he's ever going to kiss me with those ghoulish lips again, he's got another think coming.*

*Isn't that a bit like the teapot calling the kettle black?*



*I don't eat corpses, Fang.*

*Point taken. So you say this entity claimed to be living inside your friend?*

*Yes, I wrote.*

*Fang paused, then wrote: There are some who believe that werewolves and other such creatures of the night are, in fact, the physical manifestations of highly evolved dark masters.*

*I'm not sure I'm following.*

*These beings, these powerful entities, are forbidden to incarnate on earth. But they have found, let's call them, loopholes.*

*And one such loophole is to incarnate once a month, as werewolves.*

*Exactly. But they don't consider themselves wolves. You are, in fact, looking at the physical expression of the darkest of evils.*

*I shuddered.*

*And how do they find...a host?*

*No doubt the usual ways. Being bitten by such a being would be one way. But generally, and I think your ex-client is proof of this, they attach themselves to a willing host.*

*I'm lost, I wrote. As usual.*



*I have no doubt that your ex-client, the attorney, did not pointedly ask to be a werewolf. But he projected weakness, anguish, pain, despair. Such extreme emotions attract the attention of these highly evolved dark masters. It was just a matter of time until a werewolf-like creature found its way to your friend. Either that, or death.*

*So they saw my friend as a good host.*

*You could say that.*

*So, in effect, he is possessed.*

*Exactly. But he's possessed by something very dark, and very, very evil.*

*The sun will be up soon, I wrote.*

*Spoken like a true vampire. So are we still on for Sunday night?*

*That was two days from now. My heart slammed in my chest. Yes.*

*Where would you like to meet, Moon Dance?*

*You are in Southern California? I asked.*

*Yes.*

*Are you familiar with Orange County?*

*Yes.*

*Do you know where the Downtown Grill is in*



*Fullerton?*

*There was a pause. Yes.*

*Okay, I will see you there at midnight.*

*The vampire's hour. So midnight it is, Moon Dance.*

*Goodnight, Fang.*

*You mean good morning.*

*Ha-ha.*

*Sweet dreams, Moon Dance. See you soon.*

## Chapter Fifty-five

I got up earlier than normal to take care of the sliding glass door with hotel management.

Groggy, weak, and feeling less than human, I walked the short, stocky and highly disapproving woman through my fictional drunken escapade last night, which culminated in me supposedly crashing through the glass door. She clucked her tongue numerous times, and in the end, after taking a few photographs of the damages, she seemed to buy my



story. An hour or so later, a work crew stopped by and replaced the glass.

As they worked, I wondered if it was finally time for me to find my own place. Of course, I already had my own place. It was the house Danny and I had purchased together. The house he was currently using to fuck his secretary in.

I had been at the Embassy Suites for two months now. Surely, it was time for a change. And with that thought in mind, as I sat in the center of my bed while the work crew positioned the big piece of glass in the balcony doorway, I realized what I *hadn't* seen in the seedy strip club in Colton.

Heart pounding, I fired up my laptop. I jacked into the hotel wireless service and did a quick search for the club. As I expected, there was no mention of it. No mention of it, in fact, anywhere.

As the work crew finished, one of them suggested that next time I fall *away* from the glass door when I was shit-faced drunk. I told him I would keep his suggestion in mind (asshole), and when they were gone, so was I.

Covered in sunscreen and heavy clothing, sporting my cool sunhat and shades, I grabbed my



keys and hit the road.

\* \* \*

Along the way to the Riverside County Courthouse, my cell phone rang. It was Kingsley. I picked up immediately.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

"I'm sorry about last night," he said.

"Last night was a little terrifying. At least I no longer doubt that you really are a...you know what."

Kingsley hated for us to talk about our super secret identities on the phone. He actually laughed.

"This coming from a...you know what."

"We all have our hang ups."

He was silent as I drove along the congested freeway. Mercifully, the sun was behind me.

Finally, Kingsley said, "Am I to understand you took care of my client the other night?"

"You are to understand anything you want."

I could almost see him nod. "I should be very pissed off at you for that."

"You should thank me. I lessened your workload."

"That was very reckless, Sam."



"These are reckless times."

He was silent some more. I suspected he was in his massive office, surrounded by piles of files.

"So what do we do, Sam?"

"About what?"

"About us."

"I don't know," I said.

"I like you. A lot."

"I'm a very likable person," I said.

He chuckled. "Sometimes. But now you're being distant and cold."

"I feel distant and cold, so no surprise there."

"It's because of what I do," he said.

"I hate what you do."

"Sometimes I help people, Sam. Not everyone belongs in prison."

"And not everyone should be freed on a technicality."

"We can argue this forever," he said.

"And forever is a very long time for...us."

He chuckled lightly again. "Can I see you tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow night I have plans."

He made a noise on the phone. I know he wanted



to ask who my plans were with but he held back. "I see. Perhaps next week?"

"Perhaps," I said.

"I'll call you later."

I said okay and we hung up.

\* \* \*

My cell rang again. I checked the number and ID on the faceplate. The number came up "Restricted". It was either a creditor or one of my pals with law enforcement. My finances had gotten a little out of hand these past few months. My hotel room hadn't been cheap and Danny wasn't helping me. I took my chances and clicked on.

"I don't have any money," I said.

"Hello? Sam, it's Mel."

Oops. It was my DNA biologist friend from the FBI Crime Lab. Definitely not a creditor, although he did accept deposits in blood. My heart immediately slammed hard against the inside of my ribs. His call could only mean one thing.

"What's shaking, Mel?"

"I have the results to your blood work up, Sam."

I took a deep breath, held it, and then said, "Okay. Lay them on me."



## Chapter Fifty-six

Danny's firm took up the entire second floor of the office building. The building itself wasn't much to write home about. Squarish and ugly and immediately forgotten. A couple of years ago, I had jokingly referred to the building as "Ambulance Chaser Headquarters", and Danny had refused to speak to me for two days.

### *The big baby.*

With the sun still a few hours from setting and myself not at my strongest, I climbed the exterior stairs and pushed through the smoky glass doors. Four leather chairs sat empty to one side of the door. A thick, square mohair carpet spanned the length of the office. A bubbling fountain gurgled in the corner to my left, projecting an aura of zen-like calm in these troubled, accident-prone times. On the walls were the paintings I had picked out with Danny at a swap meet years ago. Big, fake, cheap stuff.



And directly in front of me, sitting behind a kidney-shaped desk, with her shiny, tan legs crossed and absently texting on her cell phone, was my ex-husband's new secretary. The woman he had cheated on me with. The woman he was currently fucking. The woman he entertained at our house, in our bedroom, in our bed. The woman he had introduced to our children.

She had known that he was married. No doubt he had made me out to be a monster. No doubt he had painted a picture of an unfit mother. Unfit or not, she had chosen to cheat with a married man. My married man.

She set her phone aside, uncrossed her thin legs, and gave me a big smile. She was about to ask if she could help me, but then stopped short. Her mouth sort of hung open and her eyes narrowed. She was an ugly woman, I thought. I had no clue what Danny saw in her. Face too thin, skin too tan, boobs too fake. On second thought, I saw exactly what Danny saw in her. She was the opposite of me.

She jumped up and moved quickly around her desk, blocking my path. She crossed her arms under



her fake breasts. Her nails were red and long. She looked like a whore.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” she said.

I smiled and, without breaking stride, punched her straight in the face. She flew backward, bounced off the desk, spun around and landed on her face. On her nose, in fact. She moaned. I wasn't at full strength and I certainly didn't hit her as hard as I could, but she would remember me.

Danny appeared from his office door, open-mouthed. He looked at me and then at his secretary on the mohair rug. “Sam, what the fuck is going on?”

And as he stepped out of the office, I punched him hard in his stomach. He *oofed* nicely and doubled over. I grabbed him by the collar and threw him back into his office and shut the door behind me.

## Chapter Fifty-seven

I pushed him down into one of his leather client chairs and sat on the edge of his executive desk,



which was big enough to land an F-17 on.

Danny still hadn't gotten his breath back entirely. His face was purplish and contorted, and he was staring at me with frightened, angry eyes.

I kicked my legs pleasantly and whistled absently, waiting for his lungs to kick start again. Finally his short rasping breaths turned into longer rasping breaths. And when they did, words vomited from his mouth. "What the fuck are...who the hell do you...you have royally fucked yourself...how dare you attack...."

"Are you quite done, asshole?"

He sat up straighter, took in a long, agonized breath. "I demand to know what's going on."

"Well, since you asked so nicely."

I grinned and continued swinging my legs. I shouldn't have been enjoying this so much, but I was.

He looked at me with very confused, very dark eyes. Danny was not a big guy. Just a few inches shy of six foot, he was also too skinny for me, but I never told him that. I had always liked my men a little beefier, which is why Kingsley had been so damn intoxicating.

He said, "Do you have any idea the shit you just landed yourself in, Sam?"



"About as much shit as you landed in, dickhead."

His eyes narrowed. "What the hell does that mean?"

There was a low moan from outside the closed door, followed by some sobbing. His secretary lying there on the carpet, crying, probably wasn't good for business.

"You're the owner of The Kittycat," I said. "Perhaps the world's sleaziest strip club. In fact, you're the sole owner of it."

The color drained from his already pale face. He tried to sit up. I told him to stay where he was and he did so.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Sam."

"Of course you don't. Deny everything, right? It's the losers' motto."

"Sam, you're talking nonsense."

"Am I? All I have to do is make one call to any number of my friends in law enforcement, and they will come down hard on The Kittycat."

"Just wait a second, Sam. Whether or not I own the business is beside the point. It's hardly a crime to run a strip club."

I crossed my arms under my chest. My own



natural bosom didn't push up unnaturally through the top of my own blouse and I was proud of that.

"It's a crime, Danny, when said business—in particular, a *strip club*—operates without a license."

"Shit."

I grinned and sat back. I swung my legs some more. Seeing Danny squirm had just become my favorite new hobby.

"I'm in the process of getting a license—"

"*In the process of* and *having one* are two different things, Danny. And you know that. But you couldn't wait, could you? You just had to open the doors to that shithole of sleaze."

He said nothing. I could see his pressed shirt pulsating slightly over his hammering heart. His mind was spinning in ten different directions. But there was no getting out of this one. Not for him.

"What the fuck happened to you, Danny?" I asked. "How does a respectable family man end up owning that dungeon of filth?"

"I don't have to answer you."

"Hey, I'm not the cops, Danny boy. There are no Miranda rights and I'm not wired. This is just



between you and me.”

“Well, you don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. Now, can I check on Sugar?”

I laughed into my hand. “Sugar?”

“Not now, Sam—”

“Her name is Sugar? Honest to God? Is she also one of your filthy strippers, Danny? Sucking up to the boss in more ways than one?”

“Okay, you caught me. So sue me for looking outside of our shitty marriage for something more. So sue me for jumping on a chance to own something that’s going to make me a lot of money.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“And you’re a living nightmare. What the fuck do you want, Sam?”

I studied him long and hard. Sugar had quit sobbing from the other side of the door. Sugar wasn’t happy.

I said, “I want the house and I want the kids.”

He laughed. “No way. There is absolutely no fucking way I’m letting you around our kids unsupervised.”

“I don’t think you understand the quagmire of shit you find yourself in, Danny. If I say the word, the



hammer comes down on your disgusting enterprise. You're looking at an ungodly amount of fines, not to mention automatic disbarment. Oh, yeah, and the world will see you as the slimeball you've turned out to be. And I can't wait to see what your mother thinks about all of this, too." I paused, shaking my head. "No one stops to consider their mothers. It's a pity."

"You forget, Sam. If you say anything, I will expose you for the monster you really are."

I slipped off the desk and approached him slowly. I squatted down between his legs, resting my elbows on his knees. He was in a very, very vulnerable position.

"Expose me for what, Danny? Having a rare skin condition?"

"I've got a vial of your blood, Sam. It's in a safe deposit box. If anything happens to me, my attorney has been notified to have that blood immediately tested. Your secret will be out. You will be exposed to the light for the freak that you are."

"Perhaps you should have already tested the blood, Danny."

"What does that mean?"

I stood again and removed a folded piece of



paper from my back pocket. Earlier, I had stopped at a Kinko's and printed out Mel's emailed test results.

"What's this?"

"My blood test results."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I had my blood tested, Danny. A variety of tests, too. The technician was asked to look for any irregularities. Look at the results yourself."

He quickly read through the report. Attorneys, if anything, were great scanners.

"As you can see," I said. "It says *no irregularities found*. My blood is normal, Danny. *Normal*. In every way. So have it tested. Do what you want with it. But I'm taking back my house, and I'm taking back my kids, and you damn well better believe that no sleazeball porn king who brings whores home to my kids will ever—*ever*—be welcomed into my house again. You have until eight p.m. tonight to move your ass out, and anything you leave behind will be trashed. Do you understand?"

He looked at the paper some more, then looked directly across at me, since I was once again squatting down at eye level. "So you won't report me?" he said.



“You disgust me.”

And I leveled a punch directly into his groin. As he rolled out of the chair, gasping, I walked out of his office and didn't even look down at his bleeding whore.

## Chapter Fifty-eight

It was 8:30 p.m. and Danny had just left.

I gave him the extra thirty minutes out of the goodness of my cold heart, since, after all, he had been working so hard to get his shit moved out. The kids were off eating pizza with Mary Lou, my sister. They would come home to find their daddy gone. Traumatic for them, I know, but they would adjust. They had to adjust.

Before Danny drove off, with his Cadillac Escalade filled with all his crap, he informed me that he had talked Sugar out of pressing charges, mostly by offering her a massive raise. I reminded Danny



that I wanted a massive raise, too, in the form of a butt-load of alimony and child support.

As he sat behind the wheel, looking utterly exhausted, he leveled a glare at me that was supposed to make me curl into the fetal position. I didn't curl.

"This isn't over, Sam."

"I certainly hope not," I said. "I'm having too much fun."

He shook his head and drove off. I watched him make a left turn and disappear out of sight, and I realized I didn't even care where he ended up.

*Smell you later, asshole.*

I flipped the phone open and called my sister. "Bring them home," I said.

\* \* \*

We were all eating hot fudge sundaes that were oozing with whipped cream and chocolate syrup. And, yes, some of us were only *pretending* to eat. So far, my kids had not caught on that I could not eat like them. Mostly, they just saw mommy not eating at all, and when I did, the spitting-it-back-into-a-cup routine worked wonders.

Even with all the spitting, some of the ice cream



and fudge made it down my esophagus, which caused some seriously uncomfortable cramps. After a few minutes of pretending to eat my ice cream, I finally ditched the bowl and emptied the cup-o'-spit down the garbage disposal. Mostly, no one noticed me, and I just sat there, glowing, watching my kids eat ice cream and laugh with their aunt...in the comfort of my own home with Danny not watching over me.

The kids had asked repeatedly where their dad was, and I told them that it was mommy's turn to have the house, and that daddy was going to stay with a friend of his for a while, and that everything was going to be okay.

Tammy later came over and held my hand for nearly the entire night. She told me again and again how sorry she was for yelling at me on the phone. I told her again and again that it didn't matter and that I loved her with all my heart.

When we were done with the ice cream, I grabbed a clean comforter from the hall closet and we all snuggled together on the living room couch and watched an illegal copy of *Toy Story 3* that Mary Lou had purchased at a liquor store. I told her I



couldn't condone such illicit behavior and vowed to purchase a real copy when the movie hit the DVD stands. Mary Joe stuck her tongue out at me.

About halfway through the movie, Anthony giggled. I knew that giggle.

"Oh, no you didn't!" I cried out.

He laughed harder and lifted up the comforter. "Dutch oven!" he shouted and a wave of stink hit us.

We all piled out of the living room, laughing and tumbling over ourselves.

And later, after the room had cleared and after we had finished the movie, while Mary Lou was twisting Tammy's long hair into a braid and while Anthony was showering, I found myself crying tears of joy.

## Chapter Fifty-nine

It was the next night and I was getting ready for my big date. I didn't often get nervous these days, but I was nervous as hell now. And while I got ready,



my AOL account twirped. It was Fang.

*See you in one hour, Moon Dance?*

*You bet.*

*Are you nervous?* he asked.

*More than you know.*

*Don't worry. I don't bite.*

I would have laughed if my stomach wasn't doing somersaults. I took a deep, shuddering breath. I really didn't need such deep breaths, but they did help to calm me.

*How do I find you?* I wrote when I had calmed myself down enough to focus on the keyboard.

*Look for the man with a twinkle in his eye.*

*Smartass.*

*Trust me, Moon Dance, there will be no mistaking me tonight.*

*What's your name?* I wrote. *I mean, your real name?*

*I will tell you my name tonight, Moon Dance. Deal?*

*Okay, deal. I have to get ready.*

*See you in fifty-six minutes.*

*So we're really doing this?*



Yes, wrote Fang. *We're really doing this.*

I shut down my laptop and went back to work on my hair. My hands, I noticed, were shaking.

\* \* \*

I was driving down Chapman Avenue when my cell rang. I looked at the faceplate. Another restricted Number. At this late hour, it could only be a cop. I even had a sneaking suspicion who it was. I clicked on.

"It wasn't me, officer, I swear. Please don't use the rubber hose again."

"We don't use rubber hoses any more," said Sherbet.

"So what do you use?"

"Proper interrogation techniques."

"And if that doesn't work?"

"We dig out the rubber hoses." He paused. "Do you have a couple of minutes?"

"Anything for you, detective."

"I'll remember that. Anyway, we had numerous eyewitness reports of something running through the streets of Fullerton a couple of nights ago, and I want your opinion."

"And because I have a rare skin disease and I'm



forced to stay out of the light of day, that makes me an expert in all things that go bump-in-the-night?”

“Something like that.”

“Was this *something* about nine feet tall and covered in fur?”

“How did you know?”

“Was there also a grave defiled?”

“Yes, over on Beacon Street, but—”

“Just a lucky guess, Detective.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit, Sam. What the hell is going on in my city?”

“You would never believe it, Detective.”

“Try me.”

“Soon. I promise.”

He was silent on his end of the phone. Finally, he said, “How soon?”

“Soon.”

He sighed. “I can be your best friend, Sam. Or your worst enemy. I have a city to protect.”

“We will talk soon, Detective. I promise.”

He didn’t like it, but accepted it.

“Get some sleep, Detective.”

“With a nine-foot creature running around? Hardly.”



"You're safe," I said. "At least until the next full moon."

"You're shitting me."

"We'll talk later, Detective."

And we clicked off just as I pulled into the Downtown Bar & Grill parking lot.

## Chapter Sixty

I was in the same parking lot where a young lady had been killed not too long ago in connection with a case of mine. A case that had involved Kingsley.

The parking lot was mostly empty. It was late Sunday night, so no surprise there. I was in a spot that afforded me a perfect view of the parking lot's entrance.

*I'm really doing this,* I thought.

I was a few minutes early. To my right was an alley that ran behind the restaurant. The alley was clean and dimly lit and led to the back entrances to



the stores that ran along Harbor Boulevard. Potted plants were arranged outside the bar's back door, and a nearby fire escape appeared freshly painted. The alley itself was composed of cobblestones, like something you would see in an English village. I remembered the way the girl's blood had soaked between the stones, zigzagging rapidly away from her dying body.

The moon was bright, but not full. Clouds were scattered thinly across the glowing sky. Glowing, at least, to my eyes. A small wind made its way through my partially opened driver's side window. I couldn't keep my hands from shaking, and so I kept them there on the steering wheel, gripping tightly, my knuckles glowing white.

A car turned slowly into the parking lot, making a left from Chapman Avenue. Its headlights bounced as the vehicle angled up the slight driveway and into the parking lot.

*I'm really doing this.*

I hadn't expected to be this nervous. Fang knew everything about me. He knew my dirtiest secrets. So what did I know about him? I knew he was a lady's man. I knew he had a massive fascination for



vampires. I knew he was mortal.

And that was it.

In a way, I loved Fang. He was always, always there for me. In my darkest hours, he consoled me. He lifted me up and reminded me that I was not a monster. I shared with him my heart, and in return he accepted it with tenderness and compassion. He was the perfect man. The perfect confidant.

I didn't want to lose what I had with Fang.

The car continued moving through the parking lot. I could hear its tires crunching. The car, I soon saw, was an old muscle car. A beautiful thing. Not quite cherried, but obviously well taken care of. It gave off a throaty growl, not unlike the growl of the werewolf the other night.

I didn't want to lose Fang. I love what we have. Our connection was so rare, so helpful, so loving, so sweet, so important to me.

*I can't lose that.*

I wrapped my hands around my keys, which were still hanging in the ignition.

This was a bad idea. I should never have agreed to this.

"What am I doing?" I whispered, feeling real



panic, perhaps the first panic I had felt in a long time. Far worse panic than when a nine-foot-tall werewolf approached me in my hotel room.

And what if Fang isn't who he says he is? What if he's someone completely different? Someone untrustworthy?

*What if I have to silence him?*

I started rocking in the driver's seat. The throaty growl of a muscle car reverberated through the empty lot, bouncing off the surrounding dark buildings. The car pulled slowly into a parking space two rows in front of me.

We were now facing each other. The windshield was tinted enough for me to have a hard time seeing inside. Still, I could see a single figure. A man.

The driver turned the car off and the parking lot fell silent again. A moment later, the muscle car's headlights flashed twice.

My heart slammed inside me. My right hand was still holding the keys. I could start the car now and get the hell out of here and forget this night ever happened, and Fang and I could go back to what we had.

I could. But I didn't.



I reached down and flashed my headlights twice in return. A moment later, the muscle car's driver's side door opened. A booted foot stepped out.

Close to hyperventilating, I went to open my door but stopped short. Shit, I had forgotten about my seat belt. I hastily unfastened it and opened the door.

*I'm really doing this.*

As I stepped out of my van completely, the person oppsite me did the same. The night air was cool. Sounds from the nearby bar reached us. Laughter. Music. The low murmur of a handful of conversations going on at once.

I stepped around to the front of my minivan, and the figure in front me did the same. He leaned a hip casually against the front fender. When I saw him, I stopped and gasped and covered my mouth with both hands.

Fang grinned at me. "Hello, Moon Dance."

*To be continued in:*

*American Vampire*



*April 2011*

(additionally, Fang's back story can be found in "Teeth and Other Stories", available at your favorite ebookseller.)



**DARK HORSE**  
A Jim Knighthorse Novel

by

**J.R. RAIN**

**DARK HORSE**

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## *Dedication*

To my sister Elaine, who loves mysteries. Love you,  
sis.

Also, a big thank you to Eve Paludan and Sandy Johnston (again!).

## *Dark Horse*

1.

Charles Brown, the defense attorney, was a small man with a round head. He was wearing a



brown and orange zigzagged power tie. I secretly wondered if he went by Charlie as a kid and had a dog named Snoopy and a crush on the little red-headed girl.

We were sitting in my office on a warm spring day. Charlie was here to give me a job if I wanted it, and I wanted it. I hadn't worked in two weeks and was beginning to like it, which made me nervous.

"I think the kid's innocent," he was saying.

"Of course you do, Charlie. You're a defense attorney. You would find cause to think Jack the Ripper was simply a misunderstood artist before his time."

He looked at me with what was supposed to be a stern face.

"The name's Charles," he said.

"If you say so."

"I do."

"Glad that's cleared up."

"I heard you could be difficult," he said. "Is this you being difficult? If so, then I'm disappointed."

I smiled. "Maybe you have me confused with my father."

Charlie sat back in my client chair and smiled.



His domed head was perfectly buffed and polished, cleanly reflecting the halogen lighting above. His skin appeared wet and viscous, as if his sweat glands were ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

"Your father has quite a reputation in L.A. I gave his office a call before coming here. Of course, he's quite busy and could not take on an extra case."

"So you settled on the next best thing."

"If you want to call it that," he said. "I've heard that you've performed adequately with similar cases, and so I've decided to give you a shot, although my expectations are not very high, and I have another P.I. waiting in the wings."

"How reassuring," I said.

"Yeah, well, he's established. You're not."

"But can he pick up a blind side blitz?"

Charlie smiled and splayed his stubby fingers flat on my desk and looked around my office, which was adorned with newspaper clippings and photographs of yours truly. Most of the photographs depict me in a Bruin uniform, sporting the number 45. In most I'm carrying the football, and in others I'm blowing open the hole for the tailback. Or at least I like to think I'm



blowing open the hole. The newspapers are yellowing now, taped or tacked to the wood paneling. Maybe someday I'll take them down. But not yet.

"You beat SC a few years back. I can never forgive you for that. Two touchdowns in the fourth quarter alone."

"Three," I said. "But who's counting?"

He rubbed his chin. "Destroyed your leg, if I recall, in the last game of the season. Broken in seven different places."

"Nine, but who's counting?"

"Must have been hard to deal with. You were on your way to the pros. Would have made a hell of a fullback."

That *had* been hard to deal with, and I didn't feel like talking about it now to Charlie Brown. "Why do you believe in your client's innocence?" I asked.

He looked at me. "I see. You don't want to talk about it. Sorry I brought it up." He crossed his legs. He didn't seem sorry at all. He looked smugly down at his shoes, which had polish on the polish. "Because I believe Derrick's story. I believe he loved his girlfriend and would never kill her."



“People have been killed for love before. Nothing new.”

On my computer screen before me I had brought up an article from the Orange County Register. The article showed a black teen being led away into a police car. He was looking down, his head partially covered by his jacket. He was being led away from a local high school. A very upscale high school, if I recalled. The story was dated three weeks ago, and I recalled reading it back then.

I tapped the computer monitor. “The police say there’s some indication that his girlfriend was seeing someone else, and that jealousy might have been a factor.”

“Yes,” said the attorney. “And we think this someone else framed our client.”

“I take it you want me to find this man.”

“Or person.”

“Ah, equality,” I said.

“We want you to find evidence of our client’s innocence, whether or not you find the true murderer.”

“Anything else I should know?”



"We feel race might be a factor here. He was the only black student in school, and in the neighborhood."

"I believe the preferred term is African-American."

"I'm aware of public sentiment in this regards. I don't need you to lecture me."

"Just trying to live up to my difficult name."

"Yeah, well, cool it," he said. "Now, no one's talking at the school. My client says he was working out late in the school gym, yet no one saw him, not even the janitors."

"Then maybe he wasn't there."

"He was there," said Charlie simply, as if his word was enough. "So do you want the job?"

"Sure."

We discussed a retainer fee and then he wrote me a check. When he left, waddling out of the office, I could almost hear Schroeder playing on his little piano in the background.



"He was found with the murder weapon," said Detective Hanson. "It was in the backseat of his car. That's damning evidence."

"That," I said, "and he's black."

"And he's black," said Hanson.

"In an all white school," I said.

"Yep."

"Were his prints on the knife?"

"No."

We were sitting in an outdoor café facing the beach. It was spring, and in southern California that's as good as summer. Many underdressed women were roller-blading, jogging or walking their dogs on the narrow beach path. There were also some men, all finely chiseled, but they were not as interesting.

Detective Hanson was a big man, but not as big as me. He had neat brown hair parted down the middle. His thick mustache screamed cop. He wore slacks and a white shirt. He was sweating through his shirt. I was dressed in khaki shorts, a surfing T-shirt and white Vans. Coupled with my amazing tan and disarming smile, I was surprised I wasn't more



often confused with Jimmy Buffet. If Jimmy Buffet stood six foot four and weighed two hundred and twenty.

"You guys have anything else on the kid?" I asked.

"You know I can't divulge that. Trial hasn't even started. The info about the knife made it to the press long ago, so that's a freebie for you. I can tell you this: the body was found at one a.m., although the ME places the time of death around seven p.m. the previous night."

"Who found the body?"

"A neighbor."

"Where were the victim's parents?"

"Dinner and dancing. It was a Friday night."

"Of course," I said. "Who doesn't go out and dance on a Friday night?"

"I don't," said Hanson.

"Me neither," I said. "Does Derrick have an alibi?"

"This will cost you a tunacoda."

"You drive a hard bargain."

I called the waitress over and put in our lunch orders.



“No alibi,” Hanson said when she had left, “but....”  
He let his voice trail off.

“But you believe the kid?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. He seems like a good kid. Says he was working out at the school gym at the time.”

“Schools have janitors, staff, students.”

“Yeah, well, it was late and no one saw him.”

“Or no one chose to see him.”

Hanson shrugged.

Our food arrived. A tunacoda for the detective. A half pound burger for me, with grilled onions and cheese, and a milkshake.

“You trying to commit suicide?” he asked.

“I’m bulking up,” I said.

“This is how you bulk up? Eating crap?”

“Only way I know how.”

“Why?”

“Thinking of trying out for San Diego,” I said.

“The Chargers?”

“Yeah.”

“What about your leg?”

“The leg’s going to be a problem.”



He thought about that, working his way through his tuna and avocado sandwich. He took a sip from his Coke.

"You wanna bash heads with other men and snap each other in the shower with jock straps, go right ahead."

"It's not as glamorous as that."

"Suicide, I say. What's your dad think?"

"He doesn't know. You're the first person I've told."

"I'm honored."

"You should be."

"What's Cindy going to say?"

I sipped my milkshake. "She won't like it, but she will support me. She happens to think very highly of me and my decisions."

He snorted and finished his sandwich, grabbed his Styrofoam cup.

"I can't believe I was bribed with a shitty tuna sandwich and a Coke."

"A simple man with simple needs."

"I should resent that remark, if it wasn't so true." He stood. "I gotta run. Good luck with the kid, but I think it's a lost cause. Kid even has a record."



“What kind?”

“Vandalism, mostly. He’s a goner. Hear they’re gonna try him as an adult.”

Detective Hanson left with his Styrofoam cup. I noticed he wasn’t wearing socks. Even cops in Huntington Beach are cool.

### 3.

Cindy Darwin is an anthropology professor at UCI. Her expertise is in the anthropology of religion, which, she tells me, is an important aspect of anthropology. And, yes, she can trace her lineage back to Charles Darwin, which makes her a sort of icon in her field. She knows more things about anthropology than she probably should, and too few things about the real world. Maybe that’s why she keeps me around.

It was late and we were walking hand-in-hand along the Huntington Pier. From here we could see the lights of Catalina Island, where the reclusive sorts



live and travel via ferry and plane. To the north, in the far distance, we could see Long Beach glittering away. The air was cool and windy and we were dressed in light jackets and jeans. Her jeans were much snuggier and more form-fitting than mine. As they should be.

"I'm thinking of giving San Diego a call," I said.

"Who's in San Diego?" she asked. She had a slightly higher pitched voice than most women. I found it endlessly sexy. She said her voice made it easier to holler across an assembly hall. Gave it more range, or something.

I was silent. She put two and two together. She let go of my hand.

"They call you again?" she asked. "The Rams, right?"

"The Chargers. Christ, Cindy, your own brother plays on the team."

"I think it's all sort of silly. Football, I mean. And all those silly mascots, I just don't get it."

"The mascots help us boys tell the teams apart," I said. "And, no, they didn't call. But I'm thinking about their last offer."

"Honey, that was two years ago."



She was right. I turned them down two years ago. My leg hadn't felt strong enough.

"The leg's better now," I said.

"Bullshit. You still limp."

"Not as much. And when I workout, I feel the strength again."

"But you still have metal pins in it."

"Lots of players play with pins."

"Have you told Rob yet?" she asked. Rob was her brother, the Chargers fourth wide receiver. Rob had introduced me to Cindy during college.

"Yes."

"What does he think?"

"He thinks it's a good idea."

We stopped walking and leaned over the heavy wooden rail. The air was suffused with brine and salt. Waves crashed beneath us, whitecaps glowing in the moonlight. A lifeguard Jeep was parked next to us, a quarter into the ocean on the pier. All that extra weight on the pier made me nervous.

"Why now?" she asked finally.

"My window is rapidly closing," I said.

"Not to mention you've always wondered if you



could do it.”

“Not to mention.”

“And you’re frustrated out of your gourd that a fucking leg injury has prevented you from finding this out.”

“Such language from an anthropologist.”

She sighed and hugged me around my waist. She was exactly a foot shorter than me, which made hugging easy, and kissing difficult.

“So what do you think?” I asked.

“I think you’re frustrated and angry and that you need to do this.”

“Not to mention I might just make a hell of a fullback.”

“Is he the one who throws the ball?”

We had gone over this precisely one hundred and two times.

“No, but close.”

She snuggled closer, burying her sharp chin deep into my side. It tickled. If I wasn’t so tough I would have laughed.

“Just don’t get yourself hurt.”

“I don’t plan to, but these things have a way of taking you by surprise.”



“So are you really that good?” she asked, looking up at me.

“I’m going to find out.”

She looked away. “If you make the team, things will change.”

I hugged her tighter. “I know.”

#### 4.

I was in a conference room at the Orange County jail in Santa Ana, accompanied by Charley Brown’s assistant, Mary Cho. We were alone, waiting for Derrick Booker to make his grand appearance. Mary was Chinese and petite and pretty. She wore a blue power suit, with the hem just above her knees. She sat next to me, and from our close proximity I had a clear view of her knees. Nice knees. Cho was probably still a law student. Probably worked out a whole lot. Seemed a little uptight, but nothing a little alcohol couldn’t fix. Was probably a little tigress in bed. She wasn’t much of a talker and seemed



immune to my considerable charm. Probably because she had caught me looking at her knees.

The heavy door with the wire window opened and Derrick was shown into the conference room by two strapping wardens. He was left alone with us, the wardens waiting just outside the door. The kid himself was manacled and hogtied. Should he make a run for it, Pope John Paul II himself could have caught him from behind.

Mary Cho sprang to life, brightening considerably, leaning forward and gesturing to a chair opposite us.

“Derrick, thanks for meeting us,” she said.

He shrugged, raising his cuffed hands slightly. “As if I had anything better to do.”

Which is what I would have said. I stifled a grin. I suspected grins were illegal in the Orange County jail. Derrick sounded white, although he tried to hide that fact with a lot of swaggering showmanship. In fact, he sounded white *and* rich, with a slightly arrogant lilt to his voice. He was good looking, with strong features and light brown eyes. He was tall and built like an athlete.

“I have someone here who wants to speak with



you,” said Cho.

“Who? Whitey?”

I raised my hand. “That would be me.”

Derrick’s father owned lots of real estate across southern California, and Derrick himself had grown up filthy rich. He was about as far from the ghetto as you could get. Yet here he was, sounding as if he had lived the mean streets all his life. As if he had grown up in poverty, rather than experiencing the best Orange County had to offer, which is considerable. I suspected here in prison he was in survival mode, where being a wealthy black kid is as bad as being a wealthy white kid. Except that he had the jargon wrong and a few years out of date, and he still sounded upper class, no matter how hard he tried to hide it.

“My name’s Jim Knighthorse.”

“Hey, I know you, man!”

“Who doesn’t?” I said. “And those who don’t, should.”

He smiled, showing a row of perfect white teeth. “How’s your leg? Saw you bust it up against Miami. Hell, I wanted to throw up.”



"I did throw up. You play?"

"Yeah. Running back."

"You any good?" I asked.

"School is full of whities, what do you think?"

I shrugged. "Some whities can run."

He grinned again. "Yeah, no shit. You could run, bro. Dad says wasn't for your leg you'd be in the pros."

"Still might."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"What about the leg?" he asked.

"We'll see about the leg," I said.

We were silent. Derrick was losing the ghetto speak. His eyes had brightened considerably with the football talk. We looked at each other. Down to business.

"You do her, Derrick?"

"Do her?"

"He means kill her, Derrick," said Cho. "He's asking if you killed Amanda Peterson."

"Thank you, assistant Cho," I said, smiling at her. She looked away quickly. Clearly she didn't trust herself around me. I looked back at Derrick. "You kill



her, Derrick?"

"Hell, no."

His arms flexed. Bulbous veins stood out against his forearms, disappearing up the short sleeves of his white prison attire. I could see those arms carrying a football.

"Why should anyone believe you?" I asked.

"Give a fuck what anyone believes."

"They found the knife in your car, Derrick. Her blood was on the knife. It adds up."

He was trying for hostile bad-ass, but he was just a kid, and eventually his emotions won out. They rippled across his expressive face, brief glimpses into his psyche: disbelief, rage, frustration. But most of all I saw *sorrow*. Deep sorrow.

"Because... " He stopped, swallowed, looked away. "Because we were going to get married."

"Married?"

"Uh huh."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"How old was she?"

"The same."

"Anyone know about the marriage?" I asked.



He laughed hollowly. "Hell, no. Her dad hates me, and I'm sure he doesn't think much of me now."

"I wouldn't imagine he does," I said. "You have any theories who might have killed her?"

He hesitated. "No."

"Was she seeing anyone else?"

"No."

"You were exclusive?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"She loved me."

"Did you love her?" I asked.

He didn't answer immediately. The silence that followed was palpable. The ticking of the clock behind us accentuated the silence and gave it depth and profundity. I listened to him breathe through his mouth. The corners of his mouth were flecked with dried spittle.

"Yeah, I loved her," he said finally. He swiped his sleeve across his face, using a shrugging motion to compensate for his cuffed wrists. The sleeve was streaked with tears.

"That will be enough, Mr. Knighthorse," said Cho. "Thank you, Derrick."



She got up and went to the door. She knocked on the window and the two wardens entered and led the shuffling Derrick out of the room. He didn't look back. I got up and stood by the door with Cho.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I think you're secretly in love with me," I said.

"I think you're secretly in love with yourself."

"It's no secret," I said.

We left the conference room and moved down the purposefully bare-walled hallway. Perhaps colorful paintings would have given the accused false hope.

"The kid didn't do her," I said. "No one's that good an actor."

She nodded. "We know. He's going to need your help."

"He's going to need a lot of help," I said.

"Let me guess: and you're the man to do it?"

"Took the words right out of my mouth."



On Beach Blvd., not too far from my crime-fighting headquarters, there is a McDonald's fast food restaurant. McDonald's is a fairly well-known establishment here in Huntington Beach, California, although I can't vouch for the rest of the country since I don't get out much. This McDonald's features an epic two- or three-story plastic playground, an ATM and DVD rentals.

Oh, and it also features God.

Yes, God. The Creator. The Lord Of All That Which Is And Is Not. The God of the Earth below and the sky above. The God of the Moon and the stars and Cher.

No, I'm not high. At least, not at the moment.

Oh, and he doesn't like me calling him God. He prefers Jack. Yes, Jack.

Again, I'm not high.

Let me explain: Not too long ago, while enjoying a Big Mac or three at this very McDonald's, a homeless man dressed in rags and smelling of an overripe dumpster sat across from me. He introduced himself as God, and later, by my third Big



Mac, I almost believed him.

God or not, he offered some pretty damn good advice that day, and I have been coming back ever since.

Today, by my second Big Mac and third re-fill of Coke, he showed up, ambling up to the restaurant from somewhere on Beach Blvd. Where he came from, I don't know. Where he goes, I still didn't know. Maybe Heaven. Maybe a dumpster. Maybe both.

As he cut across the parking lot, heading to the side entrance, I noted that his dirty jeans appeared particularly torn on this day. Perhaps he had had a fight with the Devil earlier.

Jack went through the door, walked up to the cashier, ordered a coffee.

"Hi, Jim," he said, after he had gotten his coffee. He carefully lifted the lid with very dirty fingers and blew on the steaming coffee.

"God doesn't like his coffee too hot?" I asked. I had been curious about this, as he always blew on his coffee.

"No," he said simply. God, or Jack, was an average-sized man, with average features: His hair was of average color and length (neutral brown,



hanging just above his ears), his eyes of average color (brownish, although they could have been green), and his skin was of average tone (perhaps Caucasian, although he could have passed for Hispanic). In short, the man was completely nondescript and nearly invisible to the world at large. He would make a hell of a P.I., actually.

Jack finally looked up from his coffee and studied me with his neutrally-colored eyes, squinting a little. I felt again that he was looking deep within me, into my heart and soul. While he was reading my aura, or whatever the hell it was he was doing, I looked down at his coffee: It was no longer steaming.

"How's your day going, Jim?" he finally asked me, sipping from the cup, using both hands, cradling the thing carefully, as if it were the Cup of Life.

He always asked me that, and I always said, which I did now: "Fine, Jack. How's it hanging?"

"Some would be offended to hear you speak to God in such an irreverent, disrespectful manner."

"Sure," I said. "Hell, I'm even offended. Can't you tell?"

He laughed softly.

"As they say, I broke the mold with you, Jim. And



they're hanging to the left. They're always hanging to the left. Isn't there anything else you want to ask God?"

"Sure," I said. "For starters, how do I know you're God?"

We were mostly alone at the back of the seating area. Behind me, kids played in the massive two-story jungle gym. Such jungle gyms didn't exist when I was kid. Lucky bastards.

"You have faith, Jim. That's how," he said. He always said that to me.

"How about for a lark you perform a miracle."

"You're alive and breathing," he said, sipping his coffee. "Isn't that miracle enough?"

"No," I said. "It's not, dammit." I was used to these kinds of double-talk answers. Jack seemed particularly efficient at this. "Make a million dollars appear. I don't even have to keep it. Just make it appear."

"And that would prove to you that I'm God?"

"Sure."

"Is it God you seek, or a genie?"

"Genie would be nice, too."



"I'll look into it."

"Thanks."

We were quiet. Jack silently sipped his coffee. Not even a slurp.

"You haven't been around for a while," he said.

"Have you missed me?"

"Yes."

"You have been waiting for me?" I asked, mildly shocked. It had been, perhaps, four months since I'd last visited with him.

"Yes," he said.

"How did you know I was here today?" I asked.

He grinned.

"There's something to be said for being omniscient, Jim."

"I bet," I said. "Anyway, I haven't worked on a case in a while. That is, a real case."

"You only come when you're working on a case?"

"Something like that," I said. "You would prefer I came more often?"

He looked at me from over his non-steaming cup of coffee.

"Yes," he said simply, and I found his answer oddly touching. "So am I to assume you are working



on a case now?"

"You are God," I said. "You can assume anything you want."

"So is that a yes?"

I sighed.

"I'm working on a case, yes."

"Tell me about it."

"Don't you already know?" I asked. "Hell, don't you already know who killed the girl?"

He looked at me long and hard, unblinking, his face impassive. There was dirt in the corner of his eyes, and along the border of his scalp, where his roots met his forehead. He stank of something unknown and rotten and definitely foul.

*You're insane*, I told myself for the hundredth time. *Utterly insane to even remotely entertain the idea that this might be—*

"Yes," he said. "I do know who killed the girl."

My breath caught in my throat.

"Then tell me."

"You already know, my son."

We had discussed such matters before. Jack seemed to think I knew things that I didn't really know. He also seemed to think that time meant



nothing to me and that I could sort of shift back and forth through it as I wished. I kindly let Jack know that I thought it all sounded like bullshit.

For now, I said, "I can assure you, Jack, that I most certainly do not know who killed her—and I most certainly do not want to get into that time-is-an-illusion horseshit, either. It makes my fucking head hurt, and you know it. Do you want to make my fucking head hurt, Jack?"

"Are you quite done?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, sitting back, taking a swig from my fourth or maybe fifth Coke.

He watched me quietly while I drank, then said, "Although you do know who killed the girl, but choose to deny the basic laws that govern your existence—in particular, time—I will give you the answer now if you so desire."

"Really?" I asked.

"Really."

"You know who killed Amanda Peterson?" I wasn't sure what my tone was: disbelief, curious, awe, maybe even a little fear. There are no secrets with God.

"Indeed," said Jack.



"But I haven't even discussed the case with you."

"I know."

"So why did you ask me to discuss the case with you?"

"It's called small talk, Jim. Try it sometime." And Jack winked at me.

I took in some air. These conversations were always like this. Circular. Infuriating. Often illuminating. Sometimes silly. But more often than not, just plain insane.

"Fine," I said, "write it down and I'll keep it in my wallet."

"Until?"

"Until the case is over. We'll see if we came to the same conclusions."

"Oh, we will."

"You're sure?"

"Always."

I often keep a pen above my ear, and as luck would have it, there was one there now. Jack tore off a piece of my tray liner, wrote something down on it, folded it up neatly and handed pen and paper to me. I deftly slipped the pen back over my ear, was briefly



tempted to unfold the paper, but promptly shoved it in my wallet, behind an old condom.

"So how is Amanda?" I asked. Amanda being the murdered girl on my case, of course.

"She is happy."

"But she was slaughtered just a few weeks ago."

"Yes, but she is with me now."

"This is fucking weird," I said.

"It's as weird as you want it to be," said the bum in front of me. I saw that his coffee was nearly gone.

"Want another coffee?"

"Heavens, no. It'll keep me up all night."

"I thought God never sleeps."

He looked up at me and grinned, showing a row of coffee stained teeth.

"Why, whoever told you that?"

"I'll be back," I said. "And it won't be four months this time."

And as I left, sipping from my large plastic cup, I noticed for the first time the Monopoly guy on the side of the cup, holding in his fist a single million dollar bill.

I looked over at Jack, but he had gotten up and was currently talking with someone else, oblivious to



me.

6.

Fresh from my conversation with God, I parked in front of a single story home with a copper roof, copper garage door and copper front door. I was sensing a pattern here. The front yard was immaculate and obviously professionally maintained. Roses were perfectly pruned under the front bay windows. Thick bushes separated the house from its distant neighbor. The bushes were pruned into massive green balls.

In the center of the lawn was a pile of roses. Mixed with the roses were teddy bears and cards and a massive poster with many signatures on it. The poster had photographs stapled to it. It was a sort of shrine to Amanda Peterson, marking the spot where she had been found murdered just forty-three days ago. The flowers themselves were in different stages of dying, and the grass around the shrine was



trampled to death.

A lot of dying going on around here.

I let my car idle and studied the crime scene. The large round bushes could conceal anyone, an easy ambush point. There was only one street light in this cul-de-sac, and it was four houses down. Although upscale, the neighborhood had no apparent security. Anyone could have been waiting for her.

Anyone.

But probably not Derrick.

Then again, I've been wrong before.

According to the police report, a neighbor had been the first to discover the body. The first to call the cops. The first questioned. The neighbor claimed to have heard nothing, even while Amanda was being mutilated directly across the street. I wanted to talk to that neighbor.

I yanked a u-turn and parked across the street in front of a powder blue house. The house was huge and sprawling. And silent.

I rang the doorbell and waited. While doing so, I examined the distance from where Amanda was murdered to here. My internal judge of distance told me this: it wasn't that far.



No one answered. I utilized my backup plan and tried the doorbell again.

Nothing.

Plan C.

I strolled around the side of the house, reached over the side gate, unlatched the lock and walked into the backyard. As if I owned the place. Done with enough chutzpah and self-assurance that even the nosiest neighbor will hesitate to call the police. I was also fairly certain there was no dog, unless it was trained not to bark at the doorbell. Which few were.

In the backyard, pruning roses, was an older lady. She was dressed much younger and hipper than she probably was. She wore white Capri pants, a tank top, shades and tennis shoes. Her arms were tanned, the skin hanging loose. In Huntington Beach no one ages; or, rather, no one concedes to aging. Because she was armed with shearing knives, I kept my distance.

"Mrs. Dartmouth?" I asked pleasantly.

No response. More pruning.

I said her name louder and took a step closer. I was beginning to see how a murder could indeed



happen across the street without her knowledge.

But then she finally turned and caught me out of the corner of her eye. She gasped and whipped the shearing knives around, ready to shear the hell out of me. Although thirty feet away, I stepped back, holding up my wallet and showing my private investigator license. A hell of a picture, I might add.

"Jim Knighthorse," I said. "Private investigator."

"Good Christ, you shouldn't sneak up on people around here, especially after what's happened."

"Yes, ma'am. I represent Carson and Deploma. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

She stood. "You're representing the boy?" she asked, her voice rising an octave. Not representing the *young man*. But the *boy*. She also sounded surprised, as if I were an idiot to do so.

"Yes."

She thought about that. She seemed to be struggling with something internally. Finally she shrugged.

"Would you like some iced tea?" she asked.

"Oh, would I."

At her patio table, she served it up with a mint sprig and a lemon wedge, and I suspected a dash or



two of sugar. We were shaded by a green umbrella, and as Mrs. Dartmouth sat opposite me, I noticed the shears didn't stray far from her hand. Didn't blame her.

"Great tea."

"Should be. I put enough sugar in it."

She wore a lot of lipstick and smelled of good perfume. Her hair was in a tight bun, and she watched me coolly and maybe a little warily. Again, I didn't blame her. I was a big man. A big handsome, athletic and sensitive man.

"Have you talked to many people about Amanda's murder?" I asked.

She brightened. "Lordy, yes. Reporters, police, attorneys, everyone. I've been over it a hundred times."

She sounded as if she'd enjoy going over it a hundred more times, to anyone who would listen. Probably served a lot of this iced tea in the process. And the sugar kept them coming back for more.

"Well, I won't ask you anything that's not already on the police report."

"Fine."

"You knew Amanda personally?"



She nodded. "That poor dear. Such a sweet child."

"Did you know Derrick Booker?"

"No," she said. "He never dared show his face here. I understand that Mr. Peterson didn't take a liking to him."

"Were you aware of Amanda having any other boyfriends?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm not a nosy person."

I smiled at the lie. "Of course not. How well do you know the family?"

"I babysat Amanda when she was younger. But as she got older I saw less and less of her. They always forget about us old fogies."

"When was your last conversation with Amanda?"

She took a sip from her tea and watched me carefully. "Two years ago, when she was a freshman in high school, after she had quit the school marching band. She played an instrument. The flute, I think. She loved music."

"Why did she quit?"

"I hardly think this is relevant to her murder of a month and a half ago."

"Just fishing, ma'am. After all, like my dad says:



you never know what you'll catch."

"Well, I do. They caught that boy. And that's good enough for me."

"It's good enough for a lot of people," I said. "Mrs. Dartmouth, what would you do if your daughter dated a black man?"

"What a silly question to ask."

"Why?"

"Because I don't have a daughter."

"I see," I said. "You were the first to come across the body."

She swallowed. "Yes."

I waited a moment. "At one a.m."

"Yes. I was walking. I do that sometimes when I can't sleep."

"And at the time of the murder, you saw and heard no one?"

She raised her finger and waggled it in my face. "Nuh uh uh, Mr. Knighthorse. That's all on the police report."

I produced one of my business cards and placed it on the glass table. In the background on the card was a photo of the sun sinking below the blue



horizon of the Pacific Ocean. The word *keen* always comes to mind. In one corner, was my smiling mug.

“Should you remember anything, please don’t hesitate to call.”

I set my card on the glass table; she somehow managed to not lunge for it. I finished the tea in one swallow and, leaving the way I had come, picked the mint sprig from my teeth.

Ah, dignity.

7.

The field was wet with dew, and a low wispy mist hung over the grass. The mist made the morning look colder than it really was. Sanchez and I had been doing sprints along the width of Long Beach State’s football field for the past twenty minutes. Sweat streamed down my face, and I probably had a healthy, athletic glow about me. I tried desperately to ignore the pain in my right leg. But the pain was there. Persistent, throbbing and threatening to



become something more serious. But I pushed on.

"You're pretty fast," I said to Sanchez. "For a cop."

"I've got to work off the donuts."

We finished another set of sprints and were now standing around, sucking wind like we had done at UCLA years earlier, when we had both been young and not so innocent. When the world had been my oyster. Before I had shattered my leg, and before Sanchez had become an LAPD homicide detective.

There were now two female joggers circling the track around us, dressed in long black nylon jogging pants and wearing white baseball caps. They moved spryly, their identical ponytails swishing along their angular shoulder blades.

"Sooner or later we're going to have to run to the other side of the field," said Sanchez. He spoke with a slight Hispanic accent when he wasn't careful, or when he was tired. He was tired. He was watching the two joggers. "Unless you prefer to watch them all morning long."

"Worse ways of spending a morning."

"How's the leg holding up?"

I shrugged.



Sanchez grinned. "That good, huh?"

We ran back to the other side of the field, just in time to meet the two women again, who swished past us with a casual glance or two. One of them said something and the other giggled.

"They're laughing at you," said Sanchez.

"Wouldn't be the first time," I said. "By the way, I beat you this time. Bum leg and all. How does that make you feel?"

"Maybe I should shoot myself."

"Got a gun in my gym bag."

"So do I."

We raced back and as far as I could tell we were dead even this time, pulling up just past the far sidelines. The throb in my leg was feeling unhealthy. We had done this for the past thirty minutes.

"We're even on that last run," said Sanchez. "So I say we call it a morning. Baby steps. This is your first day back in training. Want to take it easy on the leg, especially a man your age."

"You're only a month younger."

"Lot can happen in a month."

"True."



We sat on a bench wet with dew. The mist was all pervasive, leaving nothing untouched. I enjoyed the solitude it allowed.

“You going back with me to San Diego?” I asked. “To try out?”

He laughed, and kept his dark eyes on the joggers. “I wasn’t the one they asked to come out of retirement.”

“You could make it.”

“I was good, but not that good,” he said. The mist was dispersing and more light was getting through. There were also more joggers now, three males, but these were not as interesting to look at.

Sanchez checked his watch. “Most people with respectable jobs have to get going now.”

“Luckily, neither of us have respectable jobs.”

“True,” said Sanchez. “So who do you think did this girl?”

“Don’t know,” I said. “That’s the part I’m working on.”

“Isn’t it just your job to get the kid off? And to give a damn who really killed the girl?”

“But I do give a damn who killed her.”

“You always do. But you shouldn’t. It’s not your



job, at least not on this case. Your job is to spring the kid before he goes to trial.”

I said nothing.

“I know,” said Sanchez, “I know. You’ll do it your way.”

I smiled brightly. “Exactly.”

## 8.

I was sitting outside Huntington High in my car, on a stretch of road that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. My windows were down and the engine was off; a cool breeze wafted through the car. Life was good at the Beach.

It was three o’clock and school was just getting out. High schoolers nowadays are younger and smaller than I remember, although the occasional curvy creature sashayed by. Most of the girls wore unflattering jeans that rode low on the hip, showed a lot of tanned flesh and a surprising amount of lower back tattoos. The high school boys were spiked,



pierced and dyed. Those who weren't natural blonds, wanted to be. Huntington High probably had a very popular surfing club. My old high school in Inglewood did not have a surfing club. We had metal detectors and hired security that were referred to as The Staff.

More than one Mercedes whipped out of the student parking lot, followed by nineteen different Mustangs, and twenty-two of the new Volkswagen bugs. I saw exactly seventeen near-fatal car accidents in the span of forty-five seconds.

The less fortunate, and those not of driving age, waited in line and boarded the various yellow school buses. Other students walked, some passing my Cobra. I was promptly ignored, being an Old Man, and Not Very Interesting.

I didn't blame them, although my ego was crushed a little.

All in all, I saw a fair share of Asians and Hispanics, but no blacks.

Teachers on duty did their best to clear out the lingering students from the front halls. The buses pulled away. And the potential smash-up derby that was the student parking lot cleared away shockingly fast and without a single incident. I waited another



ten minutes, then left my car there on the hill, and headed up to the administration building at the front of the school.

The building, and much of the school, was old cinder block, bright with a fresh coat of powder blue. A very school-like color. I stepped into the mostly empty admin office. There was a receptionist behind her desk, pen in hand and working furiously. She was young and pretty, probably a school senior. I stepped up to the front desk.

"Hello," I said.

She jumped. She had been writing a personal letter, probably when she should have been working. Should I be tempted to read her musings, she quickly covered the letter with her folded hands. But not well enough. I saw the words: *asshole*, *love* and *booty* used repeatedly. Further proof that there's nothing so sweet in life as love's young dream.

When she had recovered enough to speak, she said, "Can I help you?"

I smiled engagingly and showed her my investigator license.

A hell of a picture.



“Doesn’t look like you.”

“It’s me, I swear.” I struck a similar pose, turning my head a little to the side, and blasted her with the same full wattage smile. “See?”

She shrugged. “The guy in the picture is cuter.”

I wasn’t sure if I should be offended. After all, it was *me* in the picture, and she was calling *that* guy cute.

“So you’re a private investigator?”

“Yep.”

She nodded, but her interest was already waning.

“I give autographs, too,” I said.

“I don’t want your autograph.”

“Of course not. Who would I see about gaining permission to access your school?”

“You need to speak with Mrs. Williams.”

“Great.”

“Let me see if she’s in.”

“That would be fantastic.”

“Are you always this cheery?”

“Yes!”

“Hold on.”

“Super!”



She removed herself from her post, snatched up her letter, and stepped down the hall and peeked into one of the open doors. I sat down in one of the plastic chairs lining the wall and made it a point to look cheery as hell. The office was covered with senior year group photographs, dating back to the forties. The photos were lined end to end and circled the room above the windows.

"Mrs. Williams will see you now, Mr. Knighthorse."

"Keen."

"Keen?"

"I was running out of superlatives."

9.

The brass nameplate on Mrs. Williams's desk designated her as vice principal in charge of discipline. Ah, she would be the one the students hated and likened to Hitler, as all students did in all high schools to any vice principal in charge of



discipline.

One difference.

She couldn't have been prettier.

Mrs. Williams stood from behind her desk and shook my hand vigorously. She gestured for me to sit and I did. She was young, perhaps the same age as me. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders and I had the impression she had recently set it free from a tight bun. Of course, the three bobby pins sitting next to her computer mouse were a dead giveaway.

I am, of course, a detective.

Mrs. Williams wore a white blouse with a wide collar that fanned across her collar bones. Her face was thin and pleasantly narrow. Of course, the intelligence behind her emerald eyes were the dead giveaway that she was something more than just a pretty face. A lot more. The eyes were arresting and disarming, true. But, good Christ, they were penetratingly cold. Chips of ice. She leveled them at me now and I squirmed in my seat.

"You seem a bit preoccupied, Mr. Knighthorse," said Mrs. Williams. "You must have a lot on your mind."



Her voice was a little husky, and a lot of sexy. The chest beneath her blouse seemed full, and heaved slightly with each breath.

"I was just wishing I had had you as my vice principal in high school."

She did not blush, and her gaze did not flick away from mine. "What are you implying?"

"You are a looker, Mrs. Williams."

She cracked a smile, and placed one hand carefully on top of the other. I could see her wedding band clearly. A plain gold band.

"A looker?"

"Means I think you're swell."

"Lord. Is this some sort of come-on line?"

"You're married, and I'm happily dating the love of my life. I am simply warming you up to get what I need."

"At least you're honest about your intentions."

"That, and I think you're a looker."

"What do you need, Knighthorse?"

"What happened to the *mister*?"

"Anyone who calls me a looker loses that formal courtesy."



"Is that a fancy way of saying I'm warming up to you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Because I need access to your school."

"What sort of access?"

Behind her the blinds were open, and I had a shot of an open quad. From here, Mrs. Williams could see much of the school. It was a good view for the vice principal of discipline to have.

"I'm here to investigate the murder of Amanda Peterson," I said. Her eyes did not waiver. I forged on. "To do so I will need to speak to witnesses."

"There are no witnesses to Amanda's murder here."

"But there are those here who could provide me some assistance, including yourself."

She leaned forward and looked down at her ring. Her smooth face had the beginnings of crow's feet. She used her thumb to toy with the ring, spinning it around her narrow finger. I wondered if perhaps she was regretting the ring was on, and thus losing an opportunity to be with yours truly. Or perhaps not.

"I'll give you access, but not during school hours, and no speaking with students."



“Agreed.”

“Now what do you need from me?”

“Was Derrick the only African-American in school?”

“No. There are three others. The papers were incorrect.”

“Was he a good student?”

“Exceptional. He carried a 4.0 GPA. Was on his way to USC for a full football scholarship. The world was his oyster.”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t call USC an oyster, Mrs. Williams. Maybe a parasitic tiger mussel that’s currently infesting the Great Lakes.”

“Nice imagery. UCLA fan?”

“And their best fullback.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I can see that. You are a big boy.”

“Was Derrick capable of killing?” I asked.

She spread her hands flat on the desk and smiled at me. “Derrick was strong and excelled at a violent sport. Physically he could have done it. If you are inquiring about his psyche, you are barking up the wrong tree. Derrick and I rarely crossed paths. He kept his nose clean, as my father would say.”



“And being in charge of discipline, you would know.”

“I would.”

“Can you tell me anything about Amanda?”

“She was more trouble. But petty stuff, really. Nothing serious.”

“Like what?”

“Skipping class, smoking on school grounds.”

“She and Derrick an item?”

“Yes. The whole school knew that. He was our star athlete.”

“And black in a nearly all-white school. Did he ever have any problems with racism?”

“As far as I knew, he was wildly popular among his fellow class mates.”

“Amanda was in the school band?”

She paused, then shrugged. “I do not know. Maybe.”

“I was told she quit. Any reason why?”

“Refer to my prior comment.”

I didn't like the answer. Mrs. Williams probably had access to Amanda's file, and certainly would have read it since the murder. Band membership would have been in the official records.



“And Knighthorse,” she said, “I am definitely not the kind of principal you wish you had in high school. Students are never, *ever* pleased to be sitting where you are now.”

I smiled. “I’m not a student. And it’s not a bad view from here, Mrs. Williams.”

Most women would have blushed. She did not. I left her office.

## 10.

The campus was sprawling and clean. The hallways were lined with yellow lockers. Most sported combination locks, although a few were padded with locks of considerable fortitude. These were blocks of titanium padlock perfection that were engineered to protect far more important things than school books and pencils.

My footsteps echoed along the now-empty hallway. Just a half hour earlier it had been filled to overflowing with students. Within these hallowed



lockered halls, plans for parties had been made, drug deals had gone down, students had been harassed, asses pinched and thoughts of teenage suicide pondered.

In the police report, Derrick claimed to have been working out at the school gym at the time of the murder. He had no alibi. His football coach often left him alone with the keys, trusting Derrick. It was against school rules, but Derrick had proven himself to be reliable, and after all he was the star athlete. The coach probably loved him like a son.

The coach was the last to see Derrick. That had been at 5:45 p.m. on the evening of the murder. The coroner's report placed the time of murder at 7:00 p.m. According to the arrest report, the detectives figured Derrick left the school weight room shortly after the coach had left and proceeded to ambush the girlfriend he loved and slaughtered her in front of her home. His vehicle had no trace of her blood. There were no wounds on Derrick's hands or arms. Other than the murder weapon found in his backseat there was nothing to link him to the murder.

The murder weapon was enough.

Had he not blundered and forgotten about the



murder weapon, Derrick would have pulled off one amazingly clean murder. I've now had a chance to see the crime scene photos. The murder was definitely *not* clean.

Derrick, of course, claimed he was at the school weight room until 7:30 p.m. that night, like he was every night. A routine that anyone could have caught onto and used against him.

No one believed Derrick's story. Except his defense attorney Charlie Brown, although he was being paid handsomely to believe his story.

And me. But I was not being handsomely paid. I hate it when that happens.

I moved beyond the hallway, beyond the brick walled central quad, beyond what was probably the school cafeteria, beyond the gym, and toward the athletic department.

It was spring, and so there was no football to be practiced, which was why Derrick had been lifting weights after school, rather than working out with his team. Instead, it was baseball and track season. Beyond a chain-linked fence I could see a varsity baseball game getting under way. Parents and some students filled the small bleachers. To the



north of the baseball field was a track field, and it was a beehive of activity. I watched a young girl sprint for about thirty yards and leap through the air, landing gracelessly in a cloud of dirt. She dusted herself off, and then headed back for another leap.

I followed a paved pathway, bigger than a sidewalk, but not big enough to be called a road. The pathway skirted the softball field and headed toward a group of buildings lined with doors. One of the doors was open, and inside I could see shining new gym equipment.

My old high school did not have shining new gym equipment. It had well-used and badly damaged gym equipment. In fact, we just had free weights and a few squat racks, come to think of it.

But it had been enough, if used correctly and religiously. Both of which I had done.

I stepped into the doorway and peaked in, almost expecting to see a membership desk. What a spread. Gleaming chrome equipment covered the entire room. Mirrors were everywhere. Techno rock pumped through loud speakers situated in every corner. Boys and a handful of girls were in there, all taking their workouts very seriously. I was completely



ignored. In fact, there seemed to be a melancholy mood to the place, despite the rhythmic pounding of the dance music.

I spied some offices in the back and headed that way, passing two kids lifting an impressive amount on the bench. I calculated the weight. They were benching almost three hundred pounds.

Not bad for a kid.

I came to the first office and knew I had hit the jackpot. The sign on the closed door said *Coach*.

Only the egocentricity of a football coach, in an entire department of other coaches, went by *Coach* alone.

I knocked on the closed door. Doing so, the door creaked open, and immediately I sensed something wrong. Very wrong.

Coach was a big man, and from what I could tell he had taken a bullet to the side of the head. Blood and brain matter sprayed the east side of his office. A revolver was still in his hands. The blood had not congealed, and was dripping steadily from the wound in his open head. His eyes were wide with the shock and horror of what he had done to himself.



Music thumped loudly into the office.  
No one had even heard the shot.

11.

Sanchez and I were working out at a 24 Hour Fitness in Huntington Beach. It was mid-day, and the gym was quiet. I had worked up a hell of a sweat, and was dripping all over the place. Sanchez didn't sweat; at least not like a real man. And I let him know it again.

"I save the sweating for the bedroom," he said, finishing off his third and final set of military presses. "Women like that."

"You married your high school sweetheart. You don't know shit about what women want."

"Fine," he said, wiping down the machine. "Danielle likes it when I sweat. Shows her I take my lovemaking seriously. Besides, Danielle is a lot of woman."

"Yes," I said, "she is."



We moved over to the incline presses. Together we added weight until we ran out of plates.

"Place is going to hell," said Sanchez, looking around, then swiping two forty-fives from another bench.

"Yes, but it's cheap. And apparently open twenty-four hours."

"You sound like a goddamn commercial." He handed me one of the plates and we pushed each into place. The bar looked very unstable and heavily overloaded. "We're attracting attention again."

I had eased down onto the incline bench. In the mirror I could see that two or three young guys, including some gym trainers, were now watching us. I ignored them. So did Sanchez, who spotted me by standing on a steel platform. The forty-five pound bar was sagging. Weight clanked as I went through my twelve reps. I focused on the Chargers training camp, which was coming up soon. This motivated me, pushed me to lift more and work harder. I focused on looking good for Cindy. This motivated me as well. Only on the last rep did Sanchez lend some help. Then he guided the barbell into place.

"Didn't need your help on the twelfth," I said.



"Sure you didn't," he said.

A voice said: "Hey, man, how much weight is that?"

We both turned. He was a surfer. Bleached hair and some minor muscle tone. He had a piercing in his nose, and some idiotic Chinese pictographs up and down his arm.

"You too stupid to do the math?" asked Sanchez. He turned to me. "Kids nowadays."

"Kids nowadays," I added sagely.

The surfer looked at the weight we were hefting and decided that he would not take offense. He left. Good decision.

Sanchez did his twelve reps, and to be a dick I helped him with the last two. After two more sets each, we sat down on opposing benches and sipped from our water bottles.

"He leave a suicide note?" asked Sanchez.

"Nothing," I said. "But he had been fired earlier that day."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "He'd been taking a lot of shit about leaving Derrick alone on the night of the murder."

"Hell of a thing to be fired over."



“Uh huh.”

“Papers say he was a hell of a coach,” said Sanchez.

“Three CIF championships.”

“Why do you think he popped himself?”

“Hard to say,” I said. “Detective Hanson tells me the man was divorced earlier in the year. They say divorced men are the highest risk for suicide.”

“Thank you for that useless bit of fucking trivia.”

I ignored him, and continued.

“Add to that your best athlete being accused of a heinous murder, and compound it with losing your job....”

I shrugged again.

“You shrug a lot for a detective,” said Sanchez.

“I know. It’s part of the job description.”

We moved over to the squat rack. We slammed on as many forty-fives as we could find, then some thirty-fives.

“You know,” said Sanchez, “people here think we’re freaks. Maybe we should go to a real gym.”

“I like it here,” I said, hunkering down under the bar and placing my feet exactly the width of my



shoulders. "Besides, it's open twenty-four hours."

Sanchez shook his head.

## 12.

He was watching me knowingly with those nondescript eyes. Nondescript only in color, that is. Everything else about them was, well, very *non-nondescript*.

*He knows what you're thinking.*

The words flashed across my mind, along with the popular Christmas tune, and a chill went through me.

I was having another Big Mac. Or three. He was drinking another coffee. Lukewarm and black. Just like I like my women. Kidding.

"So have you told anyone about me?" he asked.

"That I speak to God in a McDonald's?"

"Yes."

"Everyone I know. Hell, even people I don't know. In fact, I just told the sixteen-year-old gal working



behind the counter that I was meeting with God in a few minutes and could she hurry.”

“And what did she say?”

“Said she was going to call the cops.”

Jack shook his head and sipped some more of his coffee. I noticed he still had the same streaks of dirt along his forehead.

“So your answer is no,” he said.

“Of course it’s no, and if you were God you would know that.”

He said nothing; I said nothing. A very old man had sat in a booth next to us. The old man smiled at Jack, and Jack smiled back. The man leaned over and spoke to us.

“I’m coming home soon,” he said.

“Yes,” said Jack. “You are.”

“I’m ready,” said the old man, and sat back in his seat and proceeded to consume a gooey cinnamon roll.

“What was that about?” I asked Jack, not bothering to lower my voice. Hell, the man was as old as the hills, no way he could overhear us.

“He’s going to die tonight,” said Jack, rather nonchalantly, I thought.



"Well," I said after a moment, "his heart could only take so many cinnamon rolls."

Jack looked at me and sipped his coffee carefully, cradling the paper cup in both hands. He said nothing.

"Why do you drink with both hands?" I finally asked.

"I enjoy the feel of the warm cup."

"And why do you look at me so closely?"

"I enjoy soaking in the details of a moment."

We had gone over this before.

"Live in the moment," I repeated. "And all that other bullshit."

"Yes," he said. "And all that other bullshit."

"There is no past and there is no future," I continued, on a holy roll.

"Exactly."

"Only the moment," I said.

"You're getting it, Jim. Good."

"No, I'm not, actually. You see, Jack, I know for a fact that there is a past because a young girl got slaughtered outside her house. In the past."

"You have taken a personal interest in the case, I see."



“And now someone has killed themselves. A coach at the same high school—but, of course, you know all of this.”

Jack sat unmovingly, watching me closely.

“I saw his brains on the wall and I saw the hole in his head,” I continued. “Damn straight this case has gotten personal.”

We were silent. I could hear myself breathing, my breath running ragged in my throat. I had gotten worked up.

“You know, it’s damn hard having a conversation with someone who claims to know everything,” I said, concluding.

“I never claimed to know everything. You assume I know everything.”

“Well, do you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, fuck me. There you go.”

“But you’re forgetting something,” said Jack patiently. He was always patient, whoever the hell he was.

“No,” I said. “Don’t tell me.”

“Yes,” he said, telling me anyway. “You, too, know



everything.”

We had gone over this before, dozens of times.

“The answers are always within you,” he said.

“Would have been nice to know during algebra tests.”

“You knew the answers then, just as you know them now.”

“Bullshit.”

He smiled serenely.

“If you say so,” he said.

“Fine,” I said, “So how is it that I know everything, when, in fact, I don’t feel like I know shit?”

“First of all, you know everything because you are a part of me,” he said.

“Part of a bum?”

“Sure,” he said. “We are all one. You, me and everyone you see.”

“So I know the answers because you know the answers,” I said.

“Something like that,” he said. “Mostly, you know the answers because the answers have already been revealed to you. Would you like an example?”

“Please.”

“What’s the Atomic symbol for gold?”



"Wait, I know this one." I rubbed my head. "Fuck. I don't remember. Wait, I'll take a stab at it: *G-O*?"

"No, it's *A-U*."

"At least I was close."

"What's the Atomic symbol for gold?" he asked again.

"*A-U*," I said without thinking. "Wait, I only know that because you just told me."

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, I didn't know a few seconds ago."

"Are you living now, or are you living a few seconds ago?"

"I'm living now, of course, but if I didn't have you here to give me the answer—and by the way, I'm not convinced *A-U* is the right answer—I still wouldn't know the answer."

"Shall we try another example?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, "but this time don't give me the freakin' answer."

"What's the Atomic symbol for Mercury?"

"No idea," I said.

"None?"

"Nope. *M-E*?"

"No."



“See, told you I didn’t know the answer.”

“You were right,” he said. “And I was wrong, apparently.”

“Fuck. I’m going to go look it up tonight on the internet, aren’t I?”

He shrugged.

“And then when I do, I’ll have the answer.”

He took a sip from his coffee.

“But I still don’t have the answer now, but I will soon,” I said.

He yawned a little.

“And since time doesn’t exist, that means I always had the answer.”

He shrugged again and drank the rest of his coffee.

“I’m still not buying any of this shit,” I said.

According to homicide investigators, Amanda Peterson had been returning home from a high



school party on the night of her murder.

Returning home at 7:30 p.m.

Isn't that about the time most parties get started? Perhaps she was going home to fetch something she had forgotten. Perhaps not. Either way, I sniffed a clue here.

Thanks to Mrs. Williams, vice principal extraordinaire, I now had a small list of Amanda Peterson's known friends from high school. To help facilitate my investigation, Mrs. Williams gave me the home addresses to the three names on the list. I thought that was a hell of a nice gesture on her part, and reminded myself to repay her with one of my most winning smiles.

The first house on the list was a massive colonial with a pitched roof, numerous gables and a wide portico. I pulled into the wrap-around driveway.

The doorbell was answered by a cute teenage girl wearing matching sweatshirt and sweatpants that said UCLA. A girl after my own heart. She was blond, pretty, and quite small, no more than five foot two. Her big blue eyes were filled with intelligence.

"Can I speak with Rebecca Garner?" I asked.



"You got her."

"My name's Jim Knighthorse and I'm a private investigator."

She smiled broadly, and her eyes widened with pleasure. I turned around to see who the hell she was smiling at. Turns out it was me.

"A real private investigator," she said, clapping.

"In the flesh."

She turned somber on a dime. "You're here about Amanda."

"Yes."

"Mrs. Williams called and asked if it was okay to give out our address. So I knew you'd be coming by."

"Are your parents home?"

"No, I'm alone, so maybe we should talk out here." She stepped through the doorway and shut the door behind her. "My parents said it would be okay for me to talk to you."

She led me to a wooden rocking bench facing the street. Rebecca, utilizing the full use of the bench, rocked us back and forth. A minute later, I was feeling seasick. I stopped the rocking.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm just a little nervous. I've



never talked to a real live detective before."

"Well, you're doing a great job of it so far." I pointed at the UCLA logo. "Obviously you're highly intelligent and wise for your age if you intend to go there."

She looked down. "My dad went there."

"He must be highly intelligent and wise himself."

"He's a doctor. Intelligent, but I don't know about wise. Anyway, he's never home, so I really wouldn't know."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"You're a junior?"

"Yes."

We were silent. She started rocking again, and I put my foot out to stop it again. She ducked her head and said, "Oops."

"Were you with Amanda on the last day she was alive?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about the party."

"We got there around seven. Amanda and I went together because Derrick was working out at the gym, as usual. He's so boring. He never likes to



party. All he ever did was work out, play sports and hang out with Amanda."

"Did he love Amanda?"

She shifted her weight. The bench creaked slightly. I kept my foot firmly planted. No more swinging today. Rebecca looked away, brushing aside a blond strand that had stuck to her shiny lip gloss.

"Oh, yeah. He loved her a lot."

"You think he killed her?"

"No."

"You say that pretty quick."

"He loved her so much. He would have done anything for her."

"Was Amanda seeing someone else?"

"No. But at the time, there was another guy who wouldn't leave her alone."

"Who?"

"Chris, the guy who threw the party. He's always liked her."

"Did she fool around with Chris?"

"No. She never cheated on Derrick. They really did love each other. It was sweet watching the two of them together. They were always together and



holding each other and kissing.”

“Tell me about Chris.”

“He’s a senior. Used to play football, but got kicked off the team because he’s an asshole. You like football?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I don’t understand it. Just a bunch of boys jumping on each other.”

“That about sums it up.”

“They kicked him off the team because he was a partier and did drugs and probably never showed up for practice.”

“That’ll do it.”

“He always had it pretty bad for Amanda. I mean, you’ve seen her picture. She is—was—so pretty. A lot of guys at school liked her.”

“Especially Chris.”

“Especially Chris. He hated Derrick. Hated him.”

“Why?”

She looked at me as if I were the beach idiot. “Because Derrick had his girl, and because Derrick was black. He was always making comments to Amanda.”



“Racially insensitive comments?” I offered.

“Yes,” she said. “Those kinds of comments. Everywhere she went, he let her know it. It was horrible.”

“Then why go to Chris’s party?”

She shrugged. “It’s high school, it was the only party being thrown that night. Plus Amanda said that Chris personally invited her and had apologized for being such a jerk.”

“So what happened at the party?”

“Chris was drunk when we got there. He was being a real dick. Usual Chris, you know.”

“Oh, I know.”

“You know him?”

“No, I’m just being supportive.”

She smiled and shook her head. “You’re kind of funny.”

“Kind of.”

“So anyway, we get to the party and almost immediately Chris hits on Amanda. You know, puts his arm around her and tries to kiss her, just being an asshole.”

“What did Amanda do?”

“She pushed him away.”



"How did Chris react?"

"Same old shit. Put her down, put Derrick down."

She grinned. "Derrick's already kicked Chris's ass once for giving Amanda a hard time."

"Sounds like Chris needs another ass kicking."

"Hard to do that from jail."

I nodded. "So what happened next?"

"Amanda was pretty upset and left the party. I offered to go with her, but she refused, saying she wanted to be alone."

I didn't add that if Rebecca had been with Amanda, that Amanda stood a better chance of being alive today. Then again, there might be two dead teenage girls instead of one.

"That was the last time you saw her?"

She was looking away, blinking hard. "Yes."

"After Amanda left, what did Chris do?"

"I don't know. He took off in his car."

*Oh?*

"Did you tell the police this?" I asked.

"The police never came by."

"The police assume Derrick did the killing," I said.

"I don't blame them," she said. "But I think



someone set Derrick up.”

“I do too.”

“Someone who doesn’t like him very much,” she said.

“I agree. Where does Chris live?”

She told me, and I gave her my card.

“Nice picture,” she said.

“Like I said, you are obviously a bright and intelligent young lady.”

I left her rocking alone on the bench swing.

## 14.

According to Rebecca, Chris’s house was three streets down. Look for the broken garage door and red mailbox. Turns out the house was seven streets down. She was close. Okay, not really.

There was no one home, so I waited in my car, which really was my home away from home. I had wasted more time sitting in it than I care to dwell on. One of these days I was going to wise up and keep



an emergency novel in the glove box for just such an occasion. I turned on the radio and listened to various sports radio programs. There had once been a time when I was the subject of sports radio. At least locally. Maybe again someday. I looked at my watch. An hour of my life had passed. I turned off the radio and put my seat back. The police hadn't investigated Amanda's murder very thoroughly. That much was obvious. They were confident the killer was Derrick. They had no reason to believe otherwise, and they did not look for a reason. Looking for a reason made their job harder than it had to be, especially when a kid with a knife was looking them straight in the face. According to the homicide report, an anonymous caller had tipped the police that the knife was in the backseat of Derrick's car. Convenient.

Two hours later, after a fitful nap, a silver Corvette squealed around the corner and bounded into the driveway. A lanky kid hopped out and stared at me.

More than ready for a little action, I leapt out of my car and, perhaps a little too eagerly, approached him. The kid backed up a step.



“Chris Randall?” I asked.

He was about an inch shorter than me, about half the width of me, and certainly not as good looking. Not everyone can be me.

“Who are you?” he asked.

I told him.

“You have a badge or something?” he asked. There was mild humor in his voice, and a whole lot of cockiness. I’ve been told the same.

“Or something.” I showed him my investigator’s license. “Can I talk to you about Amanda Peterson?”

His shoulders bunched at the mention of her name. He recovered and walked around to the Vette’s trunk and popped it open with the push of a button on his keychain. He reached inside and pulled out a ratty backpack. His hands were shaking. When he spoke again, the humor was gone from his voice, although there was still an underlying tone of arrogance. My question had unsettled him. “Sure. Go ahead.”

“She was last seen leaving your party.”

He slung the pack over a bony shoulder. “Probably should have stayed, huh?”

“Probably. You were also seen leaving the party



shortly thereafter.”

“Yeah, so.”

I smiled broadly, just your friendly neighborhood detective. “So where’d you go?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Have you talked to the police yet?”

“No.”

“Then they would be interested to know that prior to Amanda leaving the party that you had verbally abused her and made racially insensitive remarks about her boyfriend Derrick.”

He looked at me some more, then shrugged. “I went on a beer run.”

“Where?”

“Corner of Eighth and Turner.” He leaned a hip against the Vette’s fender. The mild amusement was back. His eyes almost twinkled. “You think I killed her?”

I shrugged. “Just doing my job.”

“They found the knife in Derrick’s car.”

“Knives can be planted,” I said.

“Why would I kill her?”

“You tell me.”

“I wouldn’t,” he said. “I liked her a lot.”



"Maybe you were jealous."

"Of the nigger?"

"Of the African-American. Yes. He had Amanda, and you didn't."

"Then why not kill him? Doesn't make sense."

"No," I said. "Sometimes it doesn't."

"Well, fuck you." He turned and headed up to his front door.

"Have a good day," I said. "Study hard."

Without turning, he flipped me the bird.

Kids these days. They grow up so fast.

## 15.

Sanchez and I were in the backroom of the Kwik Mart on Eighth and Turner. We had convinced the reluctant owner, a small Vietnamese man named Phan, to allow us to review his security tapes on the night of Amanda's murder. We informed him that he had sold alcohol to a minor, and that we could prove it, but in exchange for his cooperation, he would



receive only a warning. He obliged.

When Phan was done setting up the VCR, he handed me the remote control. The store owner left us alone, mumbling under his breath.

"You speak Vietnamese?" asked Sanchez.

"Nope."

"What's the chances he's praising us for our diligent investigative work?"

"Slim to none."

We both leaned back in a worn leather love seat, the only seating available in the back room.

"Just because we're in a love seat," said Sanchez, "doesn't mean I love you."

"Sure you do," I said. "You just don't know it yet."

I had the remote control and was fast forwarding through the day of her murder. In the bottom right corner was the time.

At seven thirty I let the tape play in real time. Sanchez put his hands behind his head and stretched.

"Should have brought some popcorn," he said.

"They have some in the store. I think Phuong might be inclined to give us some on the house."



"His name was Phan, and that would be abuse of power. We would be on the take."

"For some popcorn, it would be worth it."

"But only if buttered."

We watched the comings and goings of many different people of many different nationalities, most of them buying cigarettes and Lotto tickets, all slapping their money down on the counter. The camera angled down from over the clerk's shoulder, giving us a clear shot of each customer's face.

"Oh, she's cute," said Sanchez.

"The brunette?"

"No, the blond."

"What is it with you and brunettes, anyway?" he asked.

"Brunettes are beautiful. Blonds are pretty. There's a difference."

"You're blond."

"There always an exception to every rule."

At seven thirty-eight a young man approached the counter carrying two cases of Miller Genuine Draft. Tall and lanky. The owner studied him carefully, then shrugged, and took the kid's money.

"That our boy?" asked Sanchez.



"Yes."

"The time of death was seven thirty?"

"Yes," I said.

"Kid can't be in two places at once."

"No," I said.

"The kid didn't do her."

"No, he didn't."

I stopped the tape and we sat back on the sofa.

"Which means someone was waiting for her at her house," I said. "So how did this someone know Amanda would be leaving the party early?"

We were silent. Two great investigative minds at work.

"Don't know," said Sanchez.

"Me neither," I said.

"Maybe she was followed home."

"Or just a random killing."

Sanchez looked at me and grinned. "Seems like you've got your work cut out for you, kiddo."



It was a late April morning in Huntington Beach, California, which meant, of course, that the weather was perfect.

Why the hell would anyone want to live anywhere else?

I was sitting at my desk, reviewing a sampling of the San Diego Chargers playbook, a sampling that Rob, Cindy's brother, had just faxed to me. Rob let it be known that this was Highly Classified material, and that his job was on the line. I reminded him that I was boffing his sister, and that practically made me family. He told me that he never wanted to hear the words *boffing* and *his sister* in the same sentence again and that he was going to get drunk at our wedding and make a nuisance of himself. I told him there would be no wedding because his sister wasn't marriage material. He told me to fuck off, and hung up.

The plays were complex, but not rocket science. The majority faxed to me involved the fullback position, which was my position. I studied them with interest, making my own notes along the borders.

And that's when the guy with the gun showed up.



I heard the door open, and when I looked up the Browning 9mm was pointed at my head. I hate when that happens.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"Shut the hell up, fuck nut."

"Fuck nut. The one nut Home Depot doesn't carry."

The man was probably in his fifties, gray hair sleeked back with a lot of gel. He wore a gold hoop in his left ear, pirate-like. Indeed, in his misspent youth he probably always wanted to be a pirate or a buccaneer, only I didn't really know the difference between the two. Had it been fashionable, he would have worn a patch over his eye. His face, all in all, was hideous, heavily pock-marked, sunken and sallow. The gun never wavered from my face.

"What's the difference between a pirate and a buccaneer?" I asked.

"Shut the fuck up."

"I don't know either. Nothing to be ashamed of."

His eyes, for all intents and purposes, were dead. Lifeless. Lacking sympathy, compassion, or



caring. The eyes of a killer, rapist, suicidal bomber, genocidal dictator. His eyes made me nervous, to say the least. Eyes like that were capable of anything. Anything. They kill your family, your babies, your children, your husbands and wives. I only knew one other man who had eyes like that, and he was my father.

The Browning never wavered from my face. "You're working on a case," the man said.

"I'm working on a few cases. It's what I do. See that filing cabinet behind me, it's full of pending cases. The shelf on the bottom is full of my closed cases."

There was a heavy silence.

"You're going to call me a *fuck nut* again aren't you?" I said. "It feels like a *fuck nut* moment, doesn't it?"

He pulled the trigger. My ear exploded with pain. I tried not to flinch, although I might have, dammit. If he had chosen that moment to call me a *fuck nut* I might have missed it...due to the excessive ringing in my head.

The bullet had punctured a picture frame behind me. I heard the glass tinkling down. I did not know yet



which picture it had been, although it would have been one of the featured articles about yours truly.

That's when I felt something drip onto my shoulder. I touched my ear. Blood. The bullet grazed my lobe.

"You shot me," I said.

"We want you off the Derrick Booker case," he said. "Or the next shot won't miss."

"But you didn't miss. You shot my earlobe. Get it straight."

"I heard you would be a smart ass."

"Sometimes I am a smart ass. Now I'm just pissed. You shot me."

"We meet again and I kill you."

"You shot me," I said. "We meet again and I owe you one."

He grinned and proceeded to shoot out five or six framed pictures behind me. I didn't move. The cacophony of tinkling glass and resounding gunshots filled my head and office.

He pointed the gun at my forehead and said, "Bang, fuck nut."

He backed out of my office and shut the door.

And I went back to my playbook. My ears were



ringing and my earlobe stung.

The fuck nut.

17.

On the way home from the office I stopped by the local liquor store and bought a bottle of Scotch and some Oreos. The Scotch was for getting drunk, and the Oreos were for gaining weight. At two-hundred and ten pounds I was still too small for an NFL fullback.

Cindy was away tonight at UC Santa Barbara's School of Anthropology giving a guest lecture on what it means to be human.

Hell, he thought, I could have saved everyone a trip out to Santa Barbara. Being human meant walking into any liquor store from here to Nantucket and buying a bottle of Scotch and a bag of Oreos. Let's see the chimps pull that one off.

Cindy Darwin was a favorite on the guest lecture circuit. Any anthropology department worth their salt wanted Cindy Darwin's ruminations on the subject of



evolution. Really, she was their messiah, their prophet and savior.

She had wanted me to come with her up the coast, but I had declined, stating there were some leads I needed to follow.

Which was bullshit, really. True I had made a few phone calls prior to leaving the office, but I could have done those on my cell. I wasn't proud that I had fibbed to the love of my life. The only lead I needed to follow was my nose to the scotch and Oreos.

Cindy did not know the extent of my drinking. And if it meant fibbing to keep it that way, then fine. I drank alone and in my apartment. I harmed no one but myself and my liver.

I lived in a five story yellow stucco apartment building that sat on the edge of the Pacific Coast Highway, and overlooked Huntington State Beach. I parked in my allotted spot, narrowly missing the wooden pole that separated my spot from the car next to mine. And for training purposes only, I hauled my ass up five flights of stairs. The bag of Oreos and the bottle of scotch were heavy on my mind.

Those, and the prick who took a pot shot at my



earlobe.

Inside my apartment, surrounded by shelves of paperback thrillers and my own rudimentary artwork, I tossed my keys and wallet next to the stove, grabbed my secret stash of cigarettes and pulled up a chair on my balcony.

I had a wonderful view. And should probably be paying a lot more for this apartment, but the landlord was a Bruin fan and he appreciated my efforts to beat SC through the years. So he gave me a hell of a deal, and in return he often showed up at my apartment to drink and relive the glory days. I didn't mind reliving the glory days. The glory days were all I had.

Now I hoped to make new glory days with the Chargers.

We'll see.

I opened the bag of Oreos and commenced my training, bulking up with one Oreo after another. I washed them down with swigs from the bottle of scotch, as a real man should.

When I was tired of the Oreos, after about the thirtieth, I took out a cigarette and tried like hell to give myself lung cancer.



I watched the ocean. Flat and black in the night. The lights of Catalina twinkled beyond a low haze. Further out the lights of a half dozen oil rigs blinked. And somewhere below the water was a cold world filled with life. The secret world, where sharks ate seals, where manta rays glided, where whales sang their beautiful songs.

Sometimes I wanted to jump into that cold world and never emerge, especially after the destruction of my leg.

That's when the drinking began. Few knew about my drinking. I did it alone and I did it hard, and I did it until I could drink no more. Until I could forget what was stolen from me by one fluke play by a son-of-a-bitch who chop blocked me.

My goddamn leg had been throbbing ever since Sanchez and I had been running sprints every morning for the past week. I was a step slower. I could feel it within me. Sluggish. Maybe too slow for the NFL.

And I had a goddamn kid in jail for murder one. And he was innocent. Because if he was guilty the asshole with the slicked back gray hair would not have felt it necessary to pierce my ear with a 9mm.



I had to stop drinking. I had to reclaim what was mine. And the smoking didn't help, either.

But on this night I continued to drink. And smoke. And eat the Oreos. Gluttony at its fucking worst.

The lights continued to blink on the ocean.

The night was slipping away with each swallow from the bottle and hit from the cigarette. I heard music and voices coming from Main Street below my apartment. Lots of laughter.

I didn't feel like laughing.

## 18.

It was Sunday evening. Cindy and I were at my place. We were waiting for Restaurant Express to deliver our food. I don't cook, unless you count cereal or PB&J's. The last meal I cooked, an experimental spaghetti with too much of everything from my spice rack, was promptly emptied into the garbage disposal. We considered my cooking a failure and decided that I was more useful in other areas.



We were sitting next to each other on my leather couch in my living room, with my blinds open to my patio. We had a good view of clear skies and open water. Bob Seger crooned in the background. Our knees touched. When our knees touched I usually became excited. I was excited now, and that was nothing new. Cindy had brought her orange Pomeranian named Ginger. Ginger was likely to pee on me when she got excited. Unfortunately she got excited every time she saw me. I have learned to make it a point for her to see me first outside.

“So am I still useful in other areas?” I asked Cindy now.

“Are you harkening back to what we have come to think of as The Great Spaghetti Debacle?”

“Yes.”

Cindy was dressed in jean shorts and a yellow tank top. Both showed off her naturally wonderful tan. She had a lot of Italian in her, which accounted for the coloring. Her brown hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail. Her face was smooth and without make up. She didn't need make up, anyway. But when she did...Lord help me.



"Hmm. You have your purposes," she said, sipping her glass of chardonnay.

"Is one of those purposes my usefulness in the bedroom?"

"I have uses for you in the bedroom."

"We have time before our dinner arrives."

She looked at her watch. "Should be here in ten minutes."

"Like I said, we have time."

She didn't need much more encouragement than that. With Ginger on the pergo floor below, running laps around the bed, I served one of my useful purposes.

Twice.

\* \* \*

We were now on the balcony. The balcony was devoid of last night's cigarette butts and Oreo crumbs. We were sharing a glass patio table, eating cheese tortellini and drinking chardonnay.

"Does Sanchez have any idea who threatened you?" asked Cindy.

"He doesn't recognize him, but Sanchez works primarily in L.A. He's going to ask his cop buddies around here."



"Who do you think this guy works for?" she asked.

"I'm willing to bet for someone who doesn't want me to find the true killer."

"So you think the boy's innocent?"

"Now more than ever."

"What do the police think?"

"They think I'm a nuisance. Nothing new. They think this is an open and shut case and resent the fact that I'm poking around on their turf. In essence, calling them fools and liars and incompetent."

"Are you?"

"In this case, yes."

"Will you call your father?"

I felt my shoulders bunch with irritation, but let it slide. She was only trying to help.

"No."

She patted my arm, soothing me. "Of course not. You don't need him. You are your own man. I'm sorry if I offended. I just worry about you."

"I know."

We were quiet. Ginger was chasing a fly that was almost as big as her.

"The man who came to your office, he was a



hired killer?"

"Yes."

"You could see it in his eyes?"

"He looked like a shark. Dead eyes."

"You sometimes get that look," said Cindy, pushing her plate away. She had eaten most of it, but had left exactly three tortellinis. I was still hopeful they would go forgotten. But the woman had a bottomless stomach, to my chagrin.

"You mean in the bedroom when my eyes roll up during the final throes of passion."

"Final throes of passion?"

"Means before I climax."

"Thank you for that clarification. No, I'm referring to the bar fight in Matzalan. I thought you were going to kill the guy. But you emerged from that look, sort of came back to your senses. I always considered that man lucky to be alive, lucky that you found yourself before you killed him."

I said nothing. I remembered that night. A barroom fight, nothing more. The man had felt up Cindy on her way to the bathroom. Bad move.

She suddenly leaned over and kissed my ear above the scab. It was a heartbreakingly sweet thing



to do. She took my hand and led me into the living room, to my sofa. We sat together.

She said, "You were a devastating football player. And you may very well be again. It is a violent sport that you excel at. I would not love you if you were not always able to come back down from whatever heights you need to scale to fight and even kill."

We were silent for a few minutes.

"Almost makes you think I am at the apex of evolution," I said. "A handsome, physically imposing, intellectually stimulating, emotionally sophisticated brute."

She put her head on my shoulder.

I was on a roll. "I will even permit you to take me to your classes for show and tell, as an example of a well-evolved human being. And in contrast we can take your last boyfriend and have him stand next to me."

"Are you quite done?"

"Quite."

"Will you need protection?" she asked, wrapping her arm through mine and holding me close to her



chest.

“I can take care of myself.”

She patted my hand. “I know.”

Ginger was jumping up and down, doing her best to leap onto the couch, but missing the mark by about a foot. I reached down and picked her up and set her in my lap. She turned three circles quickly, and then found a nook and buried her cold nose where our arms intertwined.

“How is your leg?” she asked.

“I am worried about my leg.”

When I looked down at her hand, I saw that she was holding something between her thumb and forefinger. It was a black cap. The cap to my scotch. She had said nothing, simply held me, and let me know that she knew about my drinking. But she didn't say anything. Didn't have to.

I held her close. She quit playing with the cap and held it tight in her fist.



I parked my car in front of the murder site. The same decayed heap of flowers still marked the place where Amanda had been found slain. There might have been a new teddy bear in the front row, but it was hard to tell. Anyway, he was a cute little guy holding a red heart balloon that said: "I Miss You."

I got out and headed up the stone pathway through the grass, passing a limestone circular fountain that was currently turned off. Leaves were collecting in the drain, and I suspected it might be a while until the fountain, with its gurgling expectations, would be turned on again.

When I reached the door, it swung open as if on its own volition.

Actually, *not* on its own volition. A cute little girl, perhaps eight, was standing in the doorway, staring up at me. She was the spitting image of Amanda.

"Is your mom or dad home?" I asked.

"You're big."

"I know."

"You're bigger than daddy."

"I'm bigger than most daddies."

"Really?"

"Uh huh."



She giggled.

A cute little black cat worked its way through the little girl's ankles. A blue bell jingled around its neck. The cat came right up to me and I scratched it between its ears. It was purring before I even touched it.

"That's Tinker Bell," said the little girl.

"He's cute."

"I love him."

"I bet you do."

"Alyssa honey, where are you?" There was a note of panic in the woman's voice.

"There's a policeman at the door, mommy."

"I'm not a policeman," I said.

The door was pulled all the way open and a woman folding a pair of briefs appeared. She was the older version of Amanda. The original version. She stared at me with eyes that were too blank, too red, too distant and too dead. She was dressed in a gray T-shirt and white shorts that revealed a fading tan.

"Mrs. Peterson?" I asked.

She paused, the white briefs hanging over her hand. "Who are you? You're not a policeman."



"I'm a private investigator," I said. "Can I speak with you? About Amanda."

She looked at me some more. A minute passed. Finally, she turned and disappeared into the darkness of her own home.

She left the door open. I took a deep breath and followed her in.

\* \* \*

After asking if I would like a cup of coffee, and with my answer being in the affirmative, she promptly brought me one and set it in front of me. I needed something to do with my hands, because Amanda's mother was making me nervous. She was in a bad place, a place I had emerged from years ago after the murder of my own mother. I knew what she was going through, but I did not want to empathize too much. I did not want to return to the bad place myself.

I was sitting in a thick sofa chair that matched the massive sofa near the fireplace, where Mrs. Peterson now sat. She reached into her black purse, which sat at her feet like an obedient dog, and removed a metal flask. She promptly poured a finger or two of something dark and bourbony into her



coffee.

"More medicine, mom?" said the younger version of Amanda, who trailed in from the kitchen.

"Yes, dear. Now leave the adults alone."

She did. Sort of. She grabbed a pink Barbie backpack, plopped on the floor near the rear sliding glass door, and proceeded to remove a Barbie and Ken doll from the bag. I noted that both were nude.

"How can I help you, Mr. Knighthorse?" asked Mrs. Peterson. She was looking down at one of my nifty business cards on the coffee table before her. But before I could answer she moved on. "Are you Indian? Your name sounds Indian."

"My great grandfather was Apache. Apparently grammy had a taste for savages."

"I wouldn't call them sava—oh, I see, you're kidding."

"Yes, ma'am. But the Native American in me is diluted. Mostly, I'm German and Welch and a whole lot of man."

She looked up at me and almost smiled. "You certainly are a whole lot of man. I should have guessed the German: blond hair, tall and muscular. Would have done Hitler proud."



"I would have done anyone proud, ma'am."

"A true *knight* in shining armor."

She might have sounded flirty if her words were not empty and devoid of meaning. Like listening to a corpse speak from the grave.

"You're here to try to clear Derrick?" she said.

"Yes."

She drank from her spiked coffee. "So what the hell can I do for you?"

"First of all, I would like to express my condolences."

"How very sweet of you."

"Do you feel the police have found your daughter's killer?"

"You get right to it."

"I'm sorry if I offended."

"No. I like it. No reason to dance around the subject. My daughter was torn apart just inches from our front door by a goddamn animal."

Her voice never rose an octave. She spoke in a monotone, although her lower lip quivered slightly.

"Mrs. Peterson, did you ever meet Derrick?" I asked.

She nodded and looked away. She was



watching Alyssa play with her oddly nude dolls. "Call me Cat. For Cathy." She continued to watch Alyssa. Now Ken and Barbie were kissing in her hands. Butt naked.

"What did you think of Derrick?" I said.

"I thought he was wonderful. Charming, energetic. He seemed to really care about Amanda."

"I liked him, too," said Alyssa suddenly. Her voice echoed slightly in the darkened room. The upbeat child-like quality seemed out of place, but somehow appreciated. At least by me.

"Why did you like him?" I asked her.

"He made me laugh. Amanda loooved him."

"That's enough," said her mother quietly. Then to me: "Yes. He seemed to love her as well."

"But he was not permitted to come around?" I asked.

"No. Her father had strict rules about her dating African-Americans."

"Did you agree with the rule?"

"I wanted peace in my house."

"Did Amanda ever come to you about Derrick?"

"Yes. Privately, quietly. We would often talk about Derrick. She had more than a crush on him. They



had been dating for over a year. She might have loved him, if you want to call it that.”

“Love knows no age.”

She didn’t say anything.

“So you didn’t condone her secretly seeing Derrick?”

“No. I encouraged her.”

She almost lost it right then and there. Her lip vibrated violently, but stopped when she bit down on it.

“Mrs. Peterson, you did not condemn your daughter to death by encouraging her to see Derrick.”

She turned and faced me. Her eyes were full of tears. A red splotch was spreading down from her forehead. She was getting herself worked up. Before she could unleash some unholy hellfire in my direction, I quickly added, “Cat, I was threatened by an unknown killer a few days ago to stay away from this case. The killer, I assume, represents the true murderer of your daughter. It’s the only thing that makes sense. I believe Derrick is innocent.”

She blinked. The splotch receded. “But you are



not backing off the case,” she said.

“No.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for trying to help. I never believed in Derrick’s guilt, but aren’t you afraid?”

“I am a big guy. I can take care of myself.”

And that’s when the front door open and Mr. Peterson came in.

The first thing I noticed was that both Cat and Alyssa shrank back into themselves. Especially Alyssa. The cute little girl disappeared. Replaced by something cold and wet, and left out in the rain to die.

## 20.

He strode quickly into the living room, head swiveling, trying to take in everything at once. He was wearing black slacks, cordovan loafers and a black silk shirt. Sunglasses rode high on his graying head of curly hair. His roaming, pale eyes finally



settled on me.

"Who the fuck are you?" he said to me.

"Richard...." said Cat, but her voice was weak, her words trailing.

I stood, "I'm Jim 'the fuck' Knighthorse."

I held out my hand. He didn't take it. Little Alyssa was right. I was bigger than her father, had the guy by about two inches. It was clear that he lifted weights: thick chest and small waist. But he lifted for show. I know the type.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he asked.

Richard Peterson turned to his wife, who flinched unconsciously. Or perhaps consciously. Maybe he *preferred* the women in his life to flinch in his presence. He next turned to his daughter. She was looking down, pressed against the glass of the sliding door.

I said I was here to investigate the murder of his daughter.

"Who hired you?"

I told him.

"Get out," he said. "Get the fuck out."

I didn't move at first. He then turned and looked at the little girl.



“Go to your room,” he said. “Now.”

Alyssa jumped and ran away, leaving her Barbie’s where they lay, with Ken on top of Barbie. I saw that there was a small puddle of urine where she had been sitting. A door in the back of the house slammed shut.

I turned and looked at Mrs. Peterson. Only then did I notice the purplish welts inside her legs.

“I’m sorry for intruding,” I said calmly.

“Don’t you people have any decency?” He said to me, then turned on his wife. “And you, Cat. You let him in. How could you? He’s representing the *boy* who murdered our Amanda. He’s trying to set him *free*.”

“But Richard—”

“Shut the fuck up, Cat. You.” He turned to me. “Get the fuck out or I’ll call the police.”

I looked at Cat and she nodded to me. That’s when I saw a picture of another girl on the mantle above the fireplace. This one older. She had her arm around her mother and was wearing a blue and white UCI sweatshirt. A third daughter.

I left the way I had come, and he slammed the door shut behind me. I paused a few minutes on the



porch but could hear nothing. I had the feeling he was standing behind me, waiting for me to leave.

There was nothing to do but leave.

So I did.

## 21.

“We should probably call the police,” said Cindy, after I told her about my encounter with Richard Peterson. Whom I now referred to as Dick.

“A few bruises and a terrified child does not a case make,” I said. “Someone would need to come forward.”

She sighed. “And most victims of domestic violence are hesitant to report the abuse, for fear of repercussions.”

It was just past 10 p.m. Cindy’s evening class had just ended. We were sitting at a small cafe in the UCI student union. I was eating a chocolate *chocolate* muffin—yes, chocolate chips in a chocolate muffin—the way it should be eaten: big



bites that encompassed the stump *and* the top. Cindy was sipping hot cider. The cafe was surrounded by a lot of glass and metal. Couches and chairs lined the walls and filled the many adjoining rooms, filled with students studying and working and *not* making out or sleeping, as I would have done in my day.

"We are surrounded by over-achievers," I said.

"UCI is a tough school to get into," she said. "Same with UCLA. Were you not once an over-achiever?"

"On the football field, yes. In the classroom, my mind wandered."

"Where did it wander?"

"To the next game. The next girl. I was a big man on campus."

She looked at me over her cider. "You still are," she said.

"Are you flirting with me?" I asked.

"If there wasn't a chocolate chip on your chin, the answer would be yes."

She reached over and scooped it off and ate it.

"Does that count against your diet?" I asked.

"I'll jog an extra lap tomorrow morning."



She sat her cider down carefully in front of her. She adjusted the mug so that the handle was facing at a forty-five degree angle. Precision and exactness was her life. And I loved her for it.

I reached over and moved the handle a little to the left.

“Hey,” she said, slapping my hand. She adjusted it back. “So what are you going to do about the brute?”

“About Dick? First, I need to speak with the eldest daughter, and confirm my suspicions.”

“Your suspicions are generally pretty accurate.”

“In this case, I want confirmation. I need to speak to the eldest daughter.”

“What’s her name?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t have a chance to ask.”

“And how am I supposed to find her here at UCI if you don’t know her name?”

“I know her last name is Peterson. Or at least I assume it to be. The other two daughters’ names both started with an A. So I would begin there. Perhaps an Alicia Peterson, or an Antoinette Peterson.”

“You realize this isn’t part of your job description,



at least not on this case, resolving domestic violence.”

“I know.”

“And what if she confirms your suspicions of abuse?”

“Then Dick Peterson and I are going to have a talk.”

## 22.

“So why is God dressed like a bum?” I asked.  
“Isn’t that a little cliché?”

“I invented cliché,” said Jack.

I rolled my eyes. He continued.

“But to answer your question: This is how you perceive me.”

“As a bum?”

“Not exactly. You figure that if God came to earth, he would do so in a nondescript way.”

“So as not to attract attention.”

“Perhaps.”



“So you appeared in just such a way.”

“Yes.”

“Or maybe you are just a bum, after all.”

“Maybe. Either way, you are getting something out of this, am I right?”

I looked at the man. We were sitting opposite each other at the back of the restaurant. At the moment, we were the only two people in McDonald's.

“Yeah, I'm getting something out of it, although I'm not sure what, and I still don't know why you've come into my life.”

“You asked me into your life.”

“When?”

“The day I first arrived.”

I was shaking my head, but then I remembered that day: The twentieth anniversary of my mother's murder. I had spent a good deal of that day cursing God.

“You asked me to come down and face you,” said Jack. “I believe you wanted to fight me.”

“Yes,” I said. “I was very angry.”

“And so I came down not to fight you, but to love you, Jim Knighthorse.”



"You do this for everybody?"

"Not so dramatically, but often, yes."

"Why me?" I asked.

"Why not?"

I was drinking a Coke. Big, bubbly Coke that was the perfect combination of carbonation, ice and cola. Damn. I love Coke.

"I miss my mother," I said.

"I know, but she has been with you every day of your life."

I suspected that, but didn't say anything about it now.

"You know who killed her?" I asked.

The man in front of me—the *bum* in front of me—nodded once.

"Her case is unsolved," I said.

He watched me carefully.

"And I'm going to solve it," I said. "Someday."

"Yes," he said, "you will."

"And when I do, I'm going to kill whoever killed her."

Jack said nothing, although he did look away.



I was sitting with my hands behind my head and feet up on one corner of my desk. This is a classic detective pose, and I struck it as often as I could. Mostly because it was a good way to take a nap without appearing to do so. I did my best to keep my shoes off the desktop's gold tooled leather.

There was a knock on my office door. Thanks to Fuck Nut, I kept the door locked these days. I took out my Browning, held it at my hip and opened the door.

The man I found standing before me was perhaps the last person I expected to see. Hell, I hadn't seen or spoken to him in two years. It was my father. His name was Cooper Knighthorse.

\* \* \*

He studied me for a few seconds, then looked coolly at the gun in my hand. "You could scare off clients with that thing."

"Yeah, well, you're not a client, and someone's sicced a hitman on my ass."



He stood easily six inches shorter than me, which put him around five ten. His shoulders were wider than mine, and he had freakishly large hands, hands which had pummeled my backside more than once. But it was his eyes that drew one's attention. Ice cold and blue. Calculating and fearless. Devoid of anything living. Eyes of a corpse.

He smiled slowly, the lips curling up languidly. When most people smile their eyes crinkle, giving them crow's feet over time. My father would never have to worry about crow's feet. His eyes didn't crinkle. Hell, they didn't know how to crinkle. When he smiled, as he did now, it was only with the corners of his mouth. Needless to say, the smile radiated little warmth.

"Well," he said. "Are you going to invite me in?"

I stepped aside and he moved past me smoothly, carrying himself easily and lightly. He stepped into my four hundred square foot office which paled in comparison to the monster he oversaw in L.A. He stood in the middle of the room, surveying it slowly, taking in the pint-sized refrigerator on one wall, the well-stocked trophy case adjacent to it, my sofa, the



sink, and finally the desk.

His assessment was over embarrassingly quick. He turned to face me with no emotion on his face. Did he approve of the place? Or not? Was he proud of his only son, or disappointed? Impossible to tell. Did I need his approval? Impossible to tell. But probably, and it galled me to admit it.

He was wearing a western-style denim shirt and khaki carpenter pants with a hammer loop. There was no hammer in the loop. His evenly-distributed silver hair was perfectly parted to one side. He was the picture of fitness and vitality, health and ruggedness. Just don't look at the eyes.

"So," he said, "who wants you dead?"

I stepped around him, slipped into my leather seat and motioned toward the Mr. Coffee. He shook his head and eased himself down carefully into one of the three client chairs. The chair, which usually creaked, didn't creak this time.

"Someone wants me to back off a case."

"Any idea who that someone is?"

"Not yet."

"Would be good to know that. Better for your health. Who's the hitman?"



“Older guy, wears a hoop earring. Hell of a shooter. Eyes like a shark.” I neglected to say: *eyes like yours.*

My father leaned back a little and allowed his cold eyes to spill across my face. They settled on my damaged ear. “He do your ear?”

“Yes.”

“He’s one sick motherfucker.”

“You know him?”

“Runs a kiddie porn magazine. Would be good for society if he disappeared.” He paused. “I can take care of him.”

“No.”

He studied me for a moment. I refused to turn away from his gaze. “Is he a better shooter than you?” he asked.

“We’ll find out.”

“Or you can just drop the case,” said my father. “And he’ll leave you alone.”

“Or not.”

He smiled. “Or not.”

We sat together in silence. Muted street sounds came through the closed window. My refrigerator kicked on and hummed away. My father lifted his



gaze without moving his head and scanned the wall behind me. He was looking at the pictures, the articles, the bullet holes in the wall. I could kiss my security deposit goodbye.

"I watched every game," he said.

This was news to me, but I remained silent.

"I was there for every game. At least every home game. I always sat in the back rows. How did you get so goddamn good?"

"Must have been all those special moments we spent playing catch in the park on Sunday afternoons."

"There are some things I regret in this life," he said. "Not being a father to you is one of them." He reached inside his pocket and removed a pouch of photographs. "These were taken on the last day your mother was alive."

Something froze within me, as if my stomach had suddenly been dropped into a bucket of ice. My father, the great Cooper Knighthorse, detective extraordinaire, set the packet on the table.

"I loved her the best way I could, Jim."

"Why are you giving me these pictures?" I asked.

"Because I want you to see her happy. I want you



to see us happy. We were trying, Jim. I was trying.”

“You were trying to fuck anything you could get your hands on.”

If I shook him, he didn't show it, although the corners of his lips quivered slightly. His pale eyes stared at me.

“We've all made mistakes, Jim. There's something else in the pictures.”

“What?”

But he didn't answer me. Didn't even acknowledge my simple question. He simply looked at me a moment longer, stood, then walked out of my office. He shut the door carefully behind him.

I stared at the closed door for a long, long time.

## 24.

I didn't worry about locking the office door after my father left. I could give a shit about the hitman. I had my Browning on the desk in front of me. Woe to



anyone who walked unannounced into my office at that moment.

The packet of photographs was yellowing, the flap torn. On it was a little boy blowing soap bubbles with the word KODAK inside a particularly large bubble. The packet wasn't very thick, containing perhaps twenty-four pictures in all. I had never seen these pictures, and, in fact, did not know of their existence.

I poured myself a cup of coffee with extra cream and sugar.

Heat seeped through the porcelain cup and scalded my palms, but I kept them there, feeling the heat, ignoring the heat, unaware of the heat.

Lifting both hands, I took a sip. Tasted the coffee, but didn't really taste it. Same fucking routine.

I was ten years old when I found her dead. She had bled to death all over her new bedroom set. My father and I had gone to pick up a pizza and rent a movie. I was the first through the front door, carrying the pizza box, excited because my father was in a particularly good mood.

Once inside I called her name, told her the pizza was here and to get it while it was hot. The light was



on in her bedroom, but there was no movement, no sound. I set the pizza box down on our dining room table, was about to open it when my father told me to get my mother first.

I headed down the hallway separating the dining room from the master bedroom, calling her name. There was no response. I slowed my pace when I saw her hand lying on the floor. Her hand was completely covered in something red. At first I thought it was a red glove. A wet, gleaming glove, although it wasn't entirely wet. Only parts of it were. It was blood, and it was drying rapidly, congealing over her hand.

I stepped through the doorway and into a nightmare. Blood was everywhere, sprayed across the entire room. It reached everything, touched everything, infused everything. She was lying on the wooden floor in a great puddle of it. Her pink nightgown was soaked. Face-down, her head turned away, looking beneath the bed. The last thing she had seen in the world was a box of my childhood clothing. She kept the box because she always wanted another baby. The box read: Jimmy's Stuff.

There was a bloodied hand print on the box



where she had reached for it.

25.

I opened the packet and removed the small pile of pictures. A quick count gave me twenty-two in all.

On the last day of my mother's life, I had been at Pop Warner football practice, and then later at a friend's house for a pool party. I know now my parents had used the opportunity to renew their marriage and spend some quality time together. My mother wanted us to be a happy family. She wanted my father to take an interest in me, rather than viewing me as an obligation. She had gotten pregnant at a young age, and they had married in their late teens. They were not in love.

Early in the marriage, my father joined the military and spent much of that time fighting in secret wars. I would learn later that he was an expert sniper. Expert and deadly. Apparently, my own marksman skills with a gun had been inherited from him. When he



came home from his various assignments, flush from his recent kills, he was never really home. He was restless and horny as hell. I had caught him in various parts of town with different women, once in the backseat of our car parked around the corner of our house. I had thrown a brick through the window and scared the hell out of them. I stood there defiantly as he looked up at me through the window. He never said a word about it, never apologized, and had the window replaced the next day.

At first glance, you would never believe that the smiling couple in the picture were unhappy, or that the man with the pale blue eyes was a trained killer or that the woman would only have hours more to live. They were both happy and carefree, hugging and waving. They could have been on a honeymoon.

The majority of the pictures were at the Huntington Beach pier, just a hop skip and jump from my condo. In one picture my mother was sticking her slender backside out seductively toward the camera. My father zoomed in on it tightly. I found myself smiling. They were flirting with each other, and it was nice to see. It was perhaps the most fun I had ever



seen them have with each other. For that alone, I was thankful my father had given me the pictures.

He was wearing jeans, carpenter's boots and a yellow T-shirt that said JEEP across it. My mother had on a red blouse, jean shorts and leather sandals. Her legs were slender and naturally tan. Her hair was dark brown and cut short. Her features were slender and sharp. Full red lips and deep brown eyes. She looked like Audrey Hepburn, only prettier.

There were pictures of them along the pier, next to a statue I didn't recognize, standing next to two young men, one of whom was holding a freshly caught sand shark. In that picture, my mother secretly giving my father rabbit ears behind his back.

I went through all of the pictures, my heart heavy and sad. I never recovered from her loss. Mother's Day is hell on me, and I often go into seclusion. How does one replace a mother's love? I lived briefly with an aunt and uncle and they did their best to give me love and attention, but it wasn't the same.

So what else was in the pictures?

What was I missing? What had my father seen that I was missing? Of course, the fact that he had seen it with no prompting was an irritating thought at



best.

I went through the pictures again and again, almost setting them aside. Then I found it, and my mouth went immediately dry.

I carefully removed the three photographs and placed them in chronological order on the desktop before me. I noticed my hands were shaking. I linked my fingers together to stop the shaking. I'm not sure it worked.

The first in the series of three pictures was of my parents and the two young men with the sand shark. In the second, my mother was alone and waving to the camera, all smiles, enjoying my father's company for the first time in a long time. Beyond her and up the pier a ways, the two young men with the sand shark were walking away. The brunette dangled the shark over one shoulder, while the bleached blond was looking back toward my mother. The third picture had been near the bottom of the stack, thus near the end of the roll of film, and thus near the end of their day. In that one, my parents were in a souvenir shop in Huntington Beach. The shop was still here to this day. My father had on a goofy baseball cap with a big piece of dog crap on the bill



—the hat said *Shit Happens*—while my mother was wearing a colorful straw hat. They were holding each other tight. Behind them was a young man with bleached blond hair. He was watching them, alone this time, about three rows back. He was not smiling, and he did not look too happy.

If I had to guess, I would say he was stalking them.

## 26.

The sun had set and the ocean was black and eternal. We were running along the hard-packed sand, passing cuddling lovers who really ought to have gotten a room. There was a dog loose on the beach and I called it over. It followed us briefly, then veered off to chase a hot dog wrapper skimming over the sand. It was humbling to know that we were less interesting than trash.

“So how are you holding up?” Cindy asked. Her



breathing was easy and smooth. She kept pace with me stride for stride.

“My leg?” I asked.

“That and the news about your mother.”

“Well, running on sand is a good thing, easy on the leg. As far as my mother,” I paused, shrugging. Because I was wearing a nylon coach’s jacket, I doubted Cindy could see me shrug, especially in the dark. “I don’t know. All I have are a series of pictures featuring a young man who seemed to have taken an inordinate amount of interest in my parents.”

“On the day she was murdered.”

“Yes.”

We were running along an empty stretch of sand now, no lovers or wandering dogs. We were alone with the crashing waves and the black sky. The moon was nowhere to be found; then again, I wasn’t looking very hard for it.

“Why did your father give you the pictures now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was he keeping them from you for any reason?”

“I don’t know.”

I was favoring my bad leg, but that was nothing



new. Based on the angle and depth of my shoeprints in the sand, a good detective could probably deduce that I had once broken my right leg.

“So what are you going to?”

“There’s only one thing to do.”

“You’re going to look into your mother’s murder.”

I nodded. “It’s something I have always known I would do.”

“But you weren’t ready yet.”

“No.”

“Are you ready now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Has your father looked into her murder?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “We have never discussed it.”

“I think, maybe, it’s time that you do.”

## 27.

I was alone in my car overlooking the ocean. I was in a turn-off above the Pacific Coast Highway.



Below me was a straight drop of about five hundred feet. My engine was running.

With no leads, my mother's case had been closed. It seemed like another random killing. There had been no sign of sexual trauma, and there were no fingerprints, or blood, other than my mother's. My mother had no known enemies. The only person on the face of the earth that even remotely resented her was my own father. The source of his resentment was me, of course, but we had been together at the time of her murder.

My mother had no family. No brothers or sisters, and both parents were dead. She had only a handful of acquaintances in our neighborhood. In all reality, I was her only family, her only friend, her one true love.

She used to call me her little angel.

I gripped the steering wheel. The leather groaned in my hands. I could hear the blood pounding in my skull. I fought to control my breathing.

After her funeral, she had been all but forgotten. By the police, by her friends, the media, and even her own lackluster husband. She had been forgotten by everyone except me.

*I care that you were killed. I care that someone*



*stole your life and cut your throat and hurt you so very badly. I care that you were taken from this earth before your time. I care that you felt the fear of death, the pain of the knife, the hot breath of your killer on your neck. You have not been forgotten, and your little angel is not so little any more.*

This was going to take time, I knew. The case was cold. I would investigate it on the side, around my paying work. There was no reason to rush. It's been twenty years, and no one was going anywhere.

28.

The next morning, Sanchez and I were at Cal State Fullerton's defunct football field. The school had spent millions on a fashionable new stadium, hoping to lure big name schools to compete against their smaller program, and then mysteriously decided to pull the plug on football altogether a year later. I sensed a conspiracy.

Still, the bleachers were massive and made for



an invigorating stadium workout. It was also hell on my leg. The pain was relentless and disheartening. I was accustomed to my body working through kinks of pain. But this was no kink. This was a pain that encompassed the entire leg. It was a pain that registered in my brain as something *very* wrong, and that perhaps I should stop doing stadiums.

I didn't stop.

I was determined.

Football is all about learning how to live and deal with the pain. Football was in my blood. My father played in college, but he was too small for the pros. I am not too small. I am just right.

Sanchez followed me as we wended our way up and down the narrow concrete stairways between the bleachers. We had been doing this steadily now for thirty-two minutes. I was soaked to the bone. Sanchez had a minor sweat ring around his shirt collar.

The man was a camel.

At thirty-five minutes, my target time, I stopped at the top of the bleachers, gasping for air. Sanchez pulled up next to me, gasping, I was pleased to hear,



even louder.

“You need a respirator?” I asked.

“You need a towel?”

We both had our hands on our hips, both wheezing. I had done perhaps ten minutes more than my leg could handle. It was throbbing alarmingly. I tried to ignore it.

We had a great view of Cal State Fullerton’s sports complex. I could see the baseball field, built by Kevin Costner, an alumnus of Cal State Fullerton and a hell of a fan and athlete in his own right. Baseball was this little-known university’s pride and joy, having won three national championships.

Baseball wasn’t a bad sport.

It just wasn’t football.

I told Sanchez about Dick Peterson and his daughters. For now, I left news about my mother to myself.

“So you want me to bust this guy?” asked Sanchez when he finally found his wind. “Dick who’s-this.”

“That would make it worse,” I said. “He’ll just come back more angry than ever.”

“You think he could have killed his own



daughter?"

I shrugged. "Anyone who terrifies the youngest one to the point she loses control of her bladder might be capable of doing anything. But he didn't kill her. He was with his wife; they were eating dinner together at the time of the murder."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Talk with the older daughter. Confirm my suspicions."

"And then what?"

The pain in my leg did not subside. It was a constant force. A reminder of what I had lost. But I decided to view it as my one and only obstacle to achieving my goal. It was the only thing standing in my way to becoming what I most wanted. At least, I thought it was what I most wanted. Sometimes the pain made me waver. I hated wavering.

"I will convince him to stop his nefarious ways," I said.

"*Nefarious*," said Sanchez. "Shit. You've been reading too much."

We walked down the bleachers. I could have used a handrail, to be honest.

Sanchez said, "You sure this is all worth it?"



“Yes.”

“You’re in pain.”

“I thought I could hide the pain.”

“No one’s that good of an actor.”

We reached the clay track that surrounded the football field. We were completely alone this morning.

“Why is all this shit you’re putting yourself through worth it?”

The morning was still and cool. Steam rose from our bodies. In the distance, on another field, I could see the university’s soccer team stretching together.

“It’s something left unfinished,” I said.

“Maybe some things are meant to be left unfinished.”

I thought about that, and had no answer.

After the stadiums I headed straight to 24 Hour Fitness and soaked in their Jacuzzi for half an hour.



Now, I was in my office and the pain in my leg was down to a dull throb. I could almost ignore the pain. Almost.

Although my office is in Huntington Beach, it's inland and in a tough area. I fit in nicely here. I grew up in Inglewood, the only white kid in an all black neighborhood, as was my story through elementary school and junior high. It wasn't until I was in high school that I was no longer the only white student. There were five white students at East Inglewood High.

Anyway, I'm at home in tough neighborhoods. Plus the rent's cheaper here.

I sat down in my leather chair and opened a bag of donuts. An NFL fullback weighed anywhere from two-twenty-five to two-fifty. Just to hit the minimum weight I still had to gain another ten pounds. Ideally the weight is added on as muscle and not fat. Well, I had plenty of muscle. I never stopped lifting weights, even for a single day. Except when I was sick, which is different. Your body deserves to rest when sick.

There were five donuts in the bag. I just couldn't bring myself to eat a half dozen. I started on them



with a half gallon of whole milk in hand to wash them down. By the third chocolate long john I was beginning to notice a rank smell from within my office. By the time I finished the donuts, the stench was getting worse and I was sure something had died in my office.

I opened a window.

The last thing I wanted to do was disgorge all the precious fat calories I had just consumed. I inhaled some fresh air. My office was on the third floor of a professional building filled with accountants and insurance agents and even a used bookstore that I often perused.

When I was sure I would not launch my donuts into the parking lot below, I turned back into my office, determined to find the source of the stink.

Maybe a possum had died between the walls. Christ, that was going to be a bitch if that were so.

I sniffed away until I found myself back at my desk. Perhaps under? I looked under. Nothing.

I opened my top drawer—and stepped back.

It was there in my drawer. A cat. It had not died of natural causes. No, it had been cut neatly in half, just under the rib cage. A black cat with a cute little blue



bell around its neck. Paws were thrown up over its head, like a referee giving the touchdown signal. Its eyes were wide, and it appeared devoid of blood. Just skin, fur and bones.

Tinker Bell.

A piece of greasy paper, stained with ichor and other bodily fluids, was neatly folded and shoved into its chest cavity. I extracted it carefully, and unfolded it. There were just three words on the note:

*Last warning,  
Meow.*

And that's when my fax machine turned on, startling me. Shaken, I got up, leaving the severed cat where it lay in my drawer. The fax was from Cindy. It was a short list of three names, all of them *A. Petersons* from UCI. Their class schedules were included. The last faxed page was a photocopy of Cindy's small palm pressed down against the glass of the copy machine. Written below her palm were the words: *I like your touch.*

I needed that.



I went to Huntington High in search for clues. That is, after all, what detective do. In particular I went searching for someone, *anyone*, who might be able to corroborate Derrick's story.

It was almost 7:00 p.m., about the time Amanda had been murdered. I wanted to see what kind of staff was on hand at the witching hour.

I cruised through the faculty parking lot, which ran along the west side of the school. It was nearly empty, just six vehicles in total. The student parking lot was fuller, but that could be the result of the outdoor basketball courts and tennis courts that were nearby. The days were longer now than when Amanda was murdered two months ago, so I expected to see more activity in and around the school.

At the moment, the sun was just setting, and much of the school was in shadow. Outdoor lights, many of them flickering chaotically, were perched



along the upper corners of the many buildings. A security truck was parked in the visitor's parking lot near the main entrance. There was someone inside, a large black man, talking on a cell phone. Huntington High was one of the few schools in the area that did not lock down their campus at night, trusting instead to a few tough-looking security guards.

I parked three spaces from the truck, and so that I was official, I clipped my visitor badge to the pocket of my T-shirt. As I stepped out of my car, I had the full attention of the security guard by now. He leaned out the driver's side window and beckoned me toward him. I showed him the visitor's badge by sticking out my considerable chest. Perhaps too impressed for words by the size of my chest, he simply nodded once and leaned back in his front seat.

I headed up to the school along a wide concrete path. The main hall was deserted. My sneakers echoed dully off the many lockers. Further along I heard whistling from somewhere. Had I been a puppy dog, my ears would have shot forward, twitching nervously. Unfortunately I wasn't a puppy



dog, though certainly as cute, and did my human best to zero in on the sound.

I turned a corner and came to a bathroom. A girl's bathroom.

A janitor's cart was parked out front, filled with cleaners and rags and brooms. Draped over a broom handle was a sweat-stained Anaheim Angel's baseball cap. The whistler was whistling something I did not recognize, although it sounded sort of mournful. Something you might hear on death row, perhaps.

White light issued from that most hallowed of places: the girl's bathroom, where periods were discovered, cigarettes smoked and boys gossiped about. At least hallowed to the minds and considerable imaginations of high school boys.

I rapped loudly on the open door.

The whistling stopped. A man's head jerked around the corner of one of the stalls, eyes wide with alarm, as if he had been caught doing something. Whatever it was he was doing, I didn't want to know. He was Hispanic, dark complexion, wide brown eyes. Perhaps forty-five. His forehead glistened with sweat.



"Hi," I said, ever the friendly stranger.

He said nothing. His sewn-on name badge said Mario.

"Do you speak English, Mario?"

He nodded. I held up my badge proclaiming me as an official visitor. He relaxed a little. I stepped into the bathroom and he flinched. I handed him one of my cards, holding it before him, until he finally tore his gaze off me and took the card. He looked at it carefully.

"Nice picture, huh?" I said. I turned my head to the right and gave him the same smile that was on the card.

"You...you a private detective?" he said in strangled English.

"The very best this side of the Mississippi. Just don't tell my pop that. He hates competition."

He looked at me expressionlessly.

"Never mind," I said. "Can I ask you a few questions?"

He shrugged, which was the correct response if my question was taken literally. I dunno, his shrug seemed to say, *can* you ask me a question?

"Much work to do," he said.



"I bet."

I reached inside my pocket and gave him a hundred dollar bill. He took it without realizing what he was reaching for. Then he shook his head vigorously and tried to give it back.

"Keep it," I said.

"No, *señor*."

He thrust it back into my pocket. Sometimes money talks, sometimes it doesn't. I asked, "Were you here on the night Amanda Peterson was murdered?"

He blinked up at me. Whether or not he understood I didn't know.

I forged bravely ahead. "On the night Amanda Peterson was murdered, could you verify whether or not Derrick Booker was in the school's weight room?"

He said nothing. Sweat had broken out on his brow. He was looking increasingly troubled. "Please, *señor*. I know nothing." His voice was pleading, filled with panic.

I studied him, watching his agitated body movements, and on a hunch I asked, "Has someone else been here to speak with you?" I asked. "An



older man, perhaps? Gray hair, an earring." I gestured to my ear. "A golden hoop?"

He was gasping for breath. "Please, *señor*. He scare my family."

Bingo. I walked over to him and took my card from his trembling hands and placed it carefully in his overall's pocket at his chest.

"I'm going to take care of him, Mario. I promise."

He said nothing. We stared at each other. His eyes were wide and white.

The hitman had come to see him. Warned him to shut up. Threatened his family. No wonder Mario was terrified.

"It's going to be alright, Mario. No one's going to hurt you or your family."

He said nothing more.

I left the way I had come.



The day was bright and there was a chill to the air, but that did not stop eighty-three percent of the female college students at UCI from wearing tiny shorts and cut-off T-shirts that revealed many pierced belly buttons.

I had already tried one of the classrooms, using the schedule Cindy had faxed me, but I did not see a single young lady who looked like the framed picture on the Peterson's mantle.

Now I was standing outside a classroom in the Humanities building. I was on the seventh floor and had a great shot of what the students here called Middle Earth, a beautiful central park located within the campus.

One of the problems I was running into were that many of the girls *could* have been A. Peterson. Hell, most of them were cute with dark hair.

"Excuse me," said a voice behind me.

I turned away from the window. I saw that the class across the hall had just let out, and I had already missed a few faces. Damn. But standing in front of me was clearly A. Peterson. Cute face, cute button nose. But the cuteness ended there. Everything else about the girl was anything but cute.



“Miss Peterson?”

She nodded, frowning. “Are you the private investigator that came to see my mom?”

She looked haunted. No. She ~~was~~ haunted. Her pale eyes were empty, troubled and suspicious. A heavy backpack weighed her down, and she was hunched forward to support some of the weight. Her arms were crossed in front of her, her hands holding her bony shoulders. Her hair was dyed pitch black, skin pale and milky. She had a nose, tongue and brow ring. Had she decided to wear make-up, she would have been able to cover the dark rings around her eyes.

“How did you know me?” I asked.

“My mom described you. She called me last night. Said a tall muscular man with a full head of blond hair and a tattoo of a black horse on his forearm had come to see her about Amanda.” Her voice was soft and wispy. I strained to listen to her.

“And I fit the description?”

She looked at my crossed arms. The black horse, shooting steam from its nostrils, was clear on my left forearm.

“Plus,” she said, “You’re packing heat.”



She pointed to the bulge under my left armpit. I was leaning against the wall in such a way that the bulge was evident to those who knew where to look.

"You would make a hell of an investigator," I said.

"Investigative journalism is my major."

"I couldn't think of a more fitting job," I said.

"What's your name?"

"Annette," she said.

"Ah," I said.

"And you found my classroom, so you're not so bad yourself." She might have grinned, but she had probably forgotten how.

"Glad I have your vote of confidence."

"I assume you're here to talk with me about my sister?"

"Yes," I said. "That and more. Is there somewhere we can have privacy?"



and pines and a lot of rolling green hills. Students with laptops were banging away under trees nearby. Other students were soaking in the sun, and too few were making out. There was one couple, however, going at it like minks. Good for them. College at its best.

We were sitting on the grass. My back was up against the trunk of a gnarled ash tree, and Annette was leaning against her massive backpack which was filled to overflowing.

“Are you a senior?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you live at home?”

She shook her head vehemently. “I needed to get away. Far away. But I couldn’t leave mother and my sisters. So I compromised with my mother. I live in a dorm here at UCI, and my sisters and mother can come visit me anytime.”

I said, “Your father is abusive.” It wasn’t a question.

“Do you know where my mom called me from last night?”

I had a sinking feeling. “The hospital.”



She nodded. "You are good. Two broken ribs and a broken nose. Said she fell down the stairs. We don't have fucking stairs."

"Shit."

"Shit is right. The man is a goddamn animal and I have hated him my entire life."

"He abuse you?"

"Often."

"Sexually?"

"No. Not me. I wouldn't let him. I fought him. So he settled on beating the shit out of me. Broke my arm twice. In the same fucking place. Loves to grab it and shake until something snaps."

"Were your sisters sexually abused?"

"I think so, and I'm pretty sure little Alyssa is getting the worst of it now, especially now that she's alone with him."

"Has your mother ever tried to leave?"

"No. He tells her he will kill her and her daughters. Classic shit. She's terrified of him."

"Has anyone ever gone to the police? Have any teachers ever noticed the bruises, questioned your broken arms?"

"The answer is no. Father is an assemblyman for



the county. He can have anyone's job. He knows it and they know it. Our plight has been ignored."

"Plight," I said, grinning at her. "You must be a writer."

"Someday soon I hope to even make money at it."

"Would you like your father to stop the abuse?"

"Of course. Stupid fucking question." She leaned forward, hands flat in the grass. Not surprisingly, her nails were unpainted. "Are you going to stop him?"

I shrugged. "I could give a shit if he's an assemblyman. I work for myself. I could make most men on this earth bend to my will."

She actually laughed and clapped, and that pretty much made my day. She said, "That's such a funny way to describe that you are going to royally kick his ass."

"Royally."

"He's a big guy," she said. "But you're bigger."

"I'm bigger than most. And if I happen to break his arm in the process?"

Her gaze hardened. "Tell him it was from me."

A Frisbee landed next to us. I flicked it back to an embarrassed young lady. She caught it neatly with



one hand and dashed off.

"One more thing," I said. "Do you know why Amanda quit her school band?"

"Because the band director was a creep."

"How do you know?"

"He made a pass at her," she said.

"What did she do about it?"

"Told him to leave her alone."

"I assume he didn't."

"No."

"And then she quit?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Did she often confide in you?" I asked.

She looked away. "Yeah, we were close."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"So am I."

I gave her one of my cards, and she looked at it.

"Nice picture, Mr. Knighthorse," she said.

"I know."



It was early morning and the crowd in McDonald's consisted mostly of old men in tan shorts, white tee shirts and running shoes. Most didn't look like they did much running.

I was eating a Big Breakfast with Jack at the back of the restaurant. He was sipping his lukewarm black coffee and looking very ungodlike in his bum outfit. Then again, according to him, this is how I expected him to look.

"So who's running the universe if you're down here with me?"

"I can be in many places."

"Convenient," I said. "Must make waiting in line for Zeppelin tickets a breeze."

"And makes doing chores a snap."

"Was that a joke?" I asked.

"Yes."

"God jokes?"

"Who do you think invented humor?"

"The devil?" I asked.

"There is no devil, you know that."

"I know that because you told me there's no devil."



I'm still not convinced."

The man in front of me shrugged and sipped his coffee. I've noticed that Jack often didn't care if I believed him or not. I found that interesting and a little disconcerting.

"Prove to me you're God."

"Prove I'm not."

"*Touché*," I said. "What's the square root of one million?"

"Do you know?"

"No," I said. "But I will later."

"Then ask me later."

"Fine," I said. "Perform a miracle. A real miracle."

"Like turning coffee into wine?"

"Yes. That. Or beer. Turn it into ice cold beer and let me drink it."

"You sound like an alcoholic, Jim."

"You would know."

"Drinking is not good for your body. In fact, it's very hard on your body."

"Let's not go down that road."

"Okay," he said. "What road would you like to go down?"

"I want a miracle. I want proof that I'm talking to



God.”

“One man’s miracle is another man’s reality.”

“Oh, screw that,” I said. “Turn something into something else, and quit giving me shit.”

“And if I performed a miracle for you, that would finally satisfy your curiosity?”

“Yes.”

“No it wouldn’t. You would ask for another miracle, and then another. Always doubting.”

“You’re not going to perform a miracle, are you?”

“No. That is, not in the way that you mean.”

“But you perform other miracles?”

“Every day. Every second.”

“But if you performed a miracle for me now, then I would no longer have to believe, or have to have faith.”

“This is true.”

“I think faith is overrated. Turn something into something else and I will be your biggest follower, I promise.”

“I don’t want a follower. I just want you to listen, to think for yourself and to lead the best life you can. Ultimately, to define who you are and to live by those convictions.”



“And if you performed a miracle for me...”

“Then you will no longer make your own choices.”

“I would blindly do whatever you say,” I said.

“Yes. Exactly.”

“But you are here now, claiming to be God.”

“Like I said, one man’s miracle—”

“Is another man’s reality,” I finished.

We were silent some more. I looked in his half-empty cup. It was still coffee.

Jack closed his eyes, seemed to have fallen asleep, but he did this often, going to wherever God goes.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“Very.”

“I’m going to hurt a man,” I said.

“Do what you must.”

“Really?”

“I do not define for you what is right or wrong.”

“Au contraire,” I said. “There’s a whole book out there that defines exactly what we should do.”

“Was that French?” he asked.

“Oh shut up,” I said. “Wait, did I just tell God to shut up?”

“Yes. Would you like for me to shut up?”



“No.”

“Remember, I will not tell you how to lead your life, nor will I tell you what decisions to make, or who or what defines you. These are your choices. Your gifts. The book or books of which you refer, were often inspired by me, but only the parts about love.”

“Love?”

“As in do all things with love.”

“All things?”

“Yes,” he said. “This concept alone would change much of the structure of your planet.”

“There are those who can’t love, or choose not to love.”

“There are those,” said Jack, “who are an unfortunate byproduct of your current state of non-loving.”

“You do realize we are in a McDonald’s?”

“Yes.”

“Am I going crazy?” I asked.

“That is for you to decide.”

“So you really do not care if I hurt another human being?”

“Do you derive pleasure from hurting others,



Jim?"

"No. I will be hurting another to protect many more."

"Are you living and acting and behaving within your own moral standards?"

"Yes."

"Is this what defines who you are?"

"Yes."

"And so you are being true to yourself?"

"I guess so, yes."

"I can find no fault in that."

"So you approve?" I asked.

"I approve of defining who you are, Jim. There is a difference. And there are many, many people out there who do not have a strict moral code, such as your own."

"So any moral code would work?"

"Any *true* moral code, Jim," said Jack. "Any true code."



Sanchez and I waited in Sanchez's unmarked police vehicle in a red zone across the street from the offices of Assemblyman Richard Peterson.

"His name has a nice ring to it," said Sanchez.

We were in the city of Brea, in a shopping zone that called itself Downtown Brea. The stores were all new, and there was not one but two movie theaters. The apartments above the stores were advertised as artists' lofts. Once, long ago, I wanted to be an artist, until I realized I wasn't good enough and didn't have enough patience.

"There are two ice cream shops," said Sanchez. "I wonder why."

"They are across the street from each other," I said. "Downtown Brea is all about convenience."

"If you say so."

"There's our man."

It was past 6:30 p.m. and Richard Peterson was just leaving the office. He was leaving with a rather pretty blond in a short red dress. She split one way, walking to a nearby restaurant bar, and blew him a little kiss.

"Maybe she's the secretary," I said.



“Bet she takes great dictation.”

Peterson crossed the street purposefully, and headed to the parking structure to our right. We watched him ascend the stairs.

“Takes the stairs. Keeps in shape,” said Sanchez. “You think you can handle him?”

“As long as he doesn’t take them two at a time.”

We waited at the mouth of the structure’s exit, and sure enough a black Escalade with Peterson at the helm came tearing through the structure, heedless of babies or speed bumps.

“I could give him a ticket for reckless driving,” said Sanchez.

“For now just follow him.”

Sanchez did, pulling in behind him. Peterson drove like a man drunk or on drugs, weaving carelessly in and out of traffic.

“At least he uses his blinker,” I said.

“Considerate. Where do you want this to go down?”

We were on a street called Brea Blvd. The street was wide and quiet.

“This is good,” I said.

Sanchez, hidden behind his cop glasses,



reached under his seat and pulled out a flashing light with a magnetized bottom. He put it on top of his vehicle. I saw Peterson jerk his head up and look in the rearview mirror a couple of times. Finally he yanked the Escalade off to the side of the road. Sanchez pulled in behind him.

I said, "You don't have to do this. He's my problem. You could get into a lot of trouble."

"Justice is justice, Knighthorse. Sometimes street justice can be more effective."

"And less paperwork."

"And less paperwork," said Sanchez. "Wait here."

## 35.

I watched from the passenger seat. Sanchez spoke with Peterson through the open window. A moment later I heard a lot of shouting, saw a lot of gesticulating, then the Escalade door burst open and



Peterson came charging out. He wagged a finger in Sanchez's face. From here, his finger looked like a worm on a hook.

Sanchez said something and Peterson reluctantly turned and put both hands on the SUV's hood.

I watched intently.

Sanchez was an old pro. He kicked Peterson's feet apart and patted him down. Peterson said something over his shoulder and Sanchez pushed him hard against the fender. I heard the thump from here. Peterson's sunglasses fell from his face.

Sanchez removed a pair of handcuffs from his belt, twisted Peterson's arm back, then cuffed the assemblyman's wrist. The whole cuffing process took less than three seconds, faster than Peterson could react. Once he realized what had happened, he swung around violently. Sanchez stepped back, removed his gun and pointed it at Peterson's chest.

Peterson backed off, breathing hard. Sanchez walked him back to the vehicle.

And just like that we kidnapped Mr. Richard Peterson, Orange County Assemblyman, wife beater and child molester.



He shoved Peterson in the backseat. I took off my shades and turned around.

"Hi, Dick," I said. "Dick is an acceptable variant of Richard, am I correct?"

Recognition dawned on Peterson's red and sweaty face. His eyes narrowed and his pupils shrank. "It's *you*. The *detective*. What the fuck is going on?"

I turned to Sanchez. "Do you want me to quiet him up for the ride out?"

"Go ahead, I'm tired of hearing him already."

I stepped out of the front seat, opened the back door, and punched Peterson as hard as I could. Even from my awkward angle, the blow was still a good one and caught him sharply across the temple, snapping his head around.

Dazed, he didn't go unconscious, but it sure shut him up.

I turned and headed toward the Escalade.

"Follow me," I said to Sanchez.

I followed a street called Carbon Canyon through the city of Brea. Soon the new homes and the



massive state park disappeared and we were on a winding road. The Escalade drove like a dream. Shame what was going to happen to it.

I found a dirt turn-off and hung a right. In my rearview mirror, Sanchez followed me closely, although he didn't use his turn blinker. Damn cops. Above the law. First kidnapping, and now this.

We were now following a small creek, and when we reached a point where the creek dropped off twenty feet below down a dirt embankment, I stopped the Cadillac.

Sanchez pulled up behind me with Peterson in the backseat. I put the Escalade in neutral, and stepped outside. With Sanchez's help, we pushed the Cadillac down the dirt embankment. It ricocheted nicely off two trees, careened off a pile of boulders, and then splashed down in the middle of the creek, hissing and steaming.

The vehicle was totaled.

"Damn shame," said Sanchez.

"Yep."



“Let him go,” I said to Sanchez.

Sanchez uncuffed Peterson. The assemblyman was still woozy from the blow to the head. His hair was ruffled and his face was red, and it looked like he might have been missing a button on his shirt. He looked from me to Sanchez, and then at his surroundings. Dawning seemed to come over him as he realized he was not in a good situation. When he spoke, there was real fear in his voice, along with much nastiness.

“Do you have any idea who I am?” he asked.

“You are Richard Peterson, county assemblyman and respected citizen. You are also a wife beater and a child abuser who rapes his own children. Is there anything I missed?”

He looked at me briefly, then lumbered over to the creek and looked down at his Escalade. “You can’t prove any of it,” he said, still looking down. He might have considered bolting if he wasn’t still dazed.



"I'm not here to prove anything."

"So what's going on? You want money to keep everything quiet?"

Sanchez laughed and leaned a hip against the fender of his vehicle.

"No," I said. "You have been tried and found guilty, Mr. Peterson. Now comes the punishment phase. I will allow you to defend yourself."

"It's two against one, hardly fair."

"My compatriot is here for entertainment purposes only."

"*Compatriot?*" said Sanchez.

"Yeah."

Peterson sized me up, eyes darting quickly. Sweat was on his brow, and spreading quickly under his pits.

"You're bigger than me."

"I'm bigger than most."

"Not me," said Sanchez.

"We're even," I said to Sanchez. "Besides, we've already had this argument before, which is why I said *most*."

I turned back to Peterson. He backed up. If he bolted and was fast enough I could be in trouble with



my gimp leg. Sanchez pulled out his gun and pointed it at Peterson again.

"No running," said Sanchez.

"You didn't give your children a chance to run, did you?" I asked. "When you beat them or forced yourself on them."

"What the *fuck* is going on?"

"I am here for two things: first, to convince you of the error of your ways, and second to convince you to, um, give up the error of your ways."

"Poetic," said Sanchez.

"Shut up, I'm making this up as I go."

"I can tell," said Sanchez.

I said to Peterson, "I am going to kick the royal shit out of you. You are going to have a beating unlike anything you've ever had in your life. You will tell the authorities you suffered your injuries in a car accident, resulting from your desire to go sightseeing. You will stick to this story or a letter written by your daughter Annette detailing your sexual tendencies toward your own children will be mailed instantly to all the local papers. Do you understand?"

He stared at me blankly, sweating. He looked



like he needed a drink of water.

"And if you ever so much as lay a finger on your wife or children again, your next car accident will be your last. Are we clear?"

"Lesson learned, I swear. I mean, hell, you've scared the shit out of me. I'm practically peeing my pants here."

"*Practically*," I said to Sanchez. "Then I'm not doing my job."

"Losing your touch," said Sanchez.

"Put your gun away," I told Sanchez.

Sanchez did and continued grinning and watching us. A squirrel ran along a tree branch overhead. We were far from Carbon Canyon Road. The air was fresh and scented with moss and soil and pine.

"I will give you a chance to fight back, which is more than you deserve."

"Fuck you, asshole," he said.

"That's the spirit."

He looked from me to Sanchez, and then took his shot, his right hand lashing out. I maneuvered myself in time to take the majority of the blow off my shoulder. I countered with something like a jab,



which broke his nose.

"Fuck," he said, holding the bleeding mess.

Next, I did what I do best. I tackled him low. It was a quick movement that combined my football and wrestling skills. He landed hard on his back, and his air whooshed from his lungs like an escaping devil.

I hauled Peterson up and walked him over to Sanchez's car and placed his left forearm on the fender.

"You broke Annette's arm. Twice."

"Fuck you," he said, holding his nose and gasping. "The bitches deserved everything they got. Fuck you and fuck them."

I broke his arm quickly, bringing my elbow down hard on his wrist. The snap reverberated throughout the woods. Birds erupted from nearby tree branches.

Sanchez looked away.

Peterson cried out, grabbed for his arm.

But I wasn't done with him.

No, not by a long shot.

I went to work on him, and when it was finally over, when Sanchez finally pulled me off him, my knuckles were split and bloodied and I was gasping



for breath.

37.

The MGD bottle slipped from my fingers and crashed to my cement balcony. Foam erupted among the broken glass shards.

Shit.

I considered grabbing another beer from the twenty-four pack at my feet, then decided to give it a rest for the night. Instead, I began drunkenly counting the empty glass bottles standing like sentries along the tabletop, lost count, started over, lost count again, then decided that I had drunk a shit-load of beer tonight.

I had murders, child molesters, broken arms, dead cats, suicides and death threats on my mind. And now perhaps new information about my mother. Enough to drive any man to drink. But then again I never needed much reason to drink.

Cindy was with her sister-in-law tonight,



Francine. They got together once every other week and gossiped about their men, football and the nature of God in society since Francine was a religious studies instructor at Calabasas Junior College near San Diego.

That left me alone tonight. Just me and my beer.

I automatically reached down for another beer. Stopped halfway. Put my hands in my lap, and laced my fingers together.

Good boy.

The night was cool; a soft breeze swept over my balcony. Traffic was thick on PCH. I could smell exhaust and grilling hamburgers.

On its own accord, my hand reached down for another bottle. I stopped it just as it brushed a cold bottle cap.

*The bone had snapped loud enough for birds to erupt in surprise.*

My knuckles still ached from the beating I gave Peterson. The assemblyman's solo vehicle accident had made the local papers. Neither I nor Sanchez were mentioned. After the beating, we had dragged Peterson's limp body down the incline and stowed him in the driver's seat. I placed a call via his cell



phone to 911, pretending to be Peterson, gasping for pain. Hell of a performance. Sanchez was amused, although I noted he looked a little sick and pale.

A horn honked from below, along Main Street, followed by a short outburst of obscenities.

*I would have killed Peterson if Sanchez hadn't pulled me off him.*

And, Lord help me, I was enjoying every minute of it.

I reached down and grabbed another beer. This time there was no stopping my hand. I twisted off the cap and drank from it. And it was good, so very, very good.

38.

"How's the case going?" asked Cindy.

She had just sat down in front of me at the Trocadero, a Mexican place across the street from UCI. She was wearing a casual business suit, and



her hair was down. She looked three years my junior, rather than the other way around. Her lipstick was bright red, which was good since I was color blind. Seriously. She wore the bright red for me.

"Other than the fact that I have no idea who killed Amanda, just swell."

The waiter took our drink orders. An apple martini for Cindy and Coke for me.

"I called you last night," she said. "Twice."

"I know," I said, "and I called you this morning when I got the messages."

She let her unspoken question hang in the air: so *why didn't you pick up?* I let it hang in the air as well. I still felt like shit from the night before. I had drunk the entire case. A new record for me.

"Are you feeling well?" she asked.

"Just great."

"Bullshit. Your eyes are red and you look pale." She opened her purse and removed the local edition of the Orange County Register. "Amanda Peterson's father was in an accident. A bad accident. A broken arm. Three broken ribs. A broken collar bone. And a broken jaw. Jesus Christ, Jim."



"Like they said, a bad accident."

"It was no accident."

"No," I said, looking at her. "It wasn't; it was a methodical beating that I gave to a son-of-a-bitch to reinforce the idea that he is to never, *ever* touch his family inappropriately again. The way I see it, he got off easy. His wounds will heal. The damage he inflicted may never heal."

"Did your point hit home?" There might have been sarcasm in her voice.

"So far he's sticking to the accident story. So he's scared. As he should be."

The waiter came around and took our order. Salmon for Cindy and two Super Mex chicken burritos for me, extra guacamole and sour cream.

"You're going to kill yourself before your tryouts," said Cindy. More sarcasm?

"I'm still about seven pounds from my target weight."

"Isn't there a healthier way to gain weight?"

"Is that an oxymoron?"

"I'm serious, Jim. I'm concerned about you. About us."

She wouldn't look me in the eye, and sipped her



martini faster than normal. Her free hand played with the napkin, repeatedly wadding it and smoothing it out.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I can’t keep doing this.”

“You mean strangling your napkin?”

“No. I mean us.”

I let the air out of my lungs. We had had this conversation before.

“Last time, I convinced you to stay,” I said. “Talked until I was blue in the face. Do you remember what I told you I would do if you did this to me again?”

“Yes,” she said. “You said you wouldn’t try to stop me the next time.”

“Yes.”

The napkin was wasted, rendered perfectly useless. She pushed it aside and drank deeply from her martini. So deeply, in fact, that she finished it. I said nothing. There was nothing for me to say. I was not going to keep having this conversation with her. I loved Cindy with all of my heart, but I was not going to make her do something she did not want to do.

The waiter saw her empty glass and came over.



"Another?" he asked.

"Yes, please."

She still hadn't looked me in the eye. I studied her closely. She was behaving very un-Cindy like. Small, jerky movements as she tapped on the now empty cardboard coaster. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

I said nothing.

"Jesus Christ, Jim, you beat the unholy shit out of another human being. Your life has been threatened by a hired killer. A dead cat shows up in your office. Cut in fucking *two*. And now you're drinking again. It's not that you're drinking, really. It's that you are getting drunk, and doing it in secret, which makes it dirty and dangerous and all-consuming. And, ultimately, sad. Very, very sad."

I said nothing.

"You didn't answer the phone last night because you were passed out."

Her second apple martini came, followed by a second waiter bearing our food. The food was placed before us; it went ignored.

"And now you're trying out for the Chargers in a few weeks. What if you make the team? I would



never see you. I know that's selfish of me, but it's true. You would throw your whole life into it, like you do everything else, and the NFL would own your heart and soul. Would there be any room left for me?"

She drank her martini. Her eyes were wet. Hands shaking. She spilled some of the drink, and used the shredded napkin to clean up. The napkin only managed to smear the liquid.

"Christ, aren't you going to say anything?"

I said nothing.

"And I love you so much, you big sonofabitch. You worked your way deep into my heart like a damn thorn. A thorn that hurts, but has so much love to give."

I didn't like the analogy, but said nothing.

"I worry so much about you. But you can take care of yourself. I've seen it. And you have Sanchez and your father to help you. The three of you are an amazingly formidable force. And you are so brutal and deadly, but moral and just, and so fucking hilarious. Shit."

She stopped talking and picked at her salmon.



She even went as far as to bring up a forkful, but then got distracted by her own thoughts, and set it down again.

“You are a wonderful man, but you fuck me up.”

She started crying. She brought her hands to her face, and the tears leaked from under her palms. I resisted the strong urge to reach out to her. She needed to make a decision. I was not going to influence her decision in any way. I held on to that thought, no matter how hard it was for me to do so.

“Are you just going to sit there and let me cry?”

I said nothing, and didn't move, although my hand flinched.

“I think I need to leave,” she said.

She did, getting up quickly and dashing through the dark restaurant. I watched her go, and when she was gone I set aside my Coke and signaled the waiter.

I was going to need something a little stronger.



It was almost 1:00 a.m. when I came home that night.

With a twelve-pack of MGD in hand, I took the stairs two at a time, climbing my way to the fifth floor, where my apartment and drinking sanctuary awaited. I had made it a point recently to always take the stairs, to augment my training. I figured every little bit helped.

I was regretting that decision now. Especially at this hour, and what had happened over dinner.

*Maybe I should have said something to her,* I thought.

But I was determined not to sway her decision. She needed to decide for herself whether or not she wanted me in her life. Me prostrating myself, switching into used car salesman mode, and listing my strengths and perks did no one any good. It debased me on one level, and clouded her thinking on another.

Cindy and I had been seeing each other steadily since my senior year in college. At the time, she was in the master's program at UCLA. I had met her through a teammate of mine, her brother Rob. Cindy



had come from a football family, and although she made no real effort to understand the sport, she at least understood the men who played it, and we were a good match. She went on to get her doctoral in anthropology, her expertise the anthropology of world religions. Turns out, there's a lot of world religions out there, and so she keeps fairly busy writing papers and what-nots. She's only recently been tenured at UCI, which is great because now she really has to royally screw up to be fired. Luckily, she rarely screws up.

After my injury, she had been so supportive during those years of rehabilitation. She had also been supportive of the idea of me following in the footsteps of my father, although I had sworn long ago to never be a detective. I mean, I was destined for a long and rewarding career in football, right? Say ten years in the NFL, another ten in broadcasting, and finish things up as an NFL coach. That had been the plan.

Things change.

Especially when you're hit by a cheap chop block, and you hear the sound of your bones fracturing in so many places that you still have



nightmares over it. It was only later, after my drinking had started, that I found amusement in the fact that the fracturing of my leg had sounded like the popping of popcorn.

I was now on the fifth floor. I was not winded, but there was a healthy burn in my legs. And as I stepped through the stairwell door, I saw a man smoking a cigarette five feet away. He was waiting by the elevator door, and there was a pistol hanging loosely by his side. He did not see me.

It was Fuck Nut.

40.

I eased the stairwell door shut, removed the Browning from my shoulder holster and set down the beer. This wing of the fifth floor is reserved for four apartment suites. The elevator lets you out under a veranda outdoors. From there one can choose four different routes: immediate right or left, or straight



ahead and then right or left. My apartment was straight ahead and then right. The whole area is flooded with outdoor lighting.

He had been leaning behind a stucco pillar, just feet from the elevator, gun hanging idly by his side, blowing smoke from his cigarette straight into the air. I could smell the smoke.

I had the element of surprise, of course, being that he did not expect anyone in their right mind to walk up five flights of stairs, especially someone with a bum leg. And if Fuck Nut was a professional killer, as I assumed him to be, he had done his research on me; he knew about the bum leg. He was confident I would take the elevator. He did not realize I was a hell of an example of human perseverance in the face of tragedy.

In the least he should have positioned himself to see the stairs and elevator.

*Expect the unexpected*, as my father would say.

I eased open the door and raised the Browning.

But he was no longer standing behind the pillar. No, he was now waiting off to the side of the elevator. His cigarette, tossed aside, was glowing ten feet away, half finished.



Because the elevator door was about to open.

*Shit.*

He raised his own weapon. In the glow of the outdoor lights I could see he had a silencer on the end of his pistol. A true killer.

The doors slid open.

Yellow light from the elevator washed across the veranda, and out stepped my Indian neighbor from across the way. My neighbor who had told me his name seven or eight times but I could never remember it. Poorjafar? I always felt like crap asking him to pronounce his name again, so we both accepted the fact that he was known as “Hey!” And I was known as “Jeemmy!” Normally, *Jeemmy* is an unacceptable variant of my name, but I let it slide in this case.

The man who might be Poorjafar was a big guy who lifted weights, and he stepped confidently out of the elevator, swirling his key ring on his finger and whistling. I didn’t recognize the song, but it had a sort of Bollywood feel to it. And, for effect, Poorjafar stopped, did a little dance, turned around—

And saw the hitman.

“Oh, shit,” said Poorjafar, stepping back, startled.



Fuck Nut said nothing.

"Are you waiting for someone?" asked my neighbor.

"You could say that," said the hitman.

I knew something about assassins. They didn't like witnesses. They saw themselves as living outside the real world; in fact it was a fantasy world of their construct, where they were king and God, pronouncing life and death on mere mortals.

The killer had just pronounced death on Poorjafar.

There would be no witnesses tonight, if the killer had his way.

I stepped out of the stairwell, losing my element of surprise, my own gun hidden behind my back. "He's waiting for me," I said.

Poorjafar turned. "Jeemmy! How you doing, man?"

"Hey...*hey*."

Poorjafar pointed at the man in the shadows. "This is a friend of yours?"

The killer didn't move, but his eyes wanted to bug out of his skull. He shifted uneasily, but kept his gun out of sight. I kept my eyes on him.



"He's a recent acquaintance," I said.

"Well, your acquaintance scared the shit out of me."

"Yeah, he likes to do that. Of course, it doesn't help that he's such an ugly bastard." I gave a big, fake hearty laugh. The killer didn't laugh. "Probably scared the shit out of his own mother when he was born."

Poorjafar laughed, and I could smell the alcohol on his breath.

"Shit, Jeemmy. That was a low blow. He's a friend, man."

"No, I'm not," said the man. "I'm very much not his friend."

And he stepped sideways, keeping his hand behind his back, and stepped into the elevator. He pressed a button; the door closed. He pointed a finger at me and fired a blank bullet. And he was gone. I went back for my beer, and Poorjafar danced and whistled his way into his apartment.



I was at East Inglewood High, my old high school, practicing hitting drills with my even older high school football coach. Twelve years ago I made a name for myself on this field, where I was loved and worshipped. Isn't football just swell?

Coach Samson was a big black man, now in his fifties, and I still feared him on some level. But more than fear, however, was deep respect and admiration. He was more of a father figure than my father.

"Jesus Christ, son, you still have it," he said.

Coach Samson was riding high on the back of a padded hitting dummy. Currently he was getting a sleigh ride across the football field, benefit of my churning legs and sweat. He had agreed to go over the basic fundamentals, because I had been out of football for seven years. And even a battle-scarred old war horse like myself could always use some basic training.

He blew a whistle and I stopped, dropping to my knees. We were alone on the varsity football field,



although the school marching band was practicing in an adjacent field. School was still forty-five minutes from starting. The band, as far as I could tell, was one hundred percent African-American.

I might have been the last white to come through here.

Without his prodding, I got down into a three-point stance, and then lunged forward, hitting the padded dummy hard. Coach Samson held on, and I proceeded to push that goddamn thing up and down the field.

The coach instructed and advised as I went, reminding me to keep my head up and my back straight and to keep my legs churning.

I churned and churned all morning long, and I did not once think about Cindy, or that I had not heard from her in two days. And I did not once think about Derrick or the hitman, either.

Instead, I focused on football.

Sweet football.

A sport I had been born to play, a sport that had been taken from me. But I was determined to reclaim it—and my life.

Most of all, I tried to ignore the pain in my left leg.



That endless goddamn pounding.

42.

My father's offices are on the fifteenth floor of a major LA skyscraper. I regretted the decision to walk the stairs by the seventh floor. At the fifteenth floor, I found the nearest bathroom and splashed water on my face and neck, then headed through some heavy double doors. Above the door were the words: KNIGHTHORSE INVESTIGATIONS.

A big, bald security guard was waiting behind a desk. He was about fifty. His uniform was neatly pressed. Probably a retired cop, or a retired colonel, a man who commanded respect. I immediately disliked him, partly because he worked for my father, partly because he was glaring at me.

"Can I help you?" he asked in a thick Boston accent.

"You're pretty big for a secretary," I said. "Do you also fetch the coffee?"



He frowned and his bushy eyebrows—the only hair on his head—formed one long bristly line. “I’m not a secretary.”

“I’m sorry. Is that not politically correct these days? How about front desk technician? Is that better?”

He stared at me. The hairy caterpillar above his eyes twitched.

“Waddya want?”

“Cooper Knighthorse. He’s the small guy with the creepy eyes.”

“Yes, I’m aware of who he is.”

“So you agree he has creepy eyes?”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, I thought I would surprise him. Dad always likes a good surprise. Take the time when I threw a brick through the car window when he was screwing a neighbor’s wife in the back seat.” I laughed heartily. “Let me tell you, good times for one and all.”

“Dad?”

I nodded encouragingly.

“Mr. Knighthorse is your father?”

“I see you’re no slouch. In fact, you might make a



hell of a detective some day.”

He ignored me. “Didn’t know Coop had a son.”

“Obviously, I’m his pride and joy,” I said. “Now my father usually boffs his front desk engineers in the back room. Perhaps you were unaware of your full job description.”

He made a move to stand up. “Don’t push it, buddy.”

I leaned over the desk. “But pushing it is what I do best.”

He was a big guy, maybe a little soft around the middle. It would have been a hell of a fight if a voice hadn’t come from my left. The voice belonged to my father. “He’s okay, Reginald. He’s a hardass, but he’s okay.”

“Your kid has a big mouth.”

“Always has,” said my father.

I walked around the desk and smiled at Reginald. “I’ll take cream and sugar in my coffee.”



The entire fifteenth floor was occupied by my father's agency. His office was big, but not ornately so. There was a leather executive chair with brass nail trim behind a black lacquered desk. Piles of case folders everywhere, and from all indications, business was booming. No surprise there. He sat and motioned for me to do the same in one of his client chairs.

"Why you giving Reggie such a hard time?" my father asked.

"Just making friends and influencing people."

On his desk, angled in one corner and slightly pushed askew by an errant folder, was the picture of a blond woman and a little boy. I had no idea who they were. A different family, a different life. For all I knew the little boy could have been my half brother.

"Tell me about the pictures," I said.

He sat back in his chair and studied me silently. His gaze was unwavering. So was mine. Through the open window, in my peripheral vision, I saw a helicopter hover past, then dart away like a curious hummingbird. I tried not to let it distract me.

"What do you want to know?"



"I want to know why you gave them to me now."

"I only discovered them a few years ago."

"Why not give them to me then?"

"Because you were still working here as an apprentice."

"What does that matter?"

"You didn't know what the hell you were doing," he said.

I smiled, realizing what he was getting at. "You waited for me to become a detective."

"Actually, I waited for you to become a *good* detective."

"So you think I'm good?" I hated the fact that this news pleased me.

"That's what I hear."

"You've been checking up on me."

He tilted his head toward me and shrugged. "I hear things."

"Meanwhile you just sat on these photos."

He shifted in his chair and looked away. "Yes."

"Tell me more about the photos."

"When I moved in with Candy," he nodded toward the blond on his desk, "I found them at the bottom of a box. I flipped through, the first time I had ever done



so. To be honest, I don't know when they were developed or when I picked them up. Probably they were included with some other pictures, and got forgotten."

Something rose within me. Blood, anger, revulsion, hatred. "These were pictures of your murdered wife taken on the last day she was alive, the mother of your son, and they were forgotten in the bottom of a box?"

"Those were tough times. I really didn't know my head from a hole in the ground."

"Not a good analogy. Trust me you did just fine in that department. Remember, I saw first hand."

We were silent. I did my best to control my anger. On the wall behind him was a picture of a lighthouse. His paperweight was a lighthouse, as were his two bookends. Since when did my dad like lighthouses? There was so much I didn't know about the man, and so much I didn't care to know.

"They were fishing together, and one of them appears to have taken an interest in the two of you."

He sat back. "That's how I see it."

"It might have been more than an interest," I



added.

"Perhaps. Could also be a coincidence."

I said, "Any idea who Blondie is in the picture?"

He shook his head sadly. "No."

"Do you remember him?"

"Vaguely."

"Were you aware that he had followed you back to the store?"

"No."

"Did you see him again at any other time?"

"No."

"Did you speak with him?"

"I think we did."

"Do you recall what was said?"

"No, I don't. I think I commented on the shark."

"Anything else?"

"Your mother made them laugh with the rabbit ears. They thought she was funny."

I digested this. "Since finding the pictures two years ago, have you done anything—*anything at all*—to follow up on your wife's murder?"

More shifting, as if the plush leather chair could possibly be uncomfortable. He motioned toward the files on his desk. "I've been busy lately, too busy, you



know....”

“Let me finish for you, father. You were too busy making money to follow up on your wife’s murder. Too busy solving other people’s problems to worry about a woman you never truly loved.”

He shrugged.

I got up and walked around the desk and looked down at him. I stood before him, breathing hard, blood pounding in my ears.

“Do what you’ve got to do,” he said, “and get the hell out of here.”

I backhanded him across the face. The force of the blow almost sent him over the arm of his chair. He regained his balance. A red welt was already forming on his cheek bone. Blood appeared in the corner of his mouth, then trickled out. He said nothing, did nothing, just watched me. His eyes were passionless and empty. No, not empty. There was something there, something deep within, something trying to climb up from the unfathomable depths of his cold soul, but then he blinked and it was gone.



I was sitting next to a window drinking a large iced vanilla coffee when he appeared in the parking lot from behind a large truck. The day was hot, but he didn't seem to mind or notice his copious layers of clothing. In fact, he wasn't even sweating. Maybe he was God.

Once inside, he ordered a cup of coffee and sat opposite me, carefully prying the plastic lid off and blowing on his coffee. Finally, when appropriately cooled, he took a sip.

"So where do you go when you're not here speaking with me?"

"Wherever I want."

"And where might that be?"

"It's not where you are, Jim, it's how you get there."

"Wow, that's nice. You should put that on a bumper sticker."

"Where do you think I got it?"

"Great, now God's quoting bumper stickers."

"It's an old truth, Jim."



"The journey and all that," I said.

"Yes, it's about the journey," he said, sipping quietly and watching me with his brownish eyes.

"And what happens once you get there?" I asked.

"What happens once the journey is over?"

"That is for you to decide, my son. You can stay there, or you can start a new journey."

"A new journey?"

"Of course."

"Are we talking reincarnation here?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Jack. "Are we?"

"Does reincarnation exist?" I asked.

"The soul lives forever," said the bum in front of me as if he knew what the hell he was talking about.

"But the soul can choose many forms."

"Okay, it's too early in the morning for this shit, Sorry I asked."

"Apology accepted. But there's a reason you asked, isn't there?"

There was, but I wasn't sure I wanted the answer. I put down my iced coffee and set it aside.

"So where's my mother now?" I asked. "You know, her spirit, or whatever?"



As I spoke, Jack inhaled the coffee deeply, pausing, taking the scent deep within, making it a part of him.

"She is wherever she wants to be," he said, exhaling.

"And where would that be?"

"For instance, she is with us now since we are talking about her."

"Oh really?"

"Yes."

"And is she sitting next to me?" I asked.

He didn't answer at first, although he gave me a gentle smile.

"She is in your heart, Jim. Be still, and feel her there."

I looked at the old man across from me. On second thought, he wasn't really that old. On third thought, I was hard pressed to gauge just how old he was, although he was certainly older than me. And then another thought occurred to me: My mother. I suddenly remembered a time when she and I had gone to the beach together in the city bus. She let me ditch school and had treated me like a prince that day.



My breath caught in my throat. Fuck, I missed her.

“She misses you, too,” said Jack. “But she wants you to know that she is always with you.” He paused, and that gentle smile found his weathered face. “And that you will always be her little prince, even though you are a big son-of-bitch.”

And all I could do was wipe my eyes and laugh.  
Hi, mom.

45.

“Last time you were here, Knighthorse, my school was turned upside down. Please, no more bodies.”

Vice Principal Williams’s levity over the tragic suicide of her football coach was a tad alarming, but I let it slide without comment. She had come to the door to shake my hand. Today she was dressed in a white pant suit and a white blouse that was see-through enough to ignite the imagination of any hormone-enraged teenaged boy. And to ignite the



imagination of at least one hormone-enraged detective.

“Um, nice blouse,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said. She looked down at it. “Or are you just saying that because you can see the outline of my bra?”

“Which qualifies it as a nice blouse.”

She settled into her chair behind her desk. I sat before her. Her gaze did not waver from mine. “I am a married woman.”

I pointed to the rock on her hand. “Not a hard fact to overlook, even for one as highly trained as I.”

“What makes you so highly trained?”

“I apprenticed for two years with my father. And he is the best.”

“You say that almost grudgingly.”

“My father and I have never been close. You could say he was unsupportive in my earlier sporting endeavors.”

“You hold that against him?”

“Yes.”

She studied me some more, and we held each other’s gaze for a heartbeat or two. She inhaled and her chest inflated and the lacy bra pushed out. It was



a calculated move.

"Currently my husband and I are separated."

"I see."

"What is your situation, Mr. Knighthorse?"

I hesitated. I did not know my situation. Cindy had not called me for two days. As far as I knew she was gone.

"I am in a similar situation," I said.

"Perhaps we can entertain each other in the meantime."

"Entertaining is good."

"How about dinner this weekend?" she asked.

I thought about it. It was getting old drinking alone.

"Mrs. Williams—"

"Please, Dana."

"Dana, this weekend would be...fine."

She smiled, relaxed and sat back. She had the attitude of a closed deal. "Now what can I do for you?"

"Where can I find the school band director?"

"Bryan Dawson?"

"If that's the band director."



Her fingers drummed the arm of her chair.

"Is there a problem, Dana?" I asked.

She turned in her swivel chair and gazed out her considerable window into the empty quad. I continued to watch her, intrigued by her response.

"Why do you wish to speak to him?"

"Amanda quit the school band unexpectedly. I want to find out why."

"Seems a reach for your investigation."

"My job is to reach. Luckily I have a long arm."

"You can find him here in the mornings. Room one oh seven, around six a.m. Band practice starts at zero period, six forty-five a.m."

"Is there something I should know about him?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Look, I'm a good detective. Perhaps not as good as my pop, but the next best thing. If there's something going on with your band director, I'm going to find out about it. But you and I can cut a deal now, and if you make things easy on me, perhaps I will agree to keep things quiet."

*"Perhaps?"*

"Perhaps is the best I can offer."



*"Perhaps is not good enough."*

"Then I will find the truth on my own, and there is no deal."

She sat back and gazed at me from over steeped fingers. "You are a hard sonofabitch."

"You have no idea."

"I just want myself and the school left out of it."

"I can probably swing that," I said.

*"Probably?"*

"Best I can offer right now."

She got up and shut her door, then sat back down and faced me. She didn't look me in the eye. Instead she busied herself by adjusting her desk calendar this way and that. She only risked glancing up at me occasionally. Even then she seemed to only focus on my unnaturally broad shoulders. Who could blame her, really?

"Now, there have been some, ah, alleged indiscretions between Mr. Dawson and a couple of his students in the past."

"Have the allegations been confirmed?"

"No."

"Was Amanda Peterson one of those who allegedly had an indiscretion?"



"Yes."

"What did these indiscretions involve?"

"Sexual advances."

"Has anyone looked into the allegations?"

"I did."

"And what did you discover?"

"He denied everything and there was no proof, and now one of the girls is dead."

"And the other?"

"Lives in Washington state."

"Do you have her address?"

She looked at me blankly. Then turned to her filing cabinet behind her, opened it, and busied herself for the next minute or two thumbing through files. She removed one and brought it to her desk. There she copied some information down on a sticky pad, then passed it over to me. There was a name on it, Donna Trigger, along with a phone number.

Dana sat back. "You are very thorough."

"No stone unturned."

"Are you just as thorough in the bedroom?"

"You'll just have to use your imagination."

She smiled, and her cheeks turned a little red.



“Oh, I have.”

46.

I figure if I'm going to haul my ass out to Huntington High by six a.m., then I was going to reward myself with some Krispy Kremes.

Which I did, along with two containers of chocolate milk. I don't drink coffee, and since I'm still looking to add some weight, whole chocolate milk has the kind of calories I'm looking for.

It was cool enough for the heater, and since I didn't want to waste all my precious calories shivering, I went ahead and cranked it up. With the ocean to my right, I drove languidly south along Pacific Coast Highway. I was not in a hurry and I had my donuts to keep me company. The ocean was slate gray and choppy this morning, but that did not stop the handful of faithful surfers, who dotted the breakers like so much flotsam.



I turned up a street called Mariner, which, coincidentally, just happened to be Huntington High's mascot, and neatly finished the last of the Krispy Kremes, slugging it down with the remainder of the chocolate milk. I pulled into the visitor parking spot. My gun had traveled on the seat next to me; these days I kept it particularly handy.

I licked my fingers clean before grabbing the gun and shoving it in my shoulder holster. I just hate sticky gun handles.

\* \* \*

I was waiting outside room 107 when I heard footsteps coming from the adjoining hallway. Instinctively I reached inside my jacket and rested my hand on the handle of the Browning. A man appeared from around the corner. He was young-looking and in his early thirties, thick black hair and a nice build. His face was narrow and clean-shaven. He was a handsome guy; worse, he knew it.

When he saw me, he paused in mid-step.

"Bryan Dawson?" I asked.

He made an effort to smile broadly. It was a good smile, the kind that would melt any impressionable high schooler. However, I was not an impressionable



high schooler.

"You are the detective," he said, brushing past me, knocking a shoulder into mine. It was a calculated shoulder strike, but I didn't move. He careened briefly off-balance and only recovered by grabbing the door handle.

"Pardon you," I said. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, yes, sorry. A little clumsy this early in the morning."

He had known of me, which I found interesting. Someone had hired the thug, too; someone who had known of me as well.

"Don't worry about it. I'm just glad your shoulder is okay," I said jovially. "How do you know me?"

"Someone pointed you out the other day when the police arrived for Coach Castleton. Weren't you the one who found him?"

"Yes."

"Must have been awful," he said. "Seeing his brains and shit all over the place."

His gaze was unwavering and challenging. I didn't like him. He was cocky, loud, and too sure of himself.

"It was more awful that he found it necessary to



end his life. The murder of Amanda Peterson has had significant repercussions. Not to mention an innocent boy is in jail for the crime."

"The police don't seem to think he's so innocent. For them it's an open and shut case."

"Luckily for Derrick, I don't think it's so open and shut."

"Which means what? You're only a private dick."

"Means I'm going to find the killer."

"So what can I do for you?"

"May I come in?"

"No."

"Did you have a relationship with Amanda?"

"I was her band director."

"Did you have a relationship with her outside of school?"

"Of course not."

"Where were you on the night of Amanda Peterson's murder?"

"I have nothing left to say to you."

"Of course you don't."

And he promptly shut the door in my face.

Jim Knighthorse, master interrogator.



It was late and we were at a restaurant called Waters in the city of Irvine. Coincidentally, a small, foul-smelling, man-made lake sat next to the restaurant. I wondered what came first: The lake or the restaurant?

Vice Principal Dana Williams had pushed hard for this meeting, so I agreed to meet her here. I sensed she liked me. I also sensed she was a very lonely woman. So why had I agreed? I didn't know entirely. She was loosely connected to my case, so I could always justify the meeting in that way. I was also lonely myself. Very lonely. Perhaps we were just two lost souls meeting in the night, at a pretentiously named restaurant.

"Do you talk to your ex-girlfriend much?" asked Mrs. Williams. She emphasized the ex part a little too much.

"She's not my ex. We're just taking a break from



all the action.”

“What sort of action?” she asked.

“Nevermind,” I said. I didn’t feel like talking about it, especially someone who was all for my break up with Cindy. Anyone who was all for my break up with Cindy was no friend of mine.

“Do you always speak in football jargon?” she asked.

We were seated outside, on the wide, wooden deck that wrapped around the entire restaurant. We had a great view of the fake lake. A duck floated nearby. It could have been fake, too, but I doubted it.

“Yes,” I said simply.

“I see,” she said. She toyed with the red straw sticking out of her margarita. If my lack of enthusiasm for our meeting was making her uncomfortable, she didn’t show it. I sensed that she saw me as a challenge. “Do you think I’m pretty?” she asked suddenly.

Admittedly, the question caught me off-guard. I looked at her from across the table. She was looking ravishing, to say the least. A tight blouse that showed way too much of her chest. Make-up that seemed expertly applied. Hair perfectly framing her pretty



face.

"Yeah," I said. I wasn't in the mood to dance around the subject.

She beamed, pleased.

Our food arrived. Clams for her. A burger for me. I ate the fries first. She watched me eat. She was about to ask me something, probably something about Cindy, when I cut her off. Enough of the bullshit.

"So how long have you been separated?" I asked.

She shrugged, sipped her drink. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

She leveled her stare at me and I was reminded again that she was very much the vice principal of discipline at Huntington High. When she spoke, she lowered her voice ominously. "I don't remember, *exactly*. A few years I suppose. Is that okay?"

"Hey, I'm okay if you're okay," I said, and very much wanted to get the hell out of here. Mrs. Williams's apparent ability to go from flirtatious to bitch was alarming at best.

We ate our food in silence. Actually, I ate and she toyed. I wondered what the clams thought about



being killed only to be toyed with.

*Probably be pissed off.*

"Do you think Derrick killed Amanda?" I asked suddenly. Hey, might as well get some work done. In the least, I could write the dinner off for tax purposes.

"Yes," she said immediately.

"Why?"

"He had motive and he had the murder weapon."

"Damning evidence," I said. "Except that all indications seem to point that he was truly in love with Amanda."

"Which would make his jealousy all the more unpredictable," she said. "Wouldn't it?"

I shrugged. I didn't like answering leading questions.

We continued to eat. Just beyond, the duck floated unmovingly. I was now certain it was fake. Or asleep.

While we ate, I could sense Mrs. Williams watching me. Her watching me made me uncomfortable in a way I couldn't quite put my finger on. Perhaps I sensed in her an unpredictability. She reminded me of my father in that way. Happy one moment, a real piece of work the next.



And for perhaps the hundredth time that evening, I wished with all my heart that Cindy was sitting across from me. I missed her laugh, her smile, her scent. Her everything.

When the bill came, I quickly paid it and we left. As we exited the restaurant, Mrs. Williams looped her arm through mine. I think I shuddered a little.

I walked her to her car, where we stood awkwardly for a few moments. I wanted to leave but she wouldn't release my arm. Above, the tiny sliver of moon reflected the hollow feeling inside me.

"I had a great time tonight," she said.

Her words took me by surprise. What date had she been on? I had been miserable.

"We should do it again sometime," she added.

I nodded dumbly and just wanted to leave. Finally she released my arm and surprised me again by planting a big, wet kiss on my lips. She pulled away and grinned warmly, then got in her massive SUV and drove off.

I stood there in the parking lot, watching her go. I wanted to run to Cindy.

But I didn't. Instead, on the way home, I bought a



case of beer and drank the night away.

48.

I went on a seven mile jog the next morning. I kept an easy pace, and my leg only hurt a little, which was encouraging. I showered and shaved at home, then headed for the office, where I kept my office door locked and the Browning on the desk next to me.

I called Donna Trigger. A girl answered and told me that Donna had classes this morning but I could try later in the afternoon. I said I would, she said cool, popped a bubble and hung up.

Next I called Sanchez on his cell and asked him to run Bryan Dawson's name through his data base and see what turned up. He said no problem and that if it weren't for me he wouldn't have shit to do, nevermind his caseload of homicides to solve. I hung up on him in mid-rant.

I sat back in my chair and realized I had no real clues or suspects, other than two lecherous men with



a fondness for young girls. This was so depressing that I felt it necessary to take a nap. I usually don't need much convincing when it comes to naps.

\* \* \*

The phone woke me. It was just before noon.

"Hi," said a soft voice. My heart lurched. It was Cindy.

"Hello."

"Can I see you?"

"Sure."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

I hung up and sat at my desk for a minute or two until I realized I was holding my breath. I let it out slowly. Within the next few minutes the course of my life would be set. Amazingly, it was out of my hands, and in Cindy's alone.

\* \* \*

I stood off to the side of my window, looking down onto Beach Blvd, the blinds partly open. Hauling ass down the street and turning dangerously in front of a white pickup, Cindy arrived in her silver Lexus. I could hear the pickup's angry horn from here.

And trailing behind Cindy was a blue Taurus. Not



normally a big deal, granted, but sitting in the driver's seat was my friend the hitman. He continued on past my building and made a left and disappeared.

He made two mistakes: the first was that I made his plate. The second was that he had involved Cindy.

My phone rang. I grabbed it.

"You're girlfriend's cute. Back off, or she's dead." The line went dead.

I immediately called Sanchez and got his voice mail. I left the plate number for him to run. Now I was going to owe Sanchez another dinner. So what else was new?

Next I unlocked the door and paced before my couch, trying like hell to get the killer out of my mind and focus on Cindy. To focus on *us*.

Moving along the cement walkway, heels clicking rapidly along, I could hear Cindy coming.

My hands were sweating; my shoulders were knotted. I resented her for putting me through this. We had been serious for eight years. She knew the dangers inherent to my profession, but she also knew that I could handle them. The only new twist was my interest in resuming my football career; well,



and the drinking.

The door to my office opened, and she stood there holding a beautiful bouquet of wildflowers. She came in and set the flowers down on the desk, then threw her arms around me. Her lips found mine and we kissed like lost lovers, which, for a few days, we were. We fumbled our way to the couch, and there we made up for lost time.

And the direction of my life became clear again.  
Damn clear.

49.

Nestled between a Rite Aide and a laundromat was a little Italian place that I liked, called Frazzi's. Cindy and I were heading there now for lunch, holding hands. The mid-day sun shone straight down on us, but lacked any real heat, just a bright ornament hanging in the sky.

"So why is Italian your favorite food?" asked



Cindy. I sensed she was feeling happy. The weather was nice, and we had just made love, and she wanted to keep things light and fun, at least for the moment. We still hadn't talked about the heavy stuff, which was fine by me.

"I've discovered in the course of my considerable dining experience and extensive travels that a food joint has to work pretty damn hard to screw up Italian food. It's usually a sure bet."

"I've screwed it up before," she said.

"Actually, we screwed it up together," I said.

"Which is why we no longer cook."

"And why we eat out."

"Except for you and your damn cereal and PB&Js."

"Cereal and PB&J's are my staple. They keep me alive."

"I know. I think it's cute."

Frazzi's was a narrow restaurant with checkered table cloths and red vinyl seats. We found a booth in the back and sat ourselves. By now Cindy knows to allow me to have the best view of the restaurant, where I keep my eyes on the front door, the butt of my gun loose and free. There wasn't much for Cindy



to look at other than me. Lucky girl.

The waitress came by and we ordered two Cokes.

"So can I say a few things?" asked Cindy.

"Of course." Here it comes.

"Your drinking worries me. Actually, it's not the fact that you occasionally get drunk, it's that you feel you need to drink secretly."

"Well, it's not a pretty sight."

"How long have you been getting drunk?"

I shrugged. "Off and on since I broke my leg."

"The broken leg was the catalyst?"

"Yes."

"And nothing else?"

I reached out and took her hand from across the table. She needed to be reassured. I looked at her steadily in the eye. "It's the only reason."

"Nothing about me?"

"No."

"Can I ask you a favor?"

"Yes," I said.

"Will you try to stop for me? I'm not asking you to give up drinking altogether, but I'm asking you to stop getting drunk whenever we are away from each



other, to stop destroying your liver, to stop feeling so goddamn sorry for yourself.”

“I might need help.”

“I’ll help you.”

Our drinks came, along with some fresh bread and oil.

“The usual, Jim?” asked Mama Lucco. She was Italian and in her mid-forties. I’d been coming here for four years, ever since I set up my agency down the street.

“Make that two,” I said.

When Mama Lucco had moved off, Cindy asked, “What’s the usual?”

“Lasagna, of course.”

“I should have known.”

“So what else is on your mind?”

She took a sip from her Coke, and then tore a piece of bread off, dipped it in oil and gave it to me. I took it, and she repeated the process for herself.

When she was ready, she said, “I’ve been feeling sorry for myself, too, admittedly. I asked myself why couldn’t I have a boyfriend who has a normal job, a job in which his life isn’t threatened by a hired killer, a job that didn’t require you to deal with the dregs of



society.”

She paused. I waited.

“But then I realized that you are so goddamn good at what you do, and someone has to set things right in this fucked up world. And if you are willing to do it, then the least I can do is stand by your side, and give you my support.”

I digested this, then asked, “What about football?”

“I don’t know what to make of this football business. We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

“Fair enough.”

“And I’ve come to the conclusion that if I go back to you now, I will forever accept you, just the way you are, and deal with whatever comes our way, together. I had a taste of life without you this week, and it was horrible. Just horrible.” She paused and took my hand, and looked me in the eye. “Will you take me back?”

“Yes,” I said.

She kissed my knuckles. “You’ve got me forever, Jim Knighthorse. Or for as long as you can stand me.”



Later, with Cindy teaching an afternoon class, and me wondering how I was going to stay off the booze, Sanchez called.

"I got an address on that plate."

"Swell."

"You say it was an older model *blue* Taurus?"

"Uh huh."

"How about a *green* '89 Taurus?"

"Green, blue, same difference."

"Christ, Knighthorse. Can't you tell the difference?"

"No," I said. "Greens and blues are tough."

"That could be the difference in apprehending a felon."

"We all have our handicaps," I said. "Mine is coloration. Yours is unattractiveness."

"Fuck you," he said, chuckling.

"Perhaps if you were better looking."

"So what are you going to do?"



“Convince the killer to stay away.”

Sanchez was silent. “You’re going to kill him,” he finally said. It wasn’t a question.

“No other way to convince a hitman to stay away.”

“You need help?”

“Wouldn’t that be against the law?”

“Yes.”

“No, thank you. He made it personal. Be better if you stayed out of it, in case something goes wrong.” I paused. “I owe you.”

“Fucking eh, you do. You can start with dinner tonight.”

He gave me the name and address, and hung up. Johnny Bright. I stared at the name for some time.

He should have left Cindy out of it. Would have been healthier for him.

\* \* \*

Next I called Washington state, and this time got hold of Donna Trigger.

“Who’s this?” she asked. Her voice was soft.

“My name is Jim Knighthorse, I’m a private detective down in Huntington Beach. I’m following up on the murder of Amanda Peterson.”



There was silence. Not even a hiss of a connection. "What can I do for you, Mr. Knighthorse?"

"Can I ask you about Bryan Dawson?"

Another pause. "What would you like to know?"

"What was your relationship with Mr. Dawson?"

"He was my band director," she said evenly. "And my lover." She caught me admittedly by surprise. But I am a professional, and just as I opened my mouth for the next question, she continued: "And, in the end, my stalker."

"Could you elaborate?"

"On what?"

"On everything," I said.

\* \* \*

She did, and when we hung up I had a much clearer picture of Bryan Dawson. And I had no reason to doubt her. Dawson had approached her during her junior year, and she had been flattered because she had always considered him cute. All of the girls did. It began after band camp when he offered to give her a ride home. One thing led to another and they didn't make it home and she had been honored that he had chosen *her* out of all the



girls. She was seventeen and had been a virgin. She saw him secretly during the next year, but he became possessive and physical and she ended the relationship. He was relentless in his pursuit to win her back. Soon he was following her home, standing outside her windows, calling her repeatedly. And when she began dating someone else, a senior at their school, that someone was brutally attacked one night, leaving the kid with a fractured skull and permanent semi-blindness.

But the stalking had abruptly ended when he found a new girl.

A replacement.

Amanda Peterson.

## 51.

Sanchez and I were across the street from my pad, upstairs at the Huntington Beach Brew Pub.

“Why am I always coming out to O.C. to meet



you?" he asked.

"Because I'm worth it," I said. "What's Danielle doing tonight?"

"She's taking a class. Going back to school to get a degree in finance. She's hit a ceiling at work, needs the degree."

"It's about time you let her have a life you chauvinistic Latino pig."

"Hey, I'm only half Latino."

We were both drinking the blond house draft, a light, sweet beer.

Sanchez said, "Why is it the blond beer is the lighter beer, and the darker beer gets you drunk faster? Thought blonds have more fun."

"How long you been thinking that one up?"

"Just came to me. I am, after all, a UCLA-educated Latino."

Our food came. And lots of it. I had ordered from the appetizer menu, running my forefinger straight down the list and rattling off anything that sounded good. And it all sounded good. Now, plates of nachos, chicken wings, calamari, southwestern eggrolls and even an artichoke were arriving steadily at our table.



"Someone in the kitchen must like you," said Sanchez, "because they gave you a green flower."

"It's called an artichoke, you oaf."

"Well, your arteries are going to be choking after you eat all that shit."

Despite myself, I laughed.

"What can I say?" Sanchez said. "I'm on a roll. Can I have any of that shit?"

"Get your own food."

"Can't; you cleaned out the kitchen."

We drank from our beer. The Lakers were playing the Jazz. Shaq was unloading on them.

"So I've got news on Pencil Dick."

"Who's Pencil Dick?"

"Your teacher friend, Bryan Dawson. Anyone poking high school students is called a pencil dick."

"I see; what's the news?"

Sanchez leaned forward on his elbows. "Pencil Dick was involved in another murder up north. In a city called Half Moon Bay."

"So tell me."

"A student of his, a band student, disappeared. They found her floating in the San Francisco bay. Pencil Dick was a suspect, but they couldn't pin



anything on him. He quit his job and came down here.”

“Well, then, what do you think we should do?” I asked.

“We tail him. With Amanda gone, he might be looking for new blood.”

## 52.

I found the allegedly green Taurus parked in front of a small woodframe house in Santa Ana. It was 9:00 p.m., and the Taurus still looked blue to me.

Santa Ana is mostly Hispanic and its residents are perhaps the poorest in Orange County. In fact, downtown Santa Ana looks as if it had been lifted whole from Mexico City.

Johnny Bright, as a Caucasian, would stick out in Santa Ana like a sore white thumb.

But one question remained: was Johnny Bright the same guy who took a potshot at my ear? The vehicle could have belonged to a friend. In that case I would follow the friend. Either way, with a paid killer



on my ass, I preferred to be proactive in my involvement with him.

I waited in my car around a corner, with a clear view of Bright's front porch. My own vehicle had nicely tinted windows, and from behind them I watched the house through lightweight high-powered binoculars. I didn't have many tools of the trade, but this was one of them.

I was listening to Will Durant's *Story of Philosophy* on tape. The 5 Freeway arched above the housing tract. Freeway noises, especially the rumble of a Harley, cut through the drone of the tape. I was on my third tape, marching on through Voltaire and the French Enlightenment, when four gang members stopped by the Mustang and looked it over, not realizing I was inside. I rolled down my window and reached under my seat and pulled out a fake police badge.

Another one of my tools....

"Can I help you gentlemen?" I said, flashing the badge.

The first one, a skinny kid with a black bandana tied around his head, shot his hands up as if I had



pointed a gun at him. When he spoke he had a long, drawling Hispanic accent, punctuated by jerky hand movements.

“Don’t shoot me, officer, I didn’t mean to look at your killer set of wheels.”

“You can look but don’t touch.”

“Waddya doin’ here?” asked the kid, their obvious leader.

“Watching you boys.”

“Are you gay, too?”

His buddies slapped each other high fives.

Behind them there was movement in Bright’s house, but I couldn’t see because the gang members were in my way. I heard a screen door swing open and slap shut.

“Beat it,” I said.

The three of them waited for their leader. The leader squinted at me and seemed to recognize me. I get this kind of partial recognition a lot. Probably because at one point in their lives they had seen me on their TV screens, or in their newspapers, or sports magazines. But this kid was young, perhaps too young to know of me. But you never knew.

He jerked his head. “Let’s roll,” he told the others.



They sauntered off. One called me a pig. They would be potential witnesses; that is, if the police tried very hard to investigate the murder.

*Murder?*

*Yeah, someone's going to die tonight.*

Across the street, Fuck Nut, with his slicked-back graying hair visible from even here, opened the door to his Taurus and got in.

53.

We drove through Santa Ana. I tailed him using tricks gleaned from my father. Once, at a red light, I even turned into a liquor store parking lot. When the light turned green again, I pulled out of the parking lot and continued tailing him.

At least I was amusing myself.

He pulled into a Taco Bell, and I waited across the street. He went through the drive-thru, and when he exited I followed him back to his house.

Across the street, I waited for him to finish his tacos, since it was his last meal. As I waited, I



listened to the beating of my heart, filling the silence now that the book on tape had been turned off. The thudding filled my ears, and I focused on that rather than what was about to come. What had to come. I didn't think of myself as a killer, but sometimes you had to do what you had to do. I needed this guy off my ass and away from Cindy.

When twenty minutes had passed, I stepped out of my car, crossed the street and walked up his front porch. The porch was made of cement, and my footfalls made no sound.

I stood before the door, aimed for the area under the doorknob, lifted my foot and smashed it open. Wood splintered. The door swung open on one hinge, and I kicked it the rest of the way open.

"What the fuck?" came a startled voice from inside.

Johnny Bright, a.k.a. Fuck Nut, was now dressed in a wife beater and blue boxers. On the coffee table before him was a porn magazine. There were little boys on the cover. He had dropped his soft taco in his alarm, and had just wrapped his fingers around the handle of his own 9mm.

Standing in the doorway, I shot him four times in



the chest.

When I was about three miles away, in a city called Fountain Valley, I pulled over to the side of the road and threw up my breakfast, lunch and dinner.

And I kept throwing up....

54.

He was waiting for me at the back of McDonald's. I sat down without ordering. I was still feeling sick to my stomach, and the thought of a greasy McGriddle did little to alleviate the queasiness.

I didn't look him in the eye, although I could feel his on me. Today, he was smelling especially ripe, as if he had slept in a dumpster. Hell, as if he ~~was~~ a dumpster.

A few minutes of this and I finally risked looking up. He was smiling at me kindly, and the love and warmth in his eyes was almost unbearable.



"I'm sorry," I said.

"What are you sorry for?" he asked.

"If you are God, you know."

We were silent some more. I didn't feel like playing his head games today. If he was God, then let him take the next step. If not, then I was content to sit across from him until the smell of frying bacon made me hurl. Which might be sooner rather than later.

"He was a very troubled man," said Jack.

"Yes, he was,"

"He made many poor choices."

I took in some air. The queasiness seemed to intensify as I relived Fuck Nut's last moments.

"Perhaps his poorest choice was threatening Cindy," said Jack.

I had never once mentioned Cindy's name to the man sitting across from me. The fact that he knew who she was should have amazed me, but in my current state of disarray, it was mostly lost on me.

"A very poor choice," I said.

"And you were forced to take action to protect her."

"Yes."



"So what are you sorry for?"

"For killing him."

"He wanted to die, Jim. He knew this day was coming. He was miserable and lonely and hated every day that he was alive."

I said nothing. I could not speak. His words did, however, ease some of the queasiness. I sat a little straighter even as I felt a little better.

"Is he going to hell?" I asked.

"He is in a place you do not want to be."

We'd had this discussion before and I didn't feel like getting into it now. There was no heaven or hell, but only worlds of our own creations. There was no punishment in the afterlife, only reflection and recreation. Blah blah blah. New age mumbo-jumbo. I didn't want to hear it. I had killed a man and that was my reality.

"He hurt a lot of kids, too," I said.

"Yes."

"Hey, I've got a fucking question for you, Jack...God, or whoever the fuck you are. Why the fuck did you allow him to hurt innocent kids? There you go. Answer that question. I'm sure there's a million mothers out there who've lost innocent



children who'd just love an answer to that one. Oh, wait, never mind. You're just a bum and I'm a fucking idiot for coming in to a fucking McDonald's and entertaining the idea that you might be something more than just street trash." I stopped, took a deep breath.

"You done?" asked Jack.

I nodded, sitting back, my heart yammering in my chest.

"Nobody dies without the spirit's consent," said Jack.

"So a child who's kidnapped, raped and buried alive gives such a consent."

"Yes."

"But they're a fucking child, Jack. How the fuck could a child make that kind of a decision?"

"The decision was made long ago."

"Long ago? You mean in a place where time suddenly *does* exist?"

He ignored my sarcasm.

"Prior to taking on the body, the soul made an agreement with another soul—"

I cut him off; this was just pissing me off.

"An agreement to allow themselves to be raped



and killed? How very generous of the soul.”

Jack looked at me for a long moment.

“Yes,” he said. “Very generous.”

“And that’s supposed to comfort a grieving mother? A mother who, say, just lost her child to a sick-ass motherfucker?”

“Such a death serves many purposes, Jim. There is a ripple effect that will touch many, many lives for generations to come.”

“Fine. Many lives are touched. It’s a noble act of sacrifice. But it’s the thought of their child suffering that drives parents mad with grief. The fact that their baby *suffered* at the hands of an animal.”

Jack said nothing, although he did finally sip his coffee. Glad to see he still had his taste for coffee.

Finally, he said, “You might be pleased to know that a spirit may leave the body whenever it wants.”

“A child could leave its body?”

“Yes.”

“And not suffer?”

Jack looked at me and smiled very deeply and kindly, and I saw, for the first time ever, that there were tears in his eyes.



“And not suffer,” he said.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

55.

Two days later I was in San Diego, about an hour and a half south from Huntington Beach.

It was 10:00 a.m. sharp and I was sitting alone in a leather sofa in an ornate office overlooking the lush playing field at Qualcomm Stadium. The field, as viewed through the massive window, was empty.

The office was covered with photographs of past personnel and players. I recognized almost all of them, since football was my life. Not to mention, I had taken a particularly keen interest in the San Diego Chargers since their last offer.

I was dressed to the nines in khakis and cordovan loafers and a blue silk shirt that accentuated my blue eyes. At least that's what I'm told.

A door opened and a little bald man with gold



rimmed glasses came in. He saw me, smiled brightly, and moved over to me with surprising speed. Of course, it shouldn't be too surprising, Aaron Larkin had been free safety for the Chargers for most of his career in the seventies. In the seventies, he had not been bald.

"My God, Knighthorse, you are a big boy," he said, pumping my hand.

"Oh, really? I hadn't noticed."

He laughed and gestured for me to sit. He moved behind his black lacquer desk and took a seat. Larkin leaned forward eagerly and laced his fingers together before him. His fingers were thick and gnarled and some seemed particularly crooked, not too surprising after a full career in football. Between high school, college and the pros, fingers were bound to get broken.

"We are very excited to hear from you," Aaron Larkin began.

"Excitement is good. I am happy to be here."

"Well, we had given up on you. Such a tragedy about your leg. But my God you have kept yourself fit. And we need someone like you badly. Hell, who doesn't need a fullback nowadays?"



“Outside of football, few people.”

He laughed. “We want to give you a private workout in two weeks. If we like what we see we’ll invite you to training camp. We are honored that you’re here, Knighthorse. My God you were an unholy terror on the playing field. Your services could be very, very valuable to us. So how is the leg?” he asked, and his voice was filled with genuine concern, and for that I liked the guy immensely.

“It has healed completely.” I lied. It hurt like a motherfucker.

“An utter miracle. I watched you coming down the hall. There’s no limp to speak of.”

The hallways had been empty. He must have been watching me on some closed circuit TV. A sort of high tech surveillance to monitor my gait.

“Well, I’m a hell of a specimen.”

“Around here, they all are.”

We set a date for my mini-workout, and when I left his office, I waved to the little camera situated in the upper corner of the hallway.



"Where the hell is he?" asked Sanchez.

I shrugged.

"Did you just shrug?" he asked. "Because it's too dark to tell. I mean there's a hundred reasons why I'm one of the best homicide detectives in LAPD, but seeing in the dark ain't one of them."

"Neither is using proper English."

"Hell you're lucky I'm using any English at all, being of Latino descent, and this being Southern California."

"This is America, you know."

"Unfortunately there ain't no such thing as speaking *American*."

"Too bad."

"And last time I checked we ain't in England, so fuck English."

We were waiting outside of Huntington High in my Mustang. It was past 7:00 p.m., and Bryan Dawson, or Pencil Dick, was still in his office. We had been waiting here for the past four hours. Students were long gone, including most of the



faculty. We had watched the sun set over the Pacific.

"I'm hungry," said Sanchez.

"There's a Wendy's around the corner. Why don't you go get us something to eat."

"Why don't you give me the fucking money to go get us something to eat."

"When was the last time you paid for anything?" I asked.

"The last time you helped me solve a case."

I gave him the cash. Sanchez left, and the mere thought of a burger and fries made my stomach start to growl. We had been following Pencil Dick for four straight days. So far there was no evidence of any extracurricular activities on the part of the band director, other than his fondness for frozen yogurt.

Sanchez came back with a massive grease-stained bag of food. We ate silently and quickly, drinking from two plastic buckets that were passed off as jumbo drinks. And when we were finished, when the eating noises finally stopped altogether, when the debris had been collected back into the bags, I saw a familiar sight.

Coming down through a side hall, turning into the faculty parking lot, was a handsome man with dark



hair. He was carrying a briefcase, and looked far too important to be just a band director. Or at least that was the impression he presented. He got into a red Jetta.

“Let’s roll,” I said.

57.

Bryan Dawson lived in a condo about a mile from the beach. We were currently heading in the opposite direction.

“He’s not heading home,” said Sanchez.

“Astute,” I said.

I was three cars behind the Huntington band director, sometimes drifting back to four or five. To date, he had made no indication that he knew he was being followed.

“You’re following too close.”

“No, I’m not.”

“He’s going to make us.”

“He’s not going to make us,” I said. “And I’m the one who taught you how to tail.”



"But I'm the one who got all the tail."

"So you say."

We were heading deeper into Huntington Beach. In fact, we were just a few blocks from my office.

"Know someone works around here," said Sanchez. "Thinks he's a detective."

The Jetta suddenly turned into an empty bank parking lot. I pulled to the side of the road and killed the headlights, giving us a good view of Pencil Dick. From the shadows, a lithe figure stepped away from the building and into Dawson's car. The Jetta swung around, exited the parking lot and was soon heading back our way. Sanchez and I both ducked.

"You realize that we look like fools," said Sanchez as the car sped past us. "The windows are tinted. They can't see us."

"They especially can't see you," I said.

"Is that a comment on my darkish skin?"

"Your *dark* skin."

"I'm proud of my dark skin."

"Good for you," I said, peeking up and looking in my rearview mirror. Dawson was heading south, probably home. I flicked on the lights. "And away we go."



I followed four car lengths behind the Jetta. Judging by Dawson's preoccupation with his newly acquired passenger, I probably could have followed directly behind him with my brights on, with little fear of being made.

"She just disappeared," said Sanchez.

"In his lap," I said.

"You think she's inspecting the quality of his zipper?"

"She's inspecting something."

The Jetta swerved slightly to the right. Dawson over-compensated and swerved to the left. He finally regained some control, although he now drove more toward the right side of the lane and even on the line itself.

"Seems distracted," said Sanchez.

"Yep."



"How old do you think she is?"

"No way of telling yet," I said.

"In the least, gonna nail him for statutory rape."

"Got the camera?"

Sanchez reached around and grabbed a nifty piece of equipment. It was a high resolution camcorder with night vision capabilities.

"So you know how to work this thing?" he asked.

"No idea. But we should figure it out fairly quickly."

The Jetta braked and made a right into a massive condo complex. I pulled immediately into a maintenance parking spot near the trash dumpster.

"Okay," Sanchez said, "I've got it rolling."

"Zoom in on the car."

I heard the whir of the zoom feature, and watched the lens stretch out like a probing eye. A green light feature indicated that the night vision capability was currently being used.

"Keep it steady," I said.

"That's what your mom told me back in high school."

"I didn't know you back in high school. Plus, my mom was killed when I was ten."



He pulled away from the camera. "No shit? How was she killed?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

He shrugged, lifted the camera back up to his eye. "Fine."

I said, "Here they come."

"Nice choice of words."

The girl emerged from her position in his lap. We both hunched down. The doors opened. I peaked through the steering wheel. Although the windshield was tinted, it was not as dark as the door glass. Someone looking hard enough could still spot us.

"You need to get a van. This is bullshit."

"When you talk the camera moves. So don't."

They headed our way, laughing and holding hands. Dawson's shirt was untucked. They continued toward us. Sanchez turned in his seat and followed them. As if on cue, Dawson stopped next to Sanchez's door, turned the girl around, planted a big kiss on her lips, and felt her up.

"You getting this?" I whispered.

"Oh, yeah."

"How old do you think she is?" I asked.

They continued up a flight of stairs and



disappeared. Sanchez pulled the camera away from his eye.

“Too young.”

I said, “Goodbye, Pencil Dick.”

59.

I was in my office, feet up on my desk, fingers laced behind my head, a classic detective pose. Of course I had just finished doing two hundred military push ups. Let's see Colombo do that.

When the burn in my arms and chest had resided, I did some tricep dips along the edge of my desk. I've been doing these tricep dips every day since I was fifteen. I could do them all day long. I was at two hundred and seventy-one when my fax machine turned on. I cranked out another twenty-nine, because I like things neat and tidy, finishing in a flourish just as the fax machine stopped spitting out its image.

The fax machine sat on top of a short bookcase.



The bookcase was filled to overflowing with philosophy textbooks and modern philosophical works of particular interest to me, along with all of Clive Cussler's novels, my guilty pleasure.

In my fax tray was a grainy photograph. A grainy *police* photograph, courtesy of Sanchez.

My stomach turned; I felt sickened all over again.

I carefully put the faxed photograph in a manila folder, grabbed my car keys and wallet from the desk's top drawer and left the office.

\* \* \*

Huntington Beach was paradise. The best weather on earth. Few people would argue with me on that point. I drove south along the coast. Something must have been brewing off the coast, because there were some amazing sets crashing in. Alert Huntington surfers, or, rather, those with no life to speak of, were capitalizing on the gnarly waves. Dude. Their black forms, looking from this distance like trained seals, cut across the waves.

Two miles up the coast I turned left and headed up a small incline and parked in front of Huntington High. My home away from home.



It was 3:16 p.m., school was just out.

I moved up the central artery, past hundreds of yellow lockers, searching down row after row, until I spotted a janitor's cart parked outside a classroom.

\* \* \*

Mario and I were sitting opposite each other in student desks that were entirely too small. My knees almost touched my ears. Desks seemed bigger in my day.

Mario was studying the photograph, not saying much. The scent of after shave, sweat and cleaning agents came from him.

Finally he looked up at me. "Yes," he said slowly, enunciating clearly. "That is him."

"You're sure?"

He nodded. "You killed him?"

I said nothing. He said nothing and looked away.

"He was a motherfucker," said Mario. "I am glad he is dead. He said he would kill my whole family."

"I know."

Mario pointed with a thick finger. "Someone shot him four times in the chest. I would have shot him in his fucking face, too." He spat to the side. His lower lip was quivering. His accent was thick and heavy,



his words now even more difficult to discern. "Why did he threaten my family? He is in hell. Straight to hell."

The thought of me sending Fuck Nut to hell was a bit burdensome. I decided to change the subject, somewhat.

"But the person who hired him is still free, Mario. We need to find him next. Do you understand?"

Mario nodded.

"Mario, what did you see on the night Amanda was murdered?"

I waited for him. His lower lip continued to quiver, and he seemed briefly unable to speak, but soon he regained some control of himself, and once he did, he told me everything.

And I mean everything.

At 8:00 a.m., on a slightly overcast morning, I was driving south on the 5 Freeway with the windows



down. My head was clear and empty, which was the way I preferred it. I had stayed off the booze for over a week and felt pretty good about it. I had had a good week of workouts, even though my leg hurt like hell, even at this very moment.

To me the pain was worth it to play football.

The traffic out to San Diego was heavy but steady. At the rate I was going, I would be in San Diego in two hours.

*Two hours.*

Despite my desire to keep my head clear, I thought about this aspect of traffic, and realized again I may have to move to San Diego if I made the team. If so, then I would see less of Cindy.

Not a good thing.

All to chase a dream I had given up on. A dream that had been taken away from me. It had been the dream of a young man, a twenty-two year old man.

I was now thirty.

For a fleeting instant the need to pursue an old dream, to re-hash what I had put aside, seemed sad and silly.

But it was the NFL, man. These were the big boys.



I had been on my way to the NFL. College ball had been surprisingly easy for me. I was a man among boys. Perhaps I thought more highly of myself than I should, but I had been pursued by the NFL since my sophomore year, and rarely has a day gone by that I had not wished that I had entered the draft sooner, prior to the injury. But I had chosen to stay in college. I had wanted my body to fully mature, to be physically ready for the rigors of the NFL. Mine was a demanding position, not as glamorous as some, but tough as hell.

At the moment, my leg was throbbing. Going from the gas to the brake pedal was taking a steady toll.

I shifted in my seat to ease some of the pressure. I had taken three Advils this morning. The Advils didn't work, although my headache was long gone.

*Was I good enough to make it in the pros?*

Yeah, probably. College ball certainly couldn't contain me.

Traffic picked up a little. I entered San Diego county. Signs were posted along this stretch of freeway to be alert for illegal aliens running across



the freeway, a picture of a mother holding a child, being led by the man.

I was thirty years old. I had moved on. I had a career as a detective. I was good at it. Hell, I even knew who killed Amanda.

A killer who needed to be stopped at all costs.

I thought of Cindy and our relationship. She had left me for a week, and then had come back to me. One of the hardest week's of my life. Too hard. Yet she had come back on her own, and I had done nothing to convince her that I was right for her. She had made that decision on her own.

Could I have made the NFL? Yeah, probably.

My leg would continue to throb every day of my pro football career. Football was a twenty-two year old's dream. I was thirty.

I thought of my mother and her own unsolved murder.

There was much to do.

Time to quit screwing around.

At the next exit, I pulled off the freeway, turned around and headed back the way I had come. It was the start of a new day in my life. A new direction. New everything.



My leg felt better already.

61.

On the way back to Orange County I pulled out my cell phone and made a few phone calls, one of them to Aaron Larkin of the Chargers. I left him a voice message thanking him for the opportunity, but I had decided to move on.

He returned my phone call almost instantly, furious. "Move on? What the fuck does that mean?"

"Means I'm not coming in."

There was a pause, and I knew he was thinking: *players would give their left nut for this opportunity.*

"I don't understand. Do you want to reschedule? I'll reschedule for you, Knighthorse, even though we have a whole crew out there waiting for you."

"I'm sorry."

"What happened?"

"Life happened."

"You could make our team, Knighthorse."



"I know."

"Don't do this."

"I have a killer to catch. Hell, two killers to catch. But for now, I will take one."

"What does that mean?"

"Means I have a job to do, and I'm good at it."

"This is the last time I'm asking, Jim. You walk away from this now and no one, and I mean *no one*, will give you another opportunity."

"Good luck with the coming season. Go Chargers." I hung up, then called Detective Hanson of Huntington Beach Homicide.

## 62.

I arrived at Huntington High later that same day just as Mrs. Williams, the vice principal of discipline, was climbing into her Ford Excursion. The Excursion was raised an extra foot or two, and she looked miniscule sitting there in the driver's seat, adjusting her skirt. Her skirt rested just above the knees,



exactly where most skirts should be.

I patted the fender of the Excursion. "You could conquer a small Baltic country with this thing."

"But could you take over a small Baltic country with *your* thing?" She glanced down at my crotch just in case I hadn't picked up on the innuendo.

I said, "Only if they were susceptible to fits of hysterical laughter."

She reached out and touched my arm. Her eyes were extraordinarily large at the moment. Green as hell. Or maybe blue. Hell, I didn't know. Her pupils were pinpricks. I could see the fine lines around her eyes and lips. She didn't blink.

"A big guy like you. I'm sure you're being modest."

"Mrs. Williams, are you flirting with me?"

"Oh, yes."

"Just as long as we're clear on that point."

"Oh, we're clear."

Her thigh was about face high. It was muscular, smooth and tan. She moved it toward me, and when she did her skirt rode up, showing more skin.

"You and I need to talk."



“Oh, we’re going to do more than talk, sugar butt,” she said. “Follow me home.”

And so I followed her.

*Sugar butt?*

\* \* \*

We drove south along PCH, through Newport Beach and into Laguna. She drove quickly, darting in and out of traffic, her need to see me without my shirt on pushing her to drive recklessly. Or perhaps she had to pee. Luckily the Excursion was big enough to follow from outer space.

She turned into a gated community, then waited for me to catch up. When I had done so, a pair of wrought iron doors swung open, and I followed her in, passing beautiful Mediterranean homes, each more elaborate than the next.

A garage door opened on my right and she pulled the Excursion all the way into what must have been a hell of a deep garage. I parked in the driveway and got out.

The sun was hot on my neck. I was wearing a loose Hawaiian shirt, jeans and black hiking boots, although I wasn’t planning on going for a hike any time soon.



She stepped expertly down from the monster truck and beckoned me to follow her through a doorway that led into her kitchen. Once inside she tossed her keys on a counter near the phone and dropped her purse onto the seat of a dining chair. I felt the need to toss something of my own, but decided to hold on to my wallet and keys. The kitchen was paved with tan Spanish tile, and the cabinets were immaculate.

"Vice principals in charge of discipline do well," I said.

"Oh, they do. Especially for those who do their job well."

"I imagine you are one of those."

"Discipline is not something I take lightly, Mr. Knighthorse."

"I see. Does anyone oversee you, Mrs. Williams?"

"Dana, please." She took hold of my hand and led me out of the kitchen and into a much larger room. She hit the lights. "The answer is no one oversees me. Not really. If I failed to do my duties the school board would consider a demotion, but in actuality I am judge, jury and executioner at



Huntington High."

"An interesting choice of words."

"Oh, I don't lay a hand on them," she said.

"But do you want to?"

"Always," she said without hesitation. "Some of them need to be beaten into submission."

"Do you have any children?"

"No."

"Good."

She laughed. "What would you like to drink?"

"Soda water is fine."

The room was very adult. There was a zinc-topped bar in one corner, filled with all sorts of alcoholic delights. Dana was there fixing us a couple of drinks. Off to the right was a large cigar box sitting on a delicate end table. Original artwork from local painters adorned the wall. I walked over to one and studied it. It was a stylized surfer hanging ten.

She walked over with my drink, took hold of my hand again and led me to a leather couch in the middle of the room. I sipped the soda water. She had spiked it with scotch. I didn't say anything, just set it down on a coaster on the glass coffee table. She was watching me closely.



"Do you like your drink?" she asked.

"It's very nice."

"I have never held the hand of someone so goddamn big before. Look at your hand, it dwarfs mine."

"You should see my feet."

"And you know what they say about that."

"I guess you could say I stepped into that one."

She giggled and drank deeply from her glass, then got up and made herself another. She seemed to be drinking something green on the rocks. Perhaps a Midori sour. She came back and sat closer to me. Our legs were touching. I was not aroused.

"How long have you been separated, Dana?"

"Does it matter?" she asked, leaning over and kissing my neck.

"Well it might should your husband use this moment to show up and make amends."

"Oh, please. You could handle him with one hand behind your back. However, he won't be coming home anytime soon. Does that put you at ease, sweetums?"



*Sweetums?*

"How long have you been separated?" I asked.  
"Six months? A year? Five years?"

She started unbuttoning my shirt. "Let's not go down that road right now, sugar butt."

As she reached for the next button, I grabbed her hand and pulled it away. "You're not separated are you?"

A small sound escaped from her lips.

"In fact, you are divorced, and have been from Bryan Dawson, current band director at Huntington High, for the past seven years."

"So what do you want, a fucking reward?" When she spoke, she glanced at the ornate end table. There was a small drawer within the end table. The glance was fleeting, then settled back on me. She leaned over and drank more of her Midori sour.

"Why did he divorce you?"

She shrugged. "You'll have to ask him that."

"I will. But I want to know why he divorced you when in fact *he* was the one cheating on *you*."

She shrugged again. "Apparently he was scared of my temper. Pussy."

"Why didn't you leave him?"



"It's called love, Knighthorse. I forgave him."

"But he was having sex with his students."

"None of us are perfect."

"You lived up north. How did you both end up here at Huntington High?"

She was sitting at the edge of her couch, her empty glass dangling from her hand. The ice cubes had a greenish hue to them. Her jaw was tight and rigid. There was a deadness to her eyes that might have been caused by the alcohol. Might.

"I came down first, once I realized the marriage was over. Tried to start over. I have a masters in educational administration. Never wanted to be a teacher, always wanted to someday work on the school board, where the money is. Because of sexual allegations, he lost his job up north, then couldn't find work anywhere. Said if he came down here and if I helped him get a job that he would go straight and we could start over again. I still loved him; the idea appealed to me."

"So you got him a job at your school?"

"Yeah. I had enough clout to push his application on through. There are some people who fear me."

"Imagine that."



“So he came down, hired on as a history teacher, and soon worked his way to band director. I was using my maiden name, and we kept things quiet about our divorce.”

“But you started things up again romantically?”

She smiled faintly and looked away, looking back into her past. “Yes. It was nice. I felt the love again, you know. Real love. It was nice to have him back.”

“Why do you claim to be separated, when, in fact, you are divorced?”

“Being divorced doesn’t look good in my field. Makes you look unstable and less than desirable to oversee school policy.” She got up and refreshed her drink.

“But then the allegations about Bryan started again,” I said.

“Yes. The little bitches throw themselves at him.”

“Is that what he tells you?”

“That’s what I know. Have you seen him? Christ, he’s good looking.”

“A real treat to the eye,” I said. “So you blame the girls and not him?”

She turned on me, her drink sloshing over the rim



and down her hand. "Of course I blame them."

"Amanda Peterson tried to leave Dawson, but he stalked her. Same with Donna Trigger. He stalked them relentlessly."

"That's bullshit."

"Amanda was seeing Derrick steadily. She considered her relationship with Dawson a mistake, but he would not let her go."

"Fucking bullshit. She was obsessed with him."

Her eyes darted around the room unsteadily, restlessly. She was twisting her hands in her lap. Her eyes repeatedly came to rest on the end table.

I continued, "I have a man, a certain janitor, who tells me he saw you put something in the back of Derrick Mason's car on the night of Amanda's murder. This janitor was later threatened by the same thug who threatened me."

She was breathing quickly. "Fucking nigger comes to my school, bringing with him his fucking nigger attitude."

"I assume you're speaking of Derrick Booker?"

"The fucking nigger."

"Yes, we've established that. Derrick loved Amanda."



“Or so he says.”

“What did you put in the back of Derrick’s car?”

“Why would you believe I put something in his car?”

“Because the witness is credible.”

“Maybe he doesn’t like me.”

“Hard to believe,” I said. “Did you put something in the back of Derrick’s car?”

She looked at me, and her eyes were alight with tears and something strange. Something akin to triumph. “The knife I used to kill Amanda. Killed two birds with one stone really. Got rid of the skank-whore and the nigger in one fell swoop.”

I took in some air. I knew she had also hired the hitman, but that was a subject I was reticent to bring up, since the death of Johnny Bright was still an on-going murder investigation. The less said, the better.

“Why did you kill Amanda?”

“So she would leave my Bryan alone, the fucking skank-whore.”

“Did you kill any others?”

She tilted her head and smiled. “Can you keep a secret?”

“Boy, can I.”



"There was one up north."

"What was her name?"

"Tabitha something-or-other."

"You disposed of the body in the San Francisco Bay?"

"My my my, you are a good detective aren't you?"

"That's why I make the big bucks."

"Do you really?"

"No. Not really."

"So you just lied to me."

"It was meant to be witty repartee."

"I hate liars."

She spun away rapidly, reached for the end table drawer, yanked it open. I was at her side in three long strides. I lifted my foot and kicked the drawer closed just as her fingers curled around a revolver. She screamed in pain and frustration, turned and lashed out at me. I avoided the swipe, managed to keep my foot on the drawer, trapping her.

She clawed at my leg, but jeans are a wonderful thing: snug, tight and protective. Finally, she pounded on my poor injured leg until she sagged to the ground, whimpering.

We stayed like that until Detective Hanson,



listening in on the wire strapped to my chest, burst in through the front door.

63.

The black and white kitten was stalking my pencil eraser. It had white paws and a patch of white fur on its chest. It was slowly picking its way across my cluttered desk, around a Vicks Chloraseptic, over the latest James Rollins novel, and finally peering around my water bottle. From there it had a good view of the pencil eraser, which, coincidentally was twitching invitingly in my fingers. Now within perfect pouncing range, the kitten dug its hind paws into the grain of my pine desk, wound itself tight as a drum, then sprang forward, pouncing like a true champion. The eraser didn't stand a chance. The kitten and pencil rolled together across my desk in a furry ball of black and white.

My door opened, and in came defense attorney



Charlie Brown and his faithful assistant Mary Cho. Charlie was bald as ever and Mary Cho's skirt still hung just above her knees. Nice knees. I looked up at her; she was frowning.

Caught again.

Charlie walked over and dropped an envelope on my desktop. The kitten pounced on the envelope. Charlie jumped back, surprised as hell that something on my desk actually moved. He straightened his tie and cleared his throat, tried his best to look venerable. When he spoke, he kept his eye on the feline just in case it should make an attempt on his jugular.

"A bonus," he said to me. "For catching the bad guy."

I looked at the envelope, which at the moment was feeling the unholy wrath of the furry critter. "You don't give a shit about the bad guy. Your client's free, and that's all that matters to you."

"I *do* give a shit, and I resent you saying that. That's slander."

"So sue me. Know any good attorneys?"

"Fuck you, Knighthorse. If you quit being such a hardass, I might throw you some more cases, seeing



as you performed above expectations on this one.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Charlie,” I said.

He sighed. “Charles.”

I picked up the kitten and thrust it toward the attorney; he jumped back, stepping on his assistant’s toes, who stifled a scream.

I said, “Would you like to hold him, Charlie?”

“No, godammit. And it’s Charlie. I mean Charles. Fuck.” He turned and left.

“Assistant Cho, how about you: would you like to pet my kitty?”

“You’re a pig.”

When they were gone, I brought the kitten to my face and kissed his little wet nose. “What did I say?”

\* \* \*

Cat Peterson left her abusive husband and she and her daughter moved in with her sister in a modest Spanish-style home in a city called Temecula, in a neighboring county called Riverside, a county made popular in many a Perry Mason novel. I pulled up in front of the house and, kitten in hand, walked up to the front door and rang the bell. As I waited, the kitten made every effort to kill my nose.



"It's been fun having you around," I said to him. "But you're going to grow up with a little girl now. You take good care of her, okay?"

He gnawed on my thumb, purring.

The door opened and once again I found myself staring down at little Alyssa.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," I said.

"Tinker Bell ran away."

"I know."

"You know?"

I bent down and handed her the kitten. She gasped, then ripped the little booger from my fingers and hugged it with everything she had. The kitten, perhaps realizing that it had met its energetic match, submitted to the unabashed love. She twirled him around and around and dashed inside the house screaming for her mother to look at Tinker Bell Jr.

If ever a kitten was destined to be gay, it was Tinker Bell Jr. Of course, there's nothing wrong with that.

Footsteps echoed along the tiled entryway, and Cat Peterson appeared in the doorway. She was smiling, shaking her head.



“How did you know her cat ran away?” she asked me, leaning a shoulder against the doorframe. There was a hint of a smile on her face.

“Might be better if you didn’t know.”

She nodded, suddenly somber. “I see.”

I was motionless; she wasn’t looking at me. Suddenly, and with surprising speed, she threw herself into my arms and thanked me over and over again for finding her daughter’s killer. She didn’t let go and I let her hold me and cry on me, and we stood like that for a long, long time.

## 64.

It was a rare spring storm.

Cindy and I were sitting together on my sofa, my arm around her shoulders, looking out through my open patio doors. The rain was coming down steadily and hard, drumming on my glass patio table. In the distance, above the rooftop of the restaurants, the sky was slate gray, low and ominous.



"You like this kind of weather," said Cindy.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's different. Don't you ever get tired of the never-ending sunny days?"

"No."

"Don't you ever think that it's nice for the land to replenish itself?"

"Only when you bring it up."

"Wanna walk in the rain?" I asked.

"I thought your leg hurt in this kind of weather."

"It does."

"But it's nothing like the hurt you've been putting it through these past few weeks," she said.

"I was blinded to the pain," I said, "pursuing an old dream."

"You're not blinded now?"

"No," I said. "The blinders are off. And now my leg just hurts like hell."

"What about your dream?"

"The dream was there for the taking. I didn't take it."

"Why?"

"People change. Dreams change. Life goes on. If



I really wanted it, I would pursue it.”

“So you don’t really want it? Is that because of me? God, I feel horrible.”

“Not because of you. When I was twenty-two, I wanted to prove I could play in the NFL. I wanted to prove I was tough enough. I had no other goals in life, no other conceivable ambition. Then, suddenly, I was forced to rethink and refocus my life, and I discovered that I could live without playing football.”

“But you’ve always been...bitter towards being a detective. Because it was something your father did. It was something that caused him not to be in your life when you were growing up.”

“Father runs a big agency. I am determined never to be that big. But you’re right, I was bitter towards my job. It was not my first choice. But then something happened.”

“You discovered you were good at detecting,” she said. “Damn good.”

“Yes.”

“What about proving yourself in the NFL?”

“Maybe some things are better left unproven.”

“But you think you could have made it?”

“In a heartbeat.” I said. “Wanna go for that walk?”



“Okay.”

I knew she didn't want to get wet, but she did it for me. We got our coats on. I grabbed an umbrella for her. I didn't mind getting wet.

Outside, in the rain, we moved slowly along Main Street. The shops and stores were all open, and a trickle of tourists, looking confused at this unprecedented Southern California weather, moved past us. I heard one of them say: “We can get rain at home.”

“Can't please everyone,” I said to Cindy.

“No.”

“Want some chocolate?” I asked.

“Mmm, sounds yummy.”

We ducked into The Chocolatiers. A massive peanut butter cup for me and a sugar-free almond rocca for Cindy.

“Sugar-free?” I asked, when we stepped outside again.

“You can't taste the difference.”

“Sure.”

“Plus it's half the calories.”

We sat down on a bench under an awning and ate our chocolate and watched the rain.



"How's Derrick doing?" asked Cindy.

"His family is moving east. Hard to have a normal life after being accused of murder. Kid will be looked at differently, no matter how innocent he is. UCLA is interested in giving him a scholarship."

"Did you have anything to do with that?"

"I happen to know a few people there."

"So your work here is done?"

I looked away, inhaling deeply.

She reached out and placed her hand on top of mine. It was warm and comforting.

"You're thinking of your mother," she said.

I kept looking away. "Her killer is still out there."

The rain continued to fall. She continued holding my hand. She squeezed it.

"You're going to find him," she said. It wasn't a question.

"I don't know what I will do to him when I find him."

"Does that worry you?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Then it doesn't worry me."



Jack was drinking a non-steaming cup of coffee. I was drinking a bubbling Coke. The dining room was empty. A very large teenage boy was filling some straw containers behind the counter. Minutes before closing.

I was toying with the scrap of folded paper.

"One thing I don't get," I said, turning the paper over in my fingers, "is why you always blow on your coffee. I mean, couldn't you just snap your fingers and it would be instantly cool? Or, a better question: how is it even possible that God could burn his lips?"

"That's more than one thing," said Jack.

"You're not going to answer, are you?"

He drank more of his coffee. His eyes were brownish, maybe with a touch of green. Maybe. What the hell did I know? I was colorblind.

"Could you heal me of my colorblindness?" I asked.

"Heal yourself."

"Heal myself?"

"Sure. I gave you a big brain for a reason."



"They say we're only using ninety percent," I said.

"If that much."

We were silent some more. I was thinking about my big brain...surely mine was bigger than most, since I was always being told I had a big head. Or were they referring to something else? I held up the folded piece of paper.

"I'm going to open this now," I said.

"Go ahead."

"I've wanted to for quite sometime."

"I'm sure you did, but you didn't."

"No," I said.

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to find the answer myself."

"And did you?"

"Yes."

The kid behind the counter walked over to us and told us we had five minutes. I said sure. Jack didn't say anything. And when the kid was gone, I unfolded the paper and looked down at the single word:  
*Dana.*

"Lucky guess," I said.

Jack laughed.

"So why did you come to me," I said. "Why are



you here now?"

"You asked me here."

"Fine. Now what do I do with you?"

"Whatever you want."

"I'm thinking about writing a book."

"Good for you," said Jack.

"It's going to be about this case."

"Would make a good book," said Jack.

"I want to put you in it," I said.

"I'm honored."

"That is why you came to me, right?"

"That is for you to decide."

We were silent some more. The kid behind the counter was turning off the lights, banging stuff loudly so we'd get the hint.

"I feel we've only scratched the surface here," I said.

"That's why there's something called sequels."

"You mentioned something earlier about loving me."

"I did."

"So do you really love me?" I asked, a hell of a strange question for one grown man to ask another grown man. Especially a man as tough as myself.



He said, "More than you know, my son. More than you know." He reached out and put his hand on my hand. Radiating warmth spread through me instantly. "I am with you always. Remember that."

Something caught in my throat. "Then why do I feel so alone?"

"Do you feel alone now?"

"No," I said. The lights went out, and we got up together from the table. "No, I don't."

*The End*



THE  
MUMMY CASE  
A Jim Knighthorse Novel

by  
J.R. RAIN

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## *Dedication*

To Chuck, thanks for everything.

## Chapter One

I was doing decline push ups when my office door opened. Decline push ups cause a lot of blood to rush to your head and a fabulous burn across the upper pectorals. They also looked pretty damn silly in a professional environment. Luckily, this wasn't a professional environment.

Somebody was quietly watching me, probably admiring my near-perfect form or the way my tee



shirt rippled across my broad shoulders. Either way, I rattled off twenty more, completing my set of a hundred.

In a distinctive country twang, a man's voice said, "I could come back."

"And miss my near-perfect form?"

I eased my running shoes off the desk and immediately felt a wave of light-headedness. Granted, I didn't entirely mind the light-headedness. I am, after all, a sucker for a good buzz.

The man who came swimmingly into view was wearing a cowboy hat and leaning against my door frame, a bemused expression on his weathered face. He was about twenty years my senior.

"Howdy partner," I said.

He tipped his Stetson. "So what are those push ups supposed to do, other than cause a lot of blood rush to your head?"

"That's enough for me," I said happily. "Oh, and they happen to be a hell of a chest workout."

"Seems like a lot of trouble," he said.

"It's not easy being beautiful."

"Ah," he said. "You must be Jim Knighthorse. I



heard about you.”

“Lucky you.”

As he spoke, his Adam’s apple bobbed up and down like a buoy in a storm. His white hat sported an excessively rolled brim—completely useless now against the sun or rain. Maybe he was a country music star.

“I was told you could be a cocky son of a bitch.”

“You would be, too,” I said. “If you were me.”

He looked at me and shrugged. “Well, maybe. You’re certainly a big son of a bitch.”

I said nothing. My size spoke for itself. He looked around my small office, perhaps noting the many pictures and trophies that cluttered the walls and bookcases, all in recognition of my considerable prowess on the football field. Actually, all but one. There was a second place spelling bee trophy in there somewhere. Lost it on *zumbooruk*, a camel-mounted canon used in the Middle East. Hell of a shitty word to lose it on.

“I heard you could help me,” he said finally, almost pitifully.

“Ah,” I said. “Have a seat.”

He did, moseying on into my small office. As he



sat, I almost expected him to flip the client chair around and straddle it backward, cowboy-like. Instead, he used the chair as it was originally designed, although it was clearly not designed for someone as tall as he. His bony knees reached up to his ears and looked sharp enough to cut through his denim jeans. I sat behind the desk in a leather brass-studded chair that was entirely too ornate for its surroundings. The leather made rude noises.

Ever the professional detective, I kept a straight face and asked for his name.

"Jones," he answered. "*Jones T. Jones*, to be exact."

"That's a lot of Joneses."

"Well, yes," he said, blushing slightly. "It's not really my name, you see. It's sort of like a stage name. You know, a gimmick."

"So you're an actor?"

"No, I own a souvenir shop in Huntington Beach. But I've acted as the spokesperson in my own commercials." Ah. It came to me then. I'd seen Jones before, late at night on the local cable circuit. Usually right before I passed out in a drunken stupor. Damn cheesy commercials, too, many involving what



appeared to be a rabid monkey. Sometimes Jones and the monkey danced. I was embarrassed for Jones. "Maybe you've heard of it," he continued. "Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe."

"Heard of it?" I said. "Hell, I spelled *old* and *shop* with extra e's and p's up until the fifth grade. My teacher, Mrs. Franks, thought I was Chaucer reborn."

He laughed. "I wanted to change the name when I bought the store a number of years ago, but there was a big public uproar." He cracked a smile, and I realized that he *enjoyed* the big public uproar. "So I gave in to pressure and kept the damn name. I regret it to this day."

"Why?"

"No one can find us in the phone book...or even on the internet. They call us and ask: Are we under Y or O? Is it *Ye* or *The*?" He sighed and caught his breath, having worked himself up. "I mean, what were the original owners thinking?"

"Maybe they were English."

He shrugged. We were silent. Outside, in the nearby alley, a delivery truck was backing up, beeping away. I was one of the few people who appreciated the warning beeps.



"So what can I do for you, Mr. Jones?" I asked.

"I'd like to hire you."

"*Zumbooruk!*" I said.

"Excuse me?"

"Exactly."

## Chapter Two

"You know about Sylvester the Mummy, then?" asked Jones.

"Still dead?" I asked.

"As a doornail."

Sylvester the Mummy was one of Huntington Beach's main attractions—ranking a distant third behind *waves* and *babes*—and currently resided at the back of the Ye Olde Curiosity Gift Shoppe in a cozy polyurethane case for all the world to see. Sylvester had been found in the California deserts over a hundred years ago near a ghost town called Rawhide. Since then, he'd been passed from museum to museum, exhibit to exhibit, until finally



coming to rest at Ye Olde Gift Shoppe in Huntington Beach. Wouldn't his mother be proud? Although his identity is unknown, most historians figure Sylvester had once been a cowboy. Which, I figure, means he probably once owned a horse and a six shooter, ate beans from the can over an open campfire and sang lonesome songs about loose women. That is, of course, until someone put a bullet in his gut and left him for dead in the middle of the Mojave Desert. Experts figured the old boy had mummified within 24 hours due to a rare combination of extreme desert heat and chemicals in the sand. A true John Doe, he had been named after the very miner who discovered him, which I always found a little creepy.

"What about him?" I asked.

"Two months ago, as a publicity stunt, I hired a young historian fresh out of college to look into Sylvester's background. You know, generate some interest in my little store. Of course, I didn't really think the historian would find anything on Sylvester. But that wasn't the point."

"The point being to generate interest in your little store."

"Yes, exactly."



*Ah, exploiting the dead.*

"Go on," I said.

Jones shifted, suddenly looking uncomfortable, as if his tight jeans were giving him one hell of a wedgie. "The historian—a kid really—provided me regular reports. He did original research, digging through old records, even traveling out to Rawhide once or twice to interview the town historian."

He stopped talking. I waited. I sensed something ominous. I call this my sixth sense. Catchy, huh?

Jones' expression turned pained. The mother of all wedgies? "Then the reports stopped, and I didn't hear from him for a while. Shortly thereafter, his mother reported him missing. Soon after that, the sheriff's department found him dead."

"Found him where?"

"In the desert. Near Rawhide." He took a deep breath. "And just this morning I received word from the San Bernardino Sheriff's Department that his death was being officially ruled an accident. They figure he got lost in the desert, ran out of gas and died of thirst."

I sat back in my chair and rested my chin on my fingertips. Sweat had appeared on Jones's



forehead. His flashy showmanship was out the window.

"I assume you disagree with their findings," I said. He thought about it.

"I suppose so, yes."

"Why?"

He reached up and unconsciously rolled the brim of his Stetson, a nervous habit, which now explained why the thing looked like a Del Taco Macho Burrito.

My stomach growled. Lord help me.

"It's hard to say, Knighthorse. It's just a gut feeling I have. The kid...the kid was smart, you know. A recent college graduate. I was impressed by him, and not just by his book smarts. He seemed to have a sensible head on his shoulder; street smarts, too."

"Too sensible to get lost in the desert."

"Yes. Precisely. That's exactly why I'm here."

"That," I said, "and you feel guilty as hell for sending a kid out to his death."

He looked away, inhaled deeply. "Jesus, Knighthorse. Put it that way, and you make it seem like I killed him."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to look into his death. Make sure it



was an accident.”

“And if it wasn’t an accident?”

“I want you to find the killer.”

“Finding the killer is extra.”

“Price is no object.”

“*Zumbooruk!*”

“Why do you keep saying that? What does it mean?”

“It’s a camel-mounted canon used in the Middle East.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I.”

### Chapter Three

I met Detective Sherbet at a sandwich shop on Amerige St. in downtown Fullerton. Sherbet was a big man with a big cop mustache. He wore an old blue suit and a bright yellow tie. He ordered coffee and a donut. I ordered a Diet Pepsi, but thought the donut idea was a pretty good one. So I had the



waitress bring me three of whatever she had left, because when it comes to donuts, any flavor will do.

“What if she brings you a pink donut?” asked Detective Sherbet.

“Pink is good,” I said.

“I hate pink.”

“In general?”

He thought about that, then nodded. “Yeah.” He paused, looked away. “My boy likes pink.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Me, too.”

“How old is your boy?”

“Eight.”

“Maybe he will grow out of it.”

“Let’s hope.”

The waitress brought me three cake donuts. Chocolate, glazed, and pink.

*Uh oh.*

“Are you okay with me eating this?” I asked, pointing to Sherbet’s arch-nemesis, the pink-frosted donut.

He nodded, shrugging. The man had serious issues. I ate the pink donut quickly, nonetheless. As I did, Sherbet watched me curiously, as if I was a



monkey in a zoo exhibiting strange behavior. Funny, when I was done, I didn't feel gay.

"Any good?" he asked.

"Quite," I said. "And no gay side effects. At least not yet."

"Maybe I'll have one."

And he did. One pink donut. After the waitress set it before him, he picked it up warily with his thumb and forefinger, careful of the pink frosting. He studied it from a few angles, and then bit into it.

"Your son would be proud," I said.

"I love the kid."

"But you think he might be gay."

"Let's change the subject," he said.

"Thankfully," I said. Actually, Detective Sherbet wasn't so much homophobic as *homo-terrified*, as in terrified his kid might grow up to be gay. Someone needed some counseling here, and it wasn't the kid.

"So that crackpot hired you," said Sherbet. There was pink frosting in the corner of his mouth. Lord, he looked gay.

"Crackpot being Jones T. Jones."

"A shyster if I've ever met one. Anything to make a buck. Hell, I even had my suspicions that he offed



the historian just to generate more press for that damn store of his. Have you been there?"

I nodded.

He said, "Place gives me the fucking creeps."

"So he's clean?"

"Sure he's clean. Everyone's clean. Kid ran out of gas, wandered around the desert until he died of heat and thirst."

"Hell of a way to go."

Sherbet shrugged, and as he did so his mustache twitched simultaneously. Perhaps the motor neurons in his shoulders were connected to his upper lip.

"I hear Willie was a smart kid," I said.

Sherbet nodded. "Smart enough to get a Masters in history from UCI."

"Probably smart enough to call for help on his cell phone."

"Sure," said Sherbet, "except he didn't have one on him."

"Who found his body?"

"San Bernardino Sheriff. They found the body and called me out, as I was working the original missing person case. We compared notes, asked



around, decided this thing was nothing but an accident. We both closed our cases.”

“Have you talked to anyone at Rawhide?” I asked.

“Sure, went out there with the San Bernardino Sheriff. We asked around, talked to the museum curator and his assistant, the last two to see Willie alive.”

“What did they say?”

Sherbet shrugged again. His shoulders were probably hairy. Sherbet was a very manly man, which was probably why he couldn’t comprehend his kid turning out gay.

“Like I said, they were the last two to see Willie alive, at least that we know of. The museum curator and his assistant—forget their names now—showed him the site where that fucking mummy was originally found. Afterward, when everyone left the site, Willie was in his own truck right behind the curator and assistant. They look again, and Willie’s gone. They assumed he headed home in a different direction. Both their stories corroborate. Granted, this is an oddball way for a bright kid to die, but unless



something rears its ugly head here, we have no reason to suspect any funny business.”

I drank some Diet Pepsi. I’m not even really convinced that I like Diet Pepsi. I took another sip; nope, still not convinced.

“Jones seems to think there was foul play,” I said. “And gave me a hefty retainer fee to prove it.”

“Jones wants business. Twenty bucks says he turns this thing into an even bigger circus. He’s the ring leader, and you’re the....” He paused, thinking.

“World’s Strongest Man?” I offered.

“Sure, whatever. Look, I think he’s using you, Knighthorse. Especially you, since you have some name recognition.”

“Did you want my autograph for your kid?” I asked.

“You kidding? Kid doesn’t know a fullback from a backpack.” Sherbet shook his head some more, sipped his coffee. “All this over a fucking mummy.”

“Hard to believe.”

## Chapter Four



It was a warm Saturday afternoon and Cindy and I were jogging along the beach with, perhaps, two billion other people. We used the bike path that ran parallel to the ocean, expertly dodging dog walkers, roller bladers, baby strollers, various shapes and sizes of humans and, of course, bikes.

Cindy was dressed in black Spandex running pants and a long-sleeved shirt that said O'Neil on the back in blue script. She was the only human being within five square miles wearing a long-sleeved shirt. She had also smeared blue gunk over the bridge of her nose and along her cheekbones, which made her look like a wide receiver, minus the helmet and cup. I was dressed only in knee length shorts and running shoes. No shirt, no sunscreen, no blue gunk. No problem.

"That blue gunk is scaring the kids," I said.

"That blue gunk, as you call it, is sunscreen, and it helps to keep me looking young."

"You're thirty-one. That's young enough."

"But I want to look twenty-one."

As we jogged, we spoke easily, casually. Cindy huffed or puffed once or twice. I don't huff or puff,



although I was very conscious of a dull ache in my right leg, a leg held together by stainless steel pins and will power. Superman has his kryptonite; I have my stainless steel pins.

"So if you can stay ten years ahead of the aging curve you would be happy?" I said.

"Ecstatic."

"There are women who would kill to look thirty-one."

"You think I look thirty-one?"

Oops. So what was the old formula? Add two inches, subtract four years? "You easily look twenty-seven."

"Twenty-seven? How the hell did you come up with that number?"

"It's a formula."

"Formula?"

"Never mind."

"So how old do I really look to you?" she asked.

"Definitely not thirty-one," I said. "How about early twenties?"

"Then why did you say twenty-seven?"

"Twenty-seven on a bad day."

"I have bad days?"



“Not as bad as I’m having.”

She looked at me, and I think she was smiling somewhere under the blue gunk. She patted my backside. “Sorry I’m being hard on you. I’m just finding aging and wrinkles hard to deal with.”

We passed a row of sunbathers who had ventured maybe five feet from the bike path out onto the sand. They were still a good fifty yards from the water. Maybe they were afraid of sharks.

“I say wear your age like a badge of honor,” I said.

“I would prefer not to wear a badge of wrinkles, thank you very much. Look at all these women, Jim. They’re all so young, and beautiful and smooth-skinned. And most of them are looking at you. Could you please put your shirt back on.”

“I’m working on my tan.”

“Work on it somewhere else. Besides, you’re burning.”

“Part of the process. I happen to be Caucasian.”

“Women are ogling you.”

“Ogling is bad?”

“Only when I’m feeling old.”



I slipped my tank top back on, which had been tucked in the waistband of my shorts. Cindy looked me over, shook her head. "Somehow you look even better."

"Maybe I should quit lifting weights."

"Would you do that for me?"

"Don't push it."

We stopped at Balboa Pier. I bought two bottles of water from a street vendor and briefly eyeballed a dehydrated hot dog until Cindy pulled me away. We found an empty bench and seized it. Our knees touched, which sent a thrill of pleasure coursing through me, all over again.

"You thrill me," I said.

She looked at me from over her water bottle. "Even after eight years?"

"I've spent eight years being fascinated. Not too many people can say that."

She smiled and took hold of my sweaty hand. My sweat never bothered her, the surest sign of true love. Cindy's nails were painted red. I love red nails, and she knew it. The brighter the better, since I'm certifiably color blind.

"Explain to me again why you agreed to look into



the historian's death."

I found her blue nose heavily distracting. I wanted to taste it.

"Because it's what I do," I said. "Sometimes I go days without work; hell, and sometimes even weeks. So when someone walks in through my door and hands me a check to investigate something, I would be foolish not to."

"Even if this someone is using you for his own self-promotion?"

I shook my head. "Jones and I have an agreement: no self-promotion while I'm on the case. Besides, if I were to disapprove of the motives of every client prior to taking a case, I would be homeless and hungry."

"But the police have ruled the historian's death an accident."

"The police are often overworked."

"And you are not?"

"Not often enough," I said. "A private investigator can spend more time on a case, work it more thoroughly, perhaps bend a few laws here and there to find answers in places the police are not willing or able to look. Not a bad way to go if you are



unsatisfied with the answers you are given.”

“And Jones is unsatisfied.”

“Yes.”

“I think he’s feeling guilty,” she said.

“I agree.”

“But you don’t care about his motives.”

“Not enough to turn down honest work.”

“Honest?”

“Honest enough.”

“You think there might be something to this case?” she asked.

“Jones seems to think so, and that’s enough for me.”

“You’ll take the money and job, of course, because that’s what you do,” she said, looking at me. “But on another level you can’t wait to dig into this case, see what you turn up.”

“One never knows.”

“So what’s your first step?”

“Cash Jones’s check and pay my rent.”

“And then what?”

“Buy some food, maybe even a foot massager for you. Wink, wink.”

She slapped my hand. “Focus.”



"I'll probably give the mummy a visit. You know, immerse myself in the case and all that. Want to come?"

She shuddered. "I've always hated that thing."

"That 'thing' is a murdered man," I said.

She suddenly turned to me.

"I knew it!" she said excitedly.

"Knew what?"

"This isn't just about the historian."

I crossed my arms and grinned. "It's not?"

"No."

"So tell me what it's about."

She was facing me, excited. "You're going to figure out who this mummy was."

"Go on."

"Even more, you're going to find his killer, or die trying, because that's the way you are. You help those in need, even if they're hundred-year-old mummies."

"Mummies need justice too," I said.

She looked at me for perhaps twenty seconds, and, although I could have been wrong, there seemed to be real love in her eyes. Who could



blame her.

"Yes," she said finally, laying her head on my shoulder. "They certainly do."

We sat like that for ten minutes, enjoying each other's silence, enjoying the parade of humanity, enjoying the sights and sounds and smells of the ocean. I noticed men looking at Cindy's pretty face, somehow seeing beyond the blue gunk to the real beauty beneath. But then they got a look at me and moved on.

\* \* \*

We were walking back to my place along the boardwalk, hand-in-hand. The sun was hot on my neck and a nearby seagull, balancing precariously on a low brick wall, was working on a tightly crumpled Subway wrapper. Maybe it was on the Jared diet.

"Someone vandalized my office," Cindy suddenly said.

The words had the same effect as a punch to the solar plexus. I stopped walking and faced her.

"Vandalized how?"

"Trashed my lecture hall. Turned over anything they could get their hands on. Graffitied everything."



“Are the campus police on it?”

“Yeah.”

“Any leads?”

“Creationists.”

“Creationists?”

“Or anti-Darwinists,” she said. To her students, Cindy was known as Professor Darwin. And, yes, she was the great great granddaughter of the infamous Charles, his bloodline living to this day, which says a little something about surviving and fitness and all that. She continued, “They spray-painted crosses and fishes on the walls and chalk boards. Even left me a message on my computer screen.”

“What Would Jesus Do?”

“No,” she said. “Darwin is burning in hell, and so will you.”

“Not if he has his great great granddaughter’s penchant for sunscreen.”

“Not funny. I’m scared. This wasn’t your typical prank. I’ve dealt with those my entire life.” She took in some air, looked down at her half-filled water bottle. “There was a lot of anger involved in this attack. A lot. You could see it, feel it.”



“You want me to look into it?”

We started walking again. She slipped her hands around my right bicep, her fingertips not quite able to touch. She was beautiful and petite and I wanted to hug her but I was afraid of getting blue stuff on my white tank top.

“Yeah,” she said. “They scared me.”

*They scared her.* I involuntarily tightened my hand into a fist. My bicep swelled before her thunderstruck eyes. I could feel the hair on my neck standing up. Hackles.

“Yeah,” I said, “I’ll look into it.”

## Chapter Five

It was late and I was drinking alone on my balcony, feet up on the railing, gazing out across the empty black expanse that was the Pacific Ocean. The night air was cold, laced heavily with salt brine. The moon tonight was hidden behind a heavy layer of stratus clouds. A 12-pack of Bud Light was sitting on the balcony between my feet like an obedient



dog.

Good doggy.

It was the first beer I had bought in six months.  
Hell, the first I had tasted in six months.

And it tasted heavenly.

Too heavenly.

I was in trouble.

Twenty-one years ago my mother had been murdered. As a ten-year-old boy, I had found her dead in her bedroom in a pool of her own blood. Her throat had been slashed and she had been raped. Her murderer was never found. A cold case, if ever there was one.

Six months ago my father handed over a packet of forgotten photographs of my mother, taken on the last day that she was alive on this earth. Other than being of obvious sentimental interest to me, the photos contained the one and only clue to her murder. At least, I hoped.

The clue: a random young man in the background of three of the twenty-four photographs. In the three photographs, he appears to be stalking her—at least that's what my gut tells me. And I've learned to listen



to my gut.

I drank some more beer. I prefer bottles, but cans leave less evidence—no bottles caps showing up in seat cushions, for instance—and less evidence is what I preferred, at least for now.

From the glass patio table, I picked up one of the three pictures of the young man in question; the young man who may or may not have been stalking my parents; the young man who may or may not have murdered my mother.

That's a big leap, I thought.

True, but a big leap was all I had.

I angled the picture until it caught some of the ambient light from the street below. There he was, holding a freshly caught sandshark, standing behind my parents, themselves standing on the Huntington Beach pier. His hair was ragged and longish, bleached blond from hours in the sun and salt. He was wearing a red tank top and longish shorts, although not as long as the shorts kids wear today. His right leg was tanned and well muscled, although I could only see a fraction of it. My father obscured the rest of his body. *Thanks, dad. Asshole.* The young man was laughing at the rabbit ears my mother was



not-so-secretly giving my father.

I set the picture down again. Inhaled deeply, looked up at the swirling mass of clouds above.

He had taken an interest in my mother, that much was evident. Probably because my mother made him laugh. Probably because she was a striking woman. Perhaps she had fascinated him. Perhaps he had always fantasized about being with an older woman. She was a striking woman. He himself was good-looking and muscular in that surfer sort of way. Whereas I was muscular in that strong-looking way.

The beer I was holding was miraculously empty. Wasn't sure how that happened, barely even remembered drinking it. I opened another.

My mother's case had been thoroughly investigated and was later shelved due to lack of evidence. Hell, lack of *anything*. I remembered the homicide detective. A good man who was deeply troubled by my mother's murder. During his investigation, he had spoken to me often, once or twice even taking me out to get ice cream. I think he knew my father was an asshole.

But now I had these....

Pictures. Evidence.



Something.

I finished the beer, placed the empty tin carcass on the glass table and popped open another one.

I had grown up in a tough part of Inglewood. We had been poor in those days, my father was fresh out the military and not very family-oriented, if his nightly liaisons with the neighborhood whores were any indication. By the age of ten, I had witnessed a half dozen murders and more robberies than I cared to count. Growing up, I thought bullet-riddled bodies lying on street corners were sights that all school kids saw on their way home from school. Probably not the best neighborhood to raise a kid and my mother knew this. To escape, she took me to the beach any chance she had. She loved Huntington Beach, especially the pier. We would sit for hours overlooking the ocean. Sometimes I would fish, but mostly we ate ice creams and I told her about my day.

The same pier she was at in these pictures. The same pier I could see from my balcony.

Another empty can of beer. How the hell did that happen? I opened another and pondered this mystery.



Later, when the 12-pack was finally gone, I gathered up the empty cans in a trash bag and deposited the whole thing down the trash chute, and unwrapped a candy mint and lay down on my bed. My bladder was full. The ceiling spun. I awoke the next morning with the mint stuck to my forehead. Nice. My bladder was even fuller.

Between my thumb and forefinger, held in a sort of vice-like deathgrip, was the picture of the young man standing behind my mother.

## Chapter Six

Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe, with its extra e's and p's, was located just a half mile from my apartment. I could have walked there, but decided to drive, because nobody walks in Orange County, either.

The building itself was made of cinder block, painted in a red and white checkerboard pattern. White stars were painted within the red squares. It looked like a nightclub or an ice rink.



The time was noon, and the store had just opened. Inside, the curiosity shop was filled with, well, curiosities. Most of it was junk, and most of it was designed to lure away the tourist's buck. I passed rows of shrunken heads, tribal spears, bobble heads and postcards. California license plate key chains with names like Dwayne, LaToya and Javier.

The store itself was smallish, made smaller by the overwhelming amount of junk. Inventory must have been hell. I was the only customer in the store. No surprise there, as it had just opened.

I headed to the rear of the store, side-stepping a curtain of crystal talismans, and there was the old boy. Sealed within a polyurethane case, Sylvester stood guard next to a door marked Employees Only. I wondered if he was on the clock.

I stepped up to the case.

Sylvester was not a handsome man. His skin was blackened and shriveled. His lips had disappeared in the mummification process, and so had most of his eyes. His hair was there, but short and scraggly. You would think, after all these years, someone would have thought to brush it. He was



naked, although his genitalia had shriveled and disappeared. My heart went out to him. His hands were crossed under his stomach, the same position he was found in a hundred years ago.

I had aged twenty-five years since the first time I had seen Sylvester; he didn't appear a day older. Mummification has that effect.

According to the legend at the base of the pedestal, Sylvester stood six feet one inches and weighed nearly two hundred pounds. His identity was unknown. His killer unknown. The hole was there, above his right wrist, clear as day. No bullet had been found, as it had exited out his back, shot clean through. A shot that had torn up his insides and caused him to bleed to death in the desert.

The storeroom door opened, startling me slightly. Sylvester ignored the door, and ignored me for the most part. A kid came out, smiled at me, looked casually at the dead man in the case, and then headed toward the cash registers.

"Not very talkative." I nodded toward Sly.

"He's a mummy," said the employee.

"Ah, would explain it."

The kid didn't seem to care much that the man in



the case had been murdered.

But I cared. Hell, I was being paid to care. Sort of. And the more I thought of it, the more I cared.

I reread the legend for the dozenth time. Sylvester had been found in the California desert, near Rawhide, now known as the Rawhide Ghost Town. Historians had found no evidence as to who he was or why he was killed. After his discovery, Sylvester had been passed from museum to museum, paraded around until this day. The only justification as to why he was not given a proper burial was that he was a mummy, and therefore of interest to science and history.

Now he was just of interest to Jones's pocketbook.

I stepped up next to the case, my face just inches from Sly's own. I stared at him, soaking in the details of his dried-out face, his half-open eyes, and his shriveled remains of a nose. I stared at him, and we played the blinking game for a half a minute. He won, although he might have flinched.

I put my hand on the case.

Well, buddy, I think you are more than a freak show curiosity. I think you were once a person, a



person who died a hell of a shitty death. I care that you suffered so much. I care that you bled to death. I care that you never got that last drink of water you so desperately craved. Of course, you didn't leave me much to go on, but that's never stopped me before. But first I have to look into the death of a young historian, who may or may not have died accidentally. Maybe you know him. I hear he was a good kid. His name is Willie Clarke.

"There's no touching the display," said the voice of the employee behind me. "Now that we serve ice cream here, I'm always cleaning off sticky fingerprints. It's a pain in my ass. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," I said, and left.

## Chapter Seven

The University of Irvine police sub-station was a single story wooden structure located on the outskirts of campus. A female officer in her twenties



was working the front desk. She had on a cop uniform from the waist up, and cop shorts from the waist down. Her legs were thick and well muscled. Nothing says sexy like cop shorts.

She asked if I was here to pay a parking ticket. I showed her my P.I. license and told her who I was and what I was doing here. Without looking at the license, she told me to wait. I snapped my wallet shut. Her loss; she missed a hell of a picture. She disappeared through a back door.

I struck a jaunty pose at the counter and waited, ankles crossed, weight on one elbow. Surveyed the room. Wasn't much to survey. Typical campus sub-station was designed mostly to accept payments for parking tickets, which, I think, funded much of UCI's scientific research. Behind the counter were a few empty desks, the occupants probably out giving more parking tickets.

Soon enough I was sitting at a small desk watching a small cop eating a bowl of Oriental noodles. Judging by the way that he recklessly slurped, he seemed irritated that I disturbed his meal. His name was Officer Baker.

"Caught me on a lunch break," he said, wiping



his mouth carefully with a folded napkin.

"I hadn't realized."

"Professor Darwin said you might come by, and if you did, to fill you in with what's going on."

"She knows I worry."

"Quite frankly, I'm a little worried, too."

In my lap, I realized I had balled my hands into fists. My knuckles were showing white, crisscrossed with puffy scars from too many fights everywhere. Grade school, high school, college. Just last week. My fists were wide, a hell of a knuckle sandwich.

"Any leads?" I asked.

"None."

"Any other professors targeted?"

He shook his head. "No. Just Professor Darwin."

"Did the surveillance cameras catch anything?"

He briefly eyeballed his noodles. "No."

"Any witnesses?"

"Again, no."

I inhaled, wondering what, if anything, had been done about this.

"How about protection for Professor Darwin?"

"We offered to escort her across campus, but she declined. She said she has pepper spray and



wasn't afraid to use it. And that you had taught her self-defense." He was a really small man, made smaller by the fact that he had yet to do anything for Cindy. He sat forward in his desk. "I know you are concerned. But I am personally looking into this. We patrol Professor Darwin's office, her lecture hall, and her car regularly. I assure you, sooner rather than later, we will find this creep."

"You have any objections if I come by a few nights a week and poke around?"

He looked at me. "You the same Knighthorse who played for UCLA?"

"One and only."

"Then I have no objections," he said.

I left his office. Sometimes it's good to be me.

## Chapter Eight

Cindy and I finished our Saturday morning jog at the beach, ending up at my place. To conserve water, we showered together. Zowie! Cindy scrubbed the blue gunk off her face, and then tried



her best to scrub me off her. She succeeded with the former but not the latter. Now we were at the Huntington Beach Brew Pub, surrounded by a lot of beer in huge stainless steel vats. *A lot* of beer.

A waitress came by carrying three sloshing ice-encrusted mugs in one hand by their ice-encrusted handles to a nearby table. I watched her carefully. Or, more accurately, the beer carefully.

"I hope it's okay that we're here," Cindy said.

"I'll be fine."

"But you've been doing so well lately. I hate to tempt you like this."

"Actually, not as well as you think." I looked her in the eye, took a deep breath. "And you probably shouldn't feel very proud."

She was in the act of raising her glass of water to her lips. It stopped about halfway. "You've been drinking again."

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Not as much."

She set the glass back down. Perhaps a little too loudly. Our waitress picked that moment to come by,



asked if we were ready to order. I shook my head and said no, keeping my eyes on Cindy.

When the waitress was gone, Cindy said, "Jim, you promised you would quit."

"I quit for nearly three months. A record for me."

"So what happened?"

"Turns out the more I look into my mother's murder, the more I want to drink."

Her mouth was tight. She kept her hands still on the table. She took a deep breath, looked down at her hands. She was thinking, coming to some sort of decision. "And you said you haven't been drinking as much as before."

"That's true."

"At least that's something."

"Yes."

"And you have been able to control the drinking?"

"More so than before."

"Do you need help?"

"Probably."

"But you don't want it."

"Not yet."

The waitress came by again. This time she saw us talking and didn't bother to stop.



"You have a problem," Cindy said.

"I know."

"How long have you been drinking?"

"A few weeks now."

"Thank you for telling me."

I shrugged. "Should have told you sooner."

"But you told me. I know it's not easy. I don't want you to hide it from me."

"It's not something I'm proud of."

"I know. So what are you going to do about it?"

"For now, nothing."

"So you'll keep drinking?"

"Yes."

"But not as much?" she asked.

"No, not as much."

She thought about that for nearly a minute. "Maybe that's all we can ask," she finally said, then added, "at least while you are looking into your mother's murder."

"Yes," I said.

The waitress came by again, and I waved her over. She looked relieved. She took our orders with a smile. I ordered a burger and a Diet Coke.

"Did you want to order a beer?" asked Cindy



when the waitress left.

“Yes,” I said.

“But you didn’t.”

“No, not this time.”

Cindy took my hands and held them in hers. “I love you, you big oaf.”

“Yes, I know,” I said.

## Chapter Nine

The morning sun was shining at an angle through the window behind me. My feet were up on the corner of my antique desk, careful of the gold-tooled leather top. I was reading from my football scrapbook, which dated back to my high school years. The binder was thick and battered, filled with hundreds of yellowed newspaper clippings. I read some of the articles, sometimes even blushing. People can say the nicest things. I was a different man back then. Of course, I had been nothing more than a kid, but I could see it in my eyes in some of the pictures. I was arrogant, smug, and cocky.



Football came easy to me. Grades came easy. Girls came easy. Life was good, one long party in those days. No wonder I missed those days to some degree. Now I've come to realize that there is more to life than football, and it has been a hard lesson to learn. In fact, I'm still learning it, every day.

As usual, I closed the scrapbook just before I got to the last game of my senior season at UCLA. I knew all too well what happened in the last game. I had a grim reminder of it every time I stood.

Outside the sky was clear, a balmy sixty-four, according to my internet weather ticker. Southern California's version of a crisp fall day. *Brrr*.

I put the scrapbook back in the desk's bottom drawer, within easy reach for next time. I next brought up the internet and went immediately to eBay, and saw that my signature was now selling for two dollars and twenty-five cents. I put in a bid for two-fifty. Next I checked my email and saw one from Cindy. In it, she described in jaw-dropping detail what she was wearing beneath her pantsuit. I flagged the message for later reference.

Two hours later, when I was done goofing around



on the internet, I was ready for real work. In the Yahoo search engine I typed "Sylvester the Mummy" and up popped a half dozen articles written mostly by historians.

I didn't learn anything new. One forensic expert determined Sylvester had probably been twenty-seven at the time of his death. Officially, he had died from a single gunshot wound to the stomach. Not much there to go on.

Of the dozen or so articles, one name popped up more than once: Jarred Bloomer, official historian for the Rawhide Ghost Town Museum. He called himself the world's greatest expert on Sylvester the Mummy.

It's always nice to be good at something.

I knew from my interview with Detective Sherbet that Bloomer and his assistant were the last two people to see Willie Clarke alive. If I've learned one thing as a P.I., it's to take note when a name appears more than once in a case.

I sat back in my chair, laced my fingers behind my head. Perhaps it was time to visit Rawhide and Jarred Bloomer.

But first a little nap. Detecting was hard work.

I was dozing in that very same position when I



heard a deep voice say: "Get off your lazy ass, Knighthorse. It's the middle of the day."

I knew that rumbling baritone anywhere, for I hear it in my dreams and sometimes even in my nightmares.

Standing before me was Coach Samson, my old high school football coach.

## Chapter Ten

From his oversized calves to his bright green nylon coach's jacket he always wore, Coach Samson exuded coachness. He filled the client chair to its capacity, as he did all chairs unfortunate enough to cross paths with his profuse posterior. His skin was a black so deep it sometimes appeared purple. Then again I'm color blind, so what did I know?

Coach Samson looked around the office, breathing loudly through his wide nostrils. I could hear his neck scraping against the collar of his coach's jacket.



“You think pretty highly of yourself, Knighthorse.” His voice was gritty and guttural. It came from deep within his barrel chest, able to reach across football fields and high into stadiums.

“No, sir. I mean, yes, sir. Those were good memories. If you look hard enough at the picture over my right shoulder, the one with two bullet holes in it—don’t ask—you can even see yourself.”

He leaned forward, squinting. “All I see is someone’s belly.”

“Yes, sir. Your belly.”

He shook his head, and continued his slow inspection of the office. “What happened with the offer from the San Diego Chargers?”

I knew that question was coming. I had spent last summer preparing for a return to football, strengthening my injured leg, only to realize the passion to play was gone.

“I decided football had passed me by.”

His gaze leveled on me. I shifted uncomfortably. “You could have made their squad, Knighthorse. They were desperate for a fullback. Hell, they still are.”

“I’m a good detective.”



“Any idea what the minimum salary is in the NFL?”

“Probably a little more than my fee.”

“What is your fee?”

I told him.

He grunted. “People actually pay you those fees?”

“Lots of people out there want answers. I give them answers.”

He shifted in the seat. The chair creaked. If the subject wasn't football, Coach Samson grew uncomfortable. “So it wasn't about the money.”

“No.”

“Then what's it about?”

“I have a life here. I'm good at what I do. I'm a different man than when I was twenty-two.”

We were silent. I wondered why he was here.

“Do you miss football?” he asked.

“Yes and no. I don't miss the pain.”

“You want to come back?”

There it was.

“Depends in what capacity.”

“How about the capacity as my assistant coach.



The team has fallen on hard times. We're halfway through the season and we need a spark."

"You think I can be the spark?"

He leveled his hazel eyes on me. "Stranger things have happened," he said. "It's not full time, Jim. I know you're busy with...whatever the hell it is you do here. Show up when you can, once, twice a week. Be there for the games Friday nights." He paused, looked down. "I have no money for you, though. Strictly volunteer."

Inglewood High barely had enough to pay his salary.

I didn't have to think about it. "Would be an honor."

"Practices start at two. Don't be late."

"Wouldn't dream of it, sir."

## Chapter Eleven

Sanchez and I were at the 24-Hour Fitness in Newport Beach. I liked going there because they were always open, except Friday and Saturday



nights, in which they closed at 10 p.m.

"You see," I was saying, as we were doing dumbbell lunges, "they're only open twenty-four hours a day five days a week."

Sanchez said, "Will you give it a rest."

I set the dumbbells down. We were using sixty-pound weights. Sanchez picked them up and began his set, lunging his ass off.

I said, "Should be something like: 24-Hour Fitness Some Days, 6 a.m.-10 p.m. Other Days."

"Catchy," said Sanchez.

"But accurate."

"Not all 24-Hour Fitness close early on the weekends," he said. "And not all of them close at ten, some close at eleven."

"Then the name change should be on an establishment by establishment basis."

"That would be chaotic."

"But accurate."

Sanchez shook his head. He finished his lunges, and placed the dumbbells back on the dumbbell rack. He said, "When are we going to start using the seventies?"

"When you get strong enough for the seventies."



“Hell, I’ve been waiting for you.”

We moved over to the squat rack, and used every available plate we could find. The bar sagged noticeably. People were now watching us. At least two of those people were handsome women.

“There are some handsome women watching us.”

“I hate that phrase,” said Sanchez.

“There are some handsome women watching us’?”

“No. ‘Handsome women.’ Women are *beautiful*. Men are handsome.”

“You think men are handsome?”

“I think I am handsome. I think you are an ugly Caucasian.”

I positioned myself under the barbell and began squatting away. When finished, Sanchez helped me ease the thing back on the rack. My leg was throbbing. The steel pins holding my bones together felt as if they were on fire.

“You were gritting your teeth,” said Sanchez. “Too heavy, or the old broken leg excuse?”

“The old broken leg excuse.”

He stepped into the squat machine. I did some



quick calculations. We were squatting with nearly five hundred pounds. Sanchez did ten reps easily.

"Besides," said Sanchez, when finished, "I am a married man with three kids. I don't care if two women are looking at us."

"Then why are you now flexing your calves?"

"Because it's a free country."

"Tell that to Danielle."

"I'd rather not."

"Thirsty?" I asked.

"Sure."

We showered, changed and ordered drinks at the gym's juice bar. I got a Diet Pepsi and Sanchez got something called a Sherbet Bang. We sat on red vinyl stools and leaned our elbows on the metal counter while the bartender mixed the Bang. The counter was cluttered with protein mixes, protein bars and protein supplements.

"Why not just eat a steak?" said Sanchez.

"Not enough protein."

Our drinks came. From where we sat at the gym's juice bar, we had a good view into the aerobics room. At the moment, about thirty women



and a handful of men were stretching, as we used to call it back in the day. Now it's called pre-aerobics.

"Jesus got jumped yesterday," Sanchez said. Jesus was his eleven-year-old boy. "Danielle and I spent the night with him in the hospital."

"You mean Jesus?" I pronounced it the Western way.

"His name is *Jesus*, asshole," said Sanchez, pronouncing it the Spanish way: *Hay-zeus asshole*.

"How's he doing?"

"Stayed home from school today. Nothing broken, although he lost a tooth."

"Who jumped him?"

"Eight or nine kids, best I can tell."

"Any reason, or was this just a friendly neighborhood random act of violence?"

I could tell Sanchez was doing all he could not to crush the Styrofoam cup in his hand. Probably didn't want Sherbet Bang all over the front of him. "Apparently, one of the gang's girlfriends took a liking to *Jesus*."

"Nothing wrong with that," I said. "We could all use a little Jesus."

Sanchez ignored me. At least I amused myself.



"Jesus wants revenge. That's all he talks about. Thinks he can take each of these punks. One at a time. Individually."

I nodded. Probably could. *Jesus* was a tough kid.

"And I'm going to take him around so that he can do just that, hunt these punks down. All he wants is a shot at them. One on one."

"*Mano y mano.*"

"Now you're getting it," he said. "Want to come?"

Sanchez was gazing absently over at the aerobics room, but I suspected he didn't have much else on his mind other than his son. Certainly not pre-aerobics vs. stretching.

"You're asking because you want to use my car," I said.

He shrugged.

I continued, "Because you're a cop. And you want to remain anonymous, because cops probably shouldn't be endorsing youth violence."

"Something like that."

"Sounds like fun," I said. "When does the ass-kicking begin?"

"In a few weeks. We'll let him heal a little."

"Then unleash him?" I said.



Sanchez nodded.

"Like the Second Coming," I said.

"Second Coming?"

"It's a Biblical prophecy."

Sanchez rolled his eyes. "Christ," he said.

"Exactly."

## Chapter Twelve

Cindy and I were at a trendy Thai restaurant called Thaiphoon.

"I love this place," Cindy said after we were seated next to a window overlooking a vast parking lot. "But you hate eating here."

"Hate is a strong word."

"But you come here for me."

"Yes."

I ordered a club soda, although I wanted a beer. Cindy ordered a Diet Coke, and probably only wanted a Diet Coke.

"I am so proud of you," Cindy said.

"I am too," I said.



"You don't even know what I'm talking about."

"No," I said. "I'm just proud of myself in general."

Our drinks came. Fizzing water for me; fizzing brown chemicals for her. Next, we ordered dinner. I picked something that sounded familiar and hearty.

When the waitress left, Cindy said, "I'm proud of you because I know you would rather have had a beer."

"Yes."

"But you didn't order one."

"No, not this time."

She smiled at me and there was something close to a twinkle in her eye.

"How's the mummy case coming along?" she asked.

"Today was research."

"You hate research."

"Yes, which is why I spent most of the day playing Solitaire."

Our soup arrived. Cindy dipped her oversized plastic spoon into the steaming broth and slurped daintily. I slurped less daintily, and three spoonfuls later pushed the witch's brew aside.



"You're done already?"

"I don't want to spoil my appetite."

"This coming from a guy who eats a dozen donuts in one sitting."

"I've scaled back to a half a dozen."

She sipped another spoonful, her pinkie sticking out at a perfect ninety-degree angle.

"I still think it's an accident," said Cindy.

"But I'm not getting paid to think it's an accident."

She nodded. "You're getting paid to think 'what if'."

"Exactly," I said. "As in, 'what if' I slipped under this table and really turned up the heat in this place?"

"You would never fit under the table."

"Tables are made to be overturned."

"We would never be able to come back."

"What a shame."

"Nice try," she said. "So any thoughts on who might want the historian dead?"

"I figure someone who stands to lose if Sylvester the Mummy's identity were ascertained."

"Big word for a detective."

"I'm a big detective."

"Not sure that correlates."



“Big word for a professor.”

“I get paid to use big words,” said Cindy. “The murder is over a hundred and twenty years old. The murderer is long gone. Who could possibly stand to lose?”

“Perhaps the family of the murderer. Perhaps there’s a deep dark secret.”

Cindy’s eyes brightened the way they do when she finds me particularly brilliant. I’ve learned to treasure these rare moments. She was nodding her head. “Yes, a good start. Any families stand out?”

“There’s one that has potential. They’re called the Barrons, and they own the town of Rawhide.”

“Own?”

“Yes, own. But keep in mind this isn’t a real town anymore; it’s a tourist attraction. Back in the 1970’s the county of San Bernardino was going to level what remained of the mining town, until a man named Tafford Barron purchased it for cheap and rebuilt it into a sort of amusement park. Barron is quoted as saying he couldn’t let a town built by his family be destroyed.”

“Seems innocent enough.”

“Sure,” I said. “Now he’s running for the House of



Representatives. Election's in six months. According to the local paper out there, Barron has a shot of winning this thing."

Cindy was nodding and grinning and eating. Multi-tasking at its best. "And what if this historian, Willie Whossit—"

"Clarke"

"Willie Clarke comes in and digs up some incriminating evidence."

"Or embarrassing evidence."

"Yes, embarrassing. Either way, something like this could derail a campaign."

"Possibly," I said. "It's at least a start."

Cindy was looking at me over her Diet Coke with something close to lust in her eyes.

"What?" I said.

"I like this," she said.

"You do?"

"I love talking about your cases. I love watching you sort through your case. I love being a part of the process, even if it's from the outside looking in. Being a detective might not have been your first choice in life, but you were born to do it, and I respect you so much for that."



"I was born for something else, too," I said.

"Football?"

I shook my head slowly.

"Ah," she said, blushing. "That."

## Chapter Thirteen

I am not mechanically inclined by nature. I am more of the warrior/lover/artist type. But I do know the basics of car maintenance. So before I headed out into the desert, I topped off the Mustang's water, checked the oil, tire pressure, air filter and anything else that crossed my mind. A few years back I had the engine rebuilt. Since then, the car ran smooth as hell, which was the way I preferred. More than anything, the car was paid off. A key factor to any struggling detective.

I drove north along Highway 15, the main artery into Las Vegas from southern California. Needless to say, I sat in some traffic. With some time on my hands, and being one of the few who didn't have



gambling on the brain, I was able to relax and enjoy a good book on tape. The book was about things called hobbits and a very important ring.

An hour later I was in the Mojave Desert, passing through cities called Hesperia and Victorville. I wondered if there was a Jimville somewhere. And if there wasn't, there should be.

The Mojave Desert is famous for its kangaroo rats and Joshua trees. Stephen King once set a story out here, about a Cadillac. Always liked that story.

I wondered if there were any Jim trees.

The heat was intense and uncomfortable. My windows were down, my only air conditioning. Sweat soaked through the back of my shirt and was probably puddling on my leather seat. Nice.

Every now and then someone spotted my cool car and gave me a thumbs-up gesture. I accepted the gesture with a gentle nod of my head. Every now and then someone spotted the cool driver driving the cool car, and gave me a smile. As these were mostly women, I returned the smile. Cindy would have been jealous. Luckily, Cindy wasn't in the car. Smiles are not cheating. Smiles, in my book, are okay. Unless



she's smiling at other men. Then it's not okay.

Hypocrite.

I headed off Highway 15 onto a much smaller, one-laned highway. I drove alone for many miles.

Luckily, I had hobbits to entertain me. Unfortunately, the little guys were in a fair bit of trouble, as there seemed to be a lot of interest in this ring.

I checked my temperature gauge. All was okay.

The road was flat, surrounded by a lot of stark, rocky protrusions that were too big for hills and too small for mountains. I racked my brain for all words associated with mountains, but could think of only crags and hillocks. I decided on *smallish mountains*.

At any rate these smallish mountains were bare and lifeless and would have been equally at home on Mars or Venus—where, as legend has it, men and women are from. Except these burning rocks weren't barren and empty. Life flourished here, to a degree. Snakes lived in holes. Kangaroo rats avoided the holes with the snakes. Plants clung to life in ways that made sense to evolutionary biologists but seemed remarkable to the rest of us.



A car was coming about a half-mile away. The first car in 20 miles. I was giddy with anticipation. A man was driving. A woman was looking down at a map spread across the dashboard. The backseat was piled with suitcases and clothing. They never saw me waving.

The hobbits escaped the clutches of some very wicked creatures. This was followed by a lot of history of a land called Middle Earth. I almost went to sleep, but persevered, and was rewarded by some more history of Middle Earth. I turned the tape off, for now.

My timing couldn't have been better.

Nearly two hours after leaving Orange County, as I crested a sort of rise in the road, Rawhide Ghost Town appeared before me.

*Howdy partner.*

## Chapter Fourteen

Rawhide Ghost Town was nestled in a narrow valley between high sun-baked cliffs dotted with



mine shafts. Consisting mostly of shops lining a single dirt road and much smaller than its cousin up north, Calico Ghost Town, Rawhide looked more like a Western-themed strip mall.

I parked in front of the first store that grabbed my eye, Huck's Saloon. For good measure, should anyone show up on a horse, a hitching post still ran the length of the town. Currently, no horses were hitched. Although a handful of cars and trucks were parked in front of various stores, the town appeared mostly empty, a true ghost town.

A hot wind swept down Main Street, moaning like the damned and pushing dust before it. Probably the dust was hot, too. No trees or shade. No relief from the sun unless you went inside somewhere.

So I decided to go inside somewhere, and I chose the saloon. No surprise there.

I pushed my way through a pair of swinging doors. Always wanted to do that. And not even a *squeak* after all these years....

The saloon was empty. No cowboys knocking back a few. No barroom fights in progress. No bartender cowering behind the bar because word



had spread that Big Bad Jim Knighthorse was coming to town. I tipped my Anaheim Angels hat at the empty room, stuck my thumbs in my pockets, and moseyed on into the saloon.

It was a real saloon, so far as I could tell. There was even a stage for the dancing girls and a player piano on the floor beneath it. Sadly, no dancing girls. I sat at the wraparound bar. Before me was a huge mirror. There were some bottles of not-so-authentic liquor stacked in front of the mirror. I smiled at the handsome man in the mirror. He smiled back, and we played that game for perhaps another two seconds.

A woman appeared from the back of the bar, spurs jangling, carrying a case of Bud Light. She was wearing a cowboy hat, and a bright smile. I have the effect on people.

"Howdy, partner," she said.

"Howdy ma'am," I said. "Is this where I tip my hat?"

"Maybe if you were wearing a cowboy hat." She put the case into a glass refrigerator. I noticed in passing her arms were roped with muscle. "Were you waiting long?"



“Just sat down.”

“Good. What can I get you?”

“Rolling Rock, no glass. And some information, no glass.”

She opened the refrigerator door again, grabbed a green bottle and placed it on top of a little square napkin to protect the deeply rutted counter top. Her work done for the morning, she leaned a curved hip on the bar. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She crossed her arms under her chest. The long sleeves of her red-checkered flannel were rolled up to her elbows. Veins crossed her forearms, just under the skin. She looked like she could kick Calamity Jane's ass.

“So what kind of information are you looking for?” She was smiling at me. I think she thought I was cute. Stranger things have happened.

I showed her my P.I. license. She leaned forward and studied it. “Wow, a real live private investigator. In a ghost town, no less.”

“Irony, isn't it?”

“Very,” she said. “Nice picture.”

“My girlfriend says I look urbane and dashing.”

“Girlfriend?”



"Yup."

"The good ones are always taken."

"This one is, alas."

"Knighthorse sounds Native American," she said.

"My great great grandfather was Apache."

"Hey, we could play cowboys and Indians."

"Sounds naughty," I said.

She grinned. "So what's a detective doing all the way out here?"

I told her about the case.

"Willie Clarke," she said, thinking. "The guy they found dead in the desert?"

"One in the same."

She bit her lip, frowned. Re-crossed her arms. "But I thought they ruled his death an accident."

"So they did."

"But you think different?"

"I'm being paid to think different."

"Paid by whom?"

I shook my head.

"Top secret," I said. "Did you ever meet Willie Clarke?"

"Once. He came into the bar and we chatted. He told me he was here to look into the identity of



Sylvester. You know Sylvester? Wait, of course you do, you're an ace detective."

I winked and shot her a blank with my forefinger.

"Willie was a young guy," she continued, "said he was just out of college."

"What was your impression of him?"

"Smart, funny. Sort of rugged, too."

"Did he seem like the type who could take care of himself?"

She was nodding as I asked the question. Her eyes narrowed and she frowned a little. "Yeah, definitely. He didn't look like a historian."

"More manly than me?"

She winked. "Almost, but not quite."

"Did he seem the type who would get lost in the desert and run out of gas?"

"That's asking a lot, he only came in for a Diet Coke. But, if I had to answer...."

"And you do," I added.

"I would say he seemed the type to have a map on hand, but keep in mind I only met the guy for ten minutes."

"They say he ran out of gas," I said. "And I'm



willing to bet he's also the type to make sure he topped off his gas before heading out into the desert. Would be stupid not to, and everyone seems to agree Willie was pretty smart."

She was nodding. "Maybe he ran out of gas while looking for a way out."

"Maybe," I said.

"But you don't think so."

"His truck was found close to the site. Which suggests he ran out shortly after leaving the others," I said. "Did the two of you talk about anything else?"

She bit her lip. "He mentioned he'd been hired to look into Sylvester's identity, and I asked if he had spoken to Jarred."

There he was again. Jarred, Rawhide's official town historian, and curator of the Rawhide Museum.

"Why?"

"Because Jarred thinks of himself as the world's greatest expert on Sylvester the Mummy."

"And had Willie?"

She nodded. "He said Jarred was being rude and unhelpful at best. Which sounds like Jarred. He takes his work entirely too seriously. Now he's working on his magnum opus."



“Magnum opus?”

“It’s the history of Rawhide. Jarred thinks it will help establish him as a serious historian. You know, make a name for him. That’s pretty important to Jarred.”

“And he picked Rawhide to make his name?”

She nodded, grinning. She picked up a towel and started wiping something behind the bar, below my eyesight. It was a habit all bartenders have: just wiping the hell out of things.

“He says Rawhide is untapped material. He’s going to put it on the map, so to speak.”

“Rawhide is on the map.”

She giggled.

I finished the rest of my beer in one swallow. I wanted eleven more for an even dozen. “Thank you for your time, you’ve been very helpful.”

“You don’t want another beer?”

“Duty calls.”

She looked sad. The bar was empty. I was her only entertainment. “So where you headed now?”

“Figure I might as well talk to Jarred before he goes making a name for himself and thinks he’s too important to talk to me.”



She grinned. "He's four stores down. The adobe building."

I tipped my hat. "Ma'am."

Luckily, the swinging doors were just as much fun going as coming.

## Chapter Fifteen

I stepped out of the saloon and onto the surface of Venus. Or close to it. Hell, I felt myself mummifying on the spot, and almost turned around for more beer.

I passed a leather shop, general store, and glass blowing shop, and soon came upon a smallish adobe building set back from the boardwalk. The sign out front read: *Rawhide Museum, Free Admission.*

Now we're talking.

I paused, listening. From somewhere nearby I heard the sharp report of rifle shots. From my research, I knew there was a shooting range just outside of town.

Praying for air conditioning, I entered the



museum.

\* \* \*

My prayers were answered. Maybe I should be a priest.

Cool air blasted my face the moment I stepped into the small museum, itself nothing more than a converted frontier house, filled to overflowing with antique mining equipment. Hardhats, lanterns, pick axes, carts, stuff I didn't recognize, stuff I did but didn't know the names of. I had the general sense that mining in the days of yore took a lot of muscle, and probably a lot of nerve. Not to mention light. In one corner, a display let children pan for fool's gold. Along the walls, dozens of black and white photographs showed the town in various stages of growth and decline. Many featured hardened men sporting thick handlebar mustaches.

A door was open to my right, leading into what might have once been a bedroom, but now was an office. Inside, a smallish young man with wire rim glasses and a goatee was working furiously on a computer, pounding the keyboard with a vengeance, oblivious to me. I studied him briefly, and concluded



he would have looked better with a handlebar mustache.

I knocked on the door frame, and he jumped about six inches out of his seat, gasping, clutching his heart. He snapped his head around, his eyes wide behind his thick glasses.

Jumpy little fellow.

"Oops," I said. "Of course, I could say I should have knocked, but that's just what I did."

"Oh, it's not you," he said, settling back in his chair, letting out a long stream of air. The brass nameplate on his desk read: *Jarred Booker, Town Historian*. "Just lost in my writing, you know."

"Oh, I know."

"Oh, do you write?"

"No, I was just trying to be agreeable."

"I see," he said, frowning. "Anyway, I haven't had anyone step in here for...oh, a few days."

"Maybe the price scares them away," I said.

"Any freer, and I would have to pay them."

"It's an idea."

"Are you here for a tour?" he asked.

"Not exactly."

I opened my wallet and showed him my license to



detect, complete with my happy mug. A small grin, no teeth. Eyes bright, but hard. The picture was worth a thousand words, and one of them was *roguish*.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Knighthorse?”

I told him I was hired to investigate the death of Willie Clarke and that I was here to ask a few questions. Jarred stared at me for a moment, then got up and crossed the room and closed the door and went back and sat behind his desk again.

He said, “I was told not to talk to anyone about Willie Clarke.”

“Told by who?”

Jarred leaned back in his chair and studied me. The glow from his monitor reflected off his glasses. So nice it reflected twice.

“Tafford Barron?” I asked. Shot in the dark.

He looked a little surprised. “Yes.”

“Any idea why he doesn’t want you talking to me?”

“None that I can speculate on. Besides, I’ve already told the police everything I know.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’d like to hire you to take me to the same place you took Willie Clarke.”



"In the desert?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Part of the investigation. Scene of the crime."

"According to the police, there's been no crime. It was an accident."

"Sure," I said. "Which is why Tafford wants to keep you from talking to me."

Jarred shrugged. "He doesn't want any more bad publicity for the town."

"Bad publicity for the town, or for his campaign?"

"I wouldn't know anything about that."

At that moment a back door to the office opened and bright sunshine flooded the narrow room. A pretty blond girl in her mid-twenties entered through the door, shut it quietly behind her, and stood blinking, letting her eyes adjust to the dim light. She wore jeans, a red cowboy shirt and boots, the Rawhide dress code. She was also holding a rifle. She didn't know I was there, at least not until her eyes adjusted.

"Best day yet, Jarred," she said. "I couldn't miss. Oh, hello."

"Howdy, ma'am." I tipped my hat. I was getting



better at that.

She grinned. "Howdy."

"I'm sorry I can't help you, Mr. Knighthorse," said Jarred loudly, drawing my attention back to him. "My hands are tied."

"Tied about what?" said the girl.

"I'll tell you later," said Jarred.

"I'm investigating Willie Clarke's death," I said. I looked at Jarred. "I prefer to tell her now."

"Oh," she said, frowning. "Willie Clarke."

"You must be Patricia McGovern." I remembered her from the police report. She and Jarred had escorted Willie out into the desert together. She was the other person I wanted to talk to.

She nodded. "Yes, I'm Patricia. I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

I gave her my most winning smile. "I'm Jim Knighthorse, detective extraordinaire."

Her eyes widened. "A detective?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good day, Mr. Knighthorse," said Jarred, standing. "We have nothing further to add to your investigation."



I was watching Patricia. Mostly, I was observing her reaction to Jarred's unfriendliness towards me. She didn't like it. She seemed about to say something, but then bit her lip. Maybe she didn't want to lose her job, either.

So I left, but first I handed them each a business card. Patricia looked at it as if I had handed her a two-dollar bill. Jarred tried to hand his back. Instead, I left his on his desk.

I tipped my ballcap toward Patricia. She smiled tightly, and I left the office.

And Rawhide altogether.

## Chapter Sixteen

The next day I was sitting in Detective Hansen's office on the third floor of the Huntington Beach Police Station. Today Hansen was wearing dark blue slacks, a powder blue Polo shirt with a shoulder holster, and loafers with no socks. I knew this because his feet were up on the desk, ankles crossed. His perfect hair was parted down the



middle. Fit and tan, he was the quintessential Huntington Beach cop.

I motioned toward his clothing. "Items A & B, page one twenty three of the Nordstrom's men catalog?"

"Close," he said. "Ordered from Macy's. Wife picked them out. Thought I should set the standards for hip and cool for Huntington Beach PD."

"Which, itself, sets the standards for hip and cool for police departments everywhere."

"Sure."

"So, if you follow that train of logic, you are the hippest and coolest cop this side of the Mississippi. Perhaps ever."

"Gimme a break, Knighthorse."

Something caught my eye. Actually two somethings. Hansen's office overlooked a big alabaster fountain. The fountain was of mostly of a nude sea nymph. A buxomly sea nymph.

"Distracting, huh?" said Hansen.

"The sea nymph?"

"Whatever the fuck it is," he said. "Why the hell did they have to make her tits so goddamn big?"

"Because they could."



"So what can I do for you, Knighthorse?"

I told him about my mother, the picture, and why I was there. As I spoke, his eyes never wavered from mine. I finished the story. Hansen continued looking at me and then started shaking his head. His perfect hair never moved.

"Shit, Knighthorse, I never knew."

"Few do."

"The case is closed?"

I nodded. "I'm re-opening it. Unofficially."

A corner of his lip raised in a sort of half smile. "Of course. And you have a picture of the perp, or the presumed perp?"

"Yes."

"And the picture's twenty years old?"

"Yes."

He sat back in his chair, ran his fingers through his hair. His fingers, amazingly, were tan. And his hair, amazingly, never moved. Only grudgingly made some space for the fingers. Otherwise held its ground. I waited. Hansen thought some more.

"Maybe we can ID him," he said.

"Mugshots?"

"We have them that far back, of course. Sound



good?"

I nodded. "Sounds good."

Ten minutes later we took an elevator down to the basement. He left me alone in a dusty backroom and, surrounded by outdated computers and boxes of old case files, I looked at the faces of hundreds, perhaps even thousands of Orange County's most hardened criminals of yesteryear.

But not the face I was looking for. And as I took the elevator back up from the basement, I was looking forward to crossing paths with the buxomly sea nymph.

## Chapter Seventeen

With Sanchez directing me, we drove slowly through a quiet residential neighborhood filled with small suburban houses. It was late evening, about 7:00 p.m. We were about nine blocks from Disneyland. Hard to believe there was going to be a royal ass kicking down the road from the happiest



place on Earth.

While we drove, Jesus walked me through it. "Charlene and I were walking home through Hill Park. It's a shortcut from school."

"I don't like you walking through Hill Park," said Sanchez. "That park's trouble."

Jesus and I ignored Sanchez.

"Charlene is...?" I asked.

"My girlfriend. At least one of them."

"How many do you have?"

"Two, but I keep two or three on the side."

"For emergencies?" I asked.

"Something like that."

"Lord," said Sanchez.

I was watching the kid through my rearview mirror. Jesus' face was turned, staring blankly out the side window. He was so *little*. Hard to imagine the kid being so tough. But he was. Somehow.

"Okay," I said. "So you and Charlene are walking home through the park."

"When we are surrounded by twelve guys. Most are on bikes. Some on skateboards."

"Did you run?"

"No. But I told Charlene to beat it, and she did."



They let her go, of course. They were after me, not her."

"Why were they after you?"

"Nothing I did, at least nothing I could help."

"One of their girls took a liking to you."

"That's what I hear. Like I can keep track."

"I know what you mean."

Sanchez shook his head, and pointed me down a side street. I turned the steering wheel. The Mustang rolled along smoothly, the engine throbbing.

"So they surround you, what happened next?"

"I told them all to go ahead and kick my ass, but someday I was going to hunt each of them down one at a time."

"You said that?"

"Yes."

*Tough kid.*

"What happened next?"

"Four of them took off running."

"Because they were scared of you?"

"I suppose."

Sanchez spoke up. "They threw a rock at him, hit him in the mouth."

I looked at Sanchez. He was staring straight



ahead. His jawline was rigid. A vein pulsed in his neck.

"He who is without sin," I said, "cast the first stone?"

Jesus said, "What does that mean?"

Sanchez shook his head. "Ignore him. Go on, son."

"The rock hit me in the mouth, knocked out my front tooth. Split my lips open—lips that were made for kissing."

Sanchez shook his head. "I created a monster."

"So I charged the one who threw it. Kid named Doyle. Jumped on top of him and started wailing on him. After that, things are just a big blur of fists and feet and blood."

"They knocked him out," said Sanchez. "His girl, whichever one she was, called 911. He was still unconscious when the police came. So were two of the kids."

I looked in the rearview mirror.

"Two?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't really remember what happened."

Jesus was sitting in the middle of the bench seat,



looking out the right window. He was unconsciously poking his tongue through the gap in his incisors.

Sanchez told me to stop in front of a smallish house with no porch light on. There was a chainlink fence around the house.

"Who's this?" I asked.

"Brian. It was his girl who started this mess."

"How old is he?"

"Thirteen."

"How old are you?"

"I turn twelve next month."

"So you're eleven?"

"I'm old for my age."

"Boy are you ever. Need any help?"

He shook his head, but now he was looking eagerly toward the small dark house. I looked, too. Not much was going on. There was some faint light coming from the back of the house.

Sanchez said, "I cased the house last week. The kid came home alone around this time."

"Cased?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Don't you have murderers to find?"



“Don’t start with me.”

“Brian hangs out with his friends at this time,” said Jesus. “They have a gang. Pick on kids in school, harass teachers. They get suspended all the time, smoke cigarettes, sometimes even dope.”

“Here he comes,” said Sanchez.

I looked down the street. A kid was coming towards us on a bike. Big kid. Much bigger than Jesus. And he was smoking. I could see the glowing tip of a cigarette. He passed under a streetlamp and I had a good look at his face. Wide cheekbones. Big head. The kid looked like a bully. Self-satisfied, content, mean.

He pulled up next to the chain link fence across the street.

The car door banged open behind me.

Jesus was out, running.

The boy flicked his cigarette away, stepped off the bike, and reached for the latch on the chain link fence. And turned his head just as a small dark figure tackled him hard to the ground.

## Chapter Eighteen



I instinctively went for my door, but Sanchez put his hand on my shoulder. “No. Jesus wants to do this on his own.” Sanchez was frowning. He didn’t like this either.

“The other kid has him by about twenty pounds.” And since these were just kids, twenty pounds was a significant advantage.

“Jesus fights big.”

There was just enough leftover light from a nearby streetlight to see what was going on. Jesus had tackled the kid onto a grassy parkway. Now they were rolling.

Dropped over a curb and into the gutter. As this was southern California, the gutter was dry.

The other kid, the bigger kid, landed on top.

*Uh oh.*

But Jesus promptly reached up, grabbed a handful of the kid’s hair, and yanked him off to the side. The kid screamed.

I almost cheered.

Jesus, I discovered, did not fight fairly. And in street fighting—and when you are younger and



smaller, that was the only way to go.

They were rolling again, out into the street.

There were no cars coming, luckily.

"Kid better not get dirty," said Sanchez, shaking his head. "We're supposed to be out getting ice cream."

"Jesus might have other things on his mind."

"It's *Hay-zeus*, dammit."

"Same thing."

"No, it's not," said Sanchez. "For one thing, it's a completely different language. And considering you date a world renowned anthropologist, you show a surprising lack of cultural and religious sensitivity."

"The word you want is ethnocentric."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Thinking one's culture is superior to others," I said. "Most people in most cultures suffer from it. I, however, do not suffer from it."

"And I happen to disagree," said Sanchez. "You are one hell of an ethnocentric motherfucker."

Shouts and the sound of smacking flesh reached our open windows. It was hard to tell who was doing the smacking.

"Your kid winning?" I asked.



“I can’t tell, but it’s a good bet. I told him not to kick his ass too bad. I didn’t want his knuckles scuffed. His mother would have my head if she knew what we were doing. We’re supposed to be getting ice cream.”

One kid staggered to his feet, while the other lay in the middle of the street in the fetal position. Luckily, no cars were coming.

The kid on his feet was smallish. Dark hair. Good looking.

*Son of a bitch*, I thought. *He did it.*

Jesus surveyed the street, ignoring the moaning kid, spotted the bike. He staggered over to it, then dragged it over to a trash can by its front tire, sparks flying from where one of the peddles contacted the asphalt. He picked the bike up, and deposited it inside the trashcan, and closed the lid.

“Very thorough,” I said.

Jesus staggered over, pulled open the door and collapsed inside. I could smell his sweat and something else. Maybe blood, maybe bike grease. Outside, a couple of porchlights turned on, including the one we were parked in front of.



“Let’s go,” said Sanchez.

“Anyone feel like ice cream?” I asked.

## Chapter Nineteen

Cindy and I were in her condo on a perfect Sunday afternoon watching football. During the fall, I don’t work weekends or Monday nights. Cindy knows this about me and mostly puts up with it.

Outside, through the blinds, the sun was shining. We were wasting another perfect day. Big deal. Most days in Orange County were perfect. Besides, football is worth wasting a few perfect days over.

“So explain what that yellow line means again? Do the players see it?”

“No,” I said. I didn’t mind explaining football to Cindy. I took pride in the fact that football seemed an overly complex game for the uninitiated. “The players can’t see it. The yellow line is for the benefit of the fans.”

“And you are quite a fan.”

“Yes.”



“Why?”

“Probably because I played the game. I know how difficult football is.”

“I thought you said it was easy.”

“No. I said football came easy to me. Playing my position, fullback, came naturally to me. However, everything else was hard. The grueling practices in one hundred-degree heat with twenty pounds of pads. Playing when hurt. Picking yourself up off the ground after you’ve had your bell rung.”

“And pretending it didn’t hurt,” said Cindy.

“Yep.”

“You rung a few bells in your time.”

“That’s how I made my living.”

“Except you weren’t paid.”

“Alas, no.”

“So why is there a yellow line?”

“It denotes the first down.”

She snapped her fingers. I could almost see the light on behind her eyes. “You’ve told me that before.”

“Yes.”

“But you never sound impatient.”

“No.”



“Why?”

“Because I happen to like you.”

Cindy's condo was cozy and immaculate. She had painted her north kitchen wall red. It looked orange to me, but I have it on good authority—Cindy's—that it was indeed red. The small kitchen had a ceramic red rooster on the fridge, and lots of country knickknacks. The rest of the house was laced with curtains. Cindy loved curtains. She even had curtains *behind* curtains. The walls were adorned with many of my own abstract paintings. She was my #1 fan.

Cindy's Pomeranian, Ginger, was sleeping on the couch between us, and looked like a little red throw pillow. I was working on a can of Diet Pepsi. Cindy was drinking herbal tea. Earlier, she had asked if I wanted some herbal tea, and I politely suggested herbal tea sucked ass. Now we were watching the Rams game, and eating one of her few original dishes, a 7-layer bean dip. Today, I counted only five layers.

“No guacamole or sour cream,” she admitted. “So I added more beans.”

“Did you say more beans?”



She thought about that, and groaned. "Oh, God, what have I done?"

I grinned and dug into the dip.

At halftime, Cindy said, "The vandals struck again."

I picked up the remote control and clicked off the TV and set the chips on the coffee table, and turned and looked at her.

"When?"

"Friday. Broke into my office, destroyed the place, ruined everything I owned. Pissed in the corners, defecated on my books."

"What did the campus police say?"

"They're looking into it. Appears to be a guy and a gal, according to the video footage they have. But both are masked."

"Any more messages?"

"I think the pile of crap on the title page of my latest textbook on world religions was message enough."

I inhaled. I was shaking. Adrenaline surged through my veins.

Cindy stroked my arm with her palm. "I'm not



scared, okay? I'm used to this. I've lived with this my entire life. Many people hate my name and me. Remember, I have a permit to pack heat." She did, too. She carried a small .22 in her purse. "I can take care of myself."

"I don't want you to ever need to use your heat."

"Which is why I have a big, strong boyfriend. Besides, you have been watching over me, right?"

"Every night you teach."

"But I don't see you."

"No," I said.

"Which means they don't either."

"Exactly."

"You are good."

"Exactly."

"Hey, we're missing the game. Looks like someone crossed over that yellow line thingy. That's a good thing, right?"

Except now, I didn't feel much like watching the game. The vandals upset Cindy, which upset me. Someone was going to pay.



It was after lunch and I was back in my office listening to my voicemail. The first message was from Bank of America. I hear from them each day. Good people. Very persistent. My pal the female computer recording asked me to please hold, followed by some static and then a human voice that said: "Hello, hello?" a few times before hanging up. I owed Bank of America many thousands of dollars. Bank of America and I were just going to have to suffer through some lean times together.

The second message was from BofA.

So was the third.

The fourth was from a man I did not at first identify. The voice was soft and hesitant. I pressed the receiver harder against my ear and replayed the message from the beginning. It was from Jarred, the Rawhide town historian, and he wanted to see me ASAP. He gave me a location and a time. I looked at my watch. I could make it if I hurried.

\* \* \*

An hour and a half later, I was sipping a Diet Coke at Sol's Cafe in Hesperia. I ordered a burger



and fries, and read a few pages of an emergency novel I keep in my glove box, a John Sanford I've been working on here and there.

Jarred arrived just as I was working on the last of the burger. The Rawhide historian looked a little wild-eyed and unsettled. Half of his shirt collar was turned up. He sat opposite me and looked out the window, as if making sure he hadn't been followed. Then he glanced down at my nearly finished meal.

"Been here long?" he asked.

I shrugged. "About eight or nine minutes."

"And you've already finished your meal?"

"What can I say? I'm a pig."

He gave me a half grin, but seemed distracted. He kept looking out the cafe window. I looked, too, but didn't see much, other than the nearly empty parking lot. Jarred's face was pale, the color of worm guts.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, fine. Look, sorry for the clandestine meeting." There was sweat on his brow and upper lip. The bottom rim of his glasses had collected sweat as well. Knee bouncing. Playing with his fork, flipping it over and over.



I watched all of this. "Clandestine is good. Makes me feel important." I pushed the rest of the hamburger in my mouth. "Besides, I've always been meaning to check this place out."

"Really? Oh, you're joking."

"You want a drink?" I asked.

"No, I'm fine." He looked out the window again.

"What's out there?" I asked.

His knee stopped bouncing. Wiped the sweat from his brow. "I think I was followed here."

"By who?"

"I'm not sure."

"Why do you think you were followed?"

"Because it was a Rawhide maintenance truck, and it tailed me out here."

I had seen the trucks scattered around Rawhide. "One of those blue deals," I said.

"Yes."

"Why would anyone follow you?"

He shrugged. "Maybe someone doesn't want me to meet you."

Jarred pushed his glasses up, reached inside his jacket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He



unfolded it on the table in front of me. It was a map. A hand-drawn map; of what, I couldn't be sure.

"You still want me to show you where we took Willie?"

"Yes," I said.

"Look, I was told that if I cooperated with you, I would be fired. I like my job, and I'm doing good things out there. I'm making a name for myself. Now, I can't help you directly," he said, "but this is the next best thing."

"What is it?"

"It's a map to the site."

"Where Sylvester was originally found?" I said. "And where you took Willie Clarke?"

"Yes."

I looked at the map. It seemed fairly basic, with very clear and concise directions.

"Where exactly was Willie's body found?" I asked.

Jarred pointed to an X on the map. "Somewhere along here, about five or ten miles from the site."

"Where he died of heat and fatigue and dehydration," I said, "after his car ran out of gas."

Jarred looked positively sick. He swallowed and



said, "That's what I understand. Lord, if I would have known he was out of gas, I would have given him a lift."

"You didn't wait for him?"

"His truck started right up. I thought he took an alternate route out of the desert, as he was heading back into Orange County. We thought he was fine."

"Hell of a way to go," I said. "Dying in this godforsaken heat."

Jarred looked away. That he felt guilt or some remorse for the death of the college graduate was evident.

"Just make sure you have a full tank," he said to me. "If you head out there."

"I will."

"And water."

"I'll stock up here in town."

"You need help with the directions?"

I looked at them again. "Seem clear enough."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," I said.

"Why are you going out there?"

"Scene of the crime."

"But there's been no crime, at least not according



to the police.”

I grinned. “I didn’t say which crime. I want to investigate where Sylvester was found as well.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s tied into this somehow.”

“Or maybe not at all,” said Jarred.

“Or not at all,” I said.

“There’s nothing out there, you know. It’s just an empty desert valley. I’ve been out there dozens of times myself. It’s just a big waste of time.”

I shrugged. “Who knows, maybe you actually missed something.”

“I doubt it. I’m very thorough.”

“I bet.”

He was looking out the window again, but this time he seemed lost in thought. His glasses had slipped to the tip of his narrow nose; he left them there. He flicked his gaze back to me. “Good luck and be safe.” He stood suddenly. “I have to get back to work. Are you heading to the site now?”

“Sure.”

He nodded and left. I watched him go. Outside, through the window, I watched him quickly cross the parking lot and get into the cab of a black Ford F-



150. Before stepping in, he made a show of carefully looking around. And then he was gone, tires kicking up dust in the gravel parking lot. He hung a right and headed east on Highway 15, back toward Rawhide.

## Chapter Twenty-one

I found a 7-11 in Hesperia and bought two gallons of water and a king-size bag of peanut M&M's. Ought to hold me. I had three-quarters of a tank of gas and decided that should be adequate. According to Jarred's map, I wasn't heading more than fifty miles out into the desert.

With the open bag of M&M's nestled in my lap, I munched away and headed east on Highway 15. As far as M&Ms go, I didn't prefer one color to the other. Colors, to me, were a moot point anyway. Still, I often wondered what the M's meant.

Twenty minutes later, I turned off Highway 15 and onto a narrow road called Burning Woman, instantly surrounded by a lot of rock and sand and heat.



I continued on and the deeper I got into the desert, the more I watched my temperature gauge. So far, so good. Hell, the bottled water was as much for my car as for me.

Occasionally, I checked my rearview mirror. No sign of a blue truck.

My windows were down. Sweat collected at the base of my spine. I sipped some water. Actually, a lot of water. The radio didn't work. So I listened to the rush of wind past my open window and to the not so gentle purr of the Mustang's rebuilt engine. There were no freeway noises out here. No honking horns or the rumble of Harleys.

This is nice.

Eerie.

But nice.

Per the map, I was to turn left onto a very small, winding road near a cluster of boulders. I soon found the boulders and made the left, using my turn signal because you never know who's waiting behind a cluster of boulders.



I sat in my truck and peered down into the valley. This smelled of a set up, a trap. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel.

My car wasn't getting any cooler.

I didn't *have* to go down into the valley. I didn't *have* to observe the spot where Sylvester was found. The last place Willie was seen alive.

Sure, I didn't *have* to, but I *wanted* to. It was part of my job, part of the investigation; it was why I made the big bucks.

*You could come back later with Sanchez and check the place out first.*

Or not.

I drummed my fingers some more, took in a lot of hot air. Sweat coated my skin. I stopped drumming long enough to drink some water, then resumed the drumming.

Then again, if I headed down into the canyon to look under the proverbial rock, it might be interesting to see what comes scurrying out into the light of day.

Sure, I thought, if you don't mind using yourself as bait.



A solitary hawk, or perhaps a vulture, circled the sky above, its massive wingspan forming an arching V. The sky was cloudless. The sun was almost directly overhead.

I scanned the surrounding desert; I appeared to be alone. Scraggly bushes clung to the sunbaked earth.

With my Browning tucked into my waistband, I stepped out of the car and regretted it almost instantly. The sun was unbearable, true, but it was the heat rising up from the sand that threw me off guard.

*I'm getting it from both ends.*

If there was indeed a sun god, he was surely smiling wolfishly down on this foolish mortal.

I brought one of the bottled waters with me, locked the car. By habit I set the alarm, and the horn beeped once, echoing down into the canyon. I think something scuttled in a nearby bush, frightened by the beep.

At least the car was safe. And I would know if anyone screwed with it.

I was wearing a tee shirt, knee-length Bermuda shorts and basketball sneakers. Boots would have



been better against rattlesnakes, although boots would have looked pretty silly with Bermuda shorts. I moved the gun from the small of my back to the front pocket of my shorts, as I didn't want to sweat on it.

And headed down.

The path was steep. The rocks underfoot loose. More than once I slipped, but never fell, thanks to my cat-like reflexes.

I reached the valley floor without melting or mummifying. There, I found some shade at the base of the cliff wall where I stopped and drank some water.

The valley was far removed from anything. Why had Sly, or whoever he was, been out here in the first place?

Maybe he was lost. Maybe he was part of a bank robbing gang and this valley was their hideout; maybe his fellow bangers turned on him.

The wind picked up, bringing with it a spicy mix of juniper and sage. Or maybe I was just smelling my own cooking flesh.

I knew from my readings that Sylvester A. Myers, the man who first found Sly back in 1901, had been



looking for the next great silver claim. Turns out he found a mummified man instead.

The sun angled through the narrow canyon walls. The walls were mostly dirt and sandstone, layered with the occasional swath of something darker, perhaps basalt. The hawk or vulture continued to circle slowly above. Maybe it knew something I didn't.

Something scuttled in a bush nearby.

*Ah, life emerges.*

Before me was a mound of three huge boulders. Screwed into one of the boulders was a very old and faded brass plaque. It read: "In memory of the Nameless who helped settle the Wild West."

That was assuming a lot. Maybe Sylvester didn't help settle anything. Hell, maybe he had done his best to *unsettle* things. Maybe that was why he was shot.

Maybe, but somehow I doubted it.

I bent down and took a handful of the hot sand, sifted it through my fingers. In my mind's eye, I saw the image of a man staggering through these canyons, gut-shot, bleeding and hurting. Alone and probably scared. Or not. Do cowboys get scared?



*Yeah, probably.*

To the east, high on the high cliff above, something *flashed*. Instinctively, I turned my body, narrowing myself as a target. Beside me, next to my left elbow, a section of the boulder *exploded* in a small cloud of dust, pelting me with rock fragments. I dove, rolling.

The report from a rifle followed, echoing throughout the valley.

It kept echoing even as I kept rolling.

### Chapter Twenty-three

I rolled to the relative safety of the boulders, dirt and sand going up my shorts and into places it had no business going.

*Worry about sand in your crawlater.*

*Good idea.*

The rocks gave some shelter, but not as much as I would have liked as I was forced to stay low to the ground with my face pressed against the hot earth. I removed my Browning, hoping sand hadn't gotten



lodged in the barrel.

A second shot *thunked* near my shoes. I jerked my exposed legs in closer as an earsplitting echo followed the shot.

*Jesus, that was close.*

Blindly, I eased my arm around the boulder, let loose with two shots of my own in the general proximity of the spot I had seen the reflection. The two shots were to give the shooter something to think about. I had seven more to be more careful with.

My return fire seemed to work. The shooting from above stopped, at least for the time being. I lay there behind the boulder, trying to make myself as small as possible—a difficult task at best—alert for any sounds or movement.

And then I saw movement, but not the kind I expected.

Ten feet away, emerging from the shadows of a smaller boulder, probably awakened by the gunshots—that is, if they even slept—was a tarantula. From my perspective, with my face pressed against the hot sand, the thing looked gargantuan.

The gargantuan tarantula took a few steps in my



direction.

*Jesus.*

My skin crawled, and if I wasn't currently under gunfire attack I might have jumped up and ran.

It continued toward me. Slowly, deliberately....

I swallowed. Sweat rolled from my temple and into my right eye, momentarily blurring the little monster. When my vision cleared, I saw that it had stopped. Now, slowly, it raised its two hairy front legs up into the air. Like a referee signaling a touchdown.

More movement behind it—

*You've got to be kidding me.*

Issuing out of a hole at the base of the boulder, as if straight from Hell, were dozens and dozens of tarantulas. All huge. All hairy, and all moving purposely toward me, like something out of a horror movie.

*Like something out of a horror movie?*

Hell, this *was* a horror movie.

Suddenly the water bottle next to me exploded, spraying me with water and briefly confusing the spiders. I had actually forgotten about the gunfight. Hell, the gunfight was almost a welcome distraction



at this point.

I took a deep breath, tried to focus. They were just spiders, right? Were tarantulas even poisonous? I think some were. How about California desert tarantulas? And since when did California have tarantulas?

Another shot. As the bullet ricocheted off the boulder near my head, something touched my hand. I jerked my hand away just as a particularly fat and hairy spider tumbled onto its back, its legs kicking at the air furiously.

*Sweet Jesus.*

I gathered myself, mentally considered my choices, realized I didn't have many, and then did the only thing I could think of. I fired a single shot from around the boulder. The blast sent the tarantulas scurrying—and me scurrying, too.

I stood suddenly, fired two more shots up into the cliff, and dashed off toward the north cliff wall. A single shot exploded in the sand near my feet. I had surprised the shooter. Hell, I had surprised myself.

Breathing hard, sweating even harder, I pulled up next to the curving cliff face, partially out of the shooter's line of fire. Still, he was somewhere above



me.

At least, I *thought* he was a he.

Typical male bias.

My skin was still crawling. I think I was going to have the heebie-jeebies for a week, if I survived that long.

A jutting rock buttress partially shielded me from the sun and, hopefully, from the shooter. I waited there another ten minutes without incident. Incident being, of course, gunshots and tarantulas. Now there's a band name for you.

Keeping to the shadows of the cliff trail, I slowly worked my way back up the steep face. Already, I was regretting not having the water.

There were no more gunshots.

Or giant, hairy bugs.

I was about halfway up the cliff face when I heard it: the sudden roar of an engine. Recklessly, I pocketed my pistol, scrambled up the rest of the way as fast as I could.

Just as I crested the cliff ridge, I saw a blue Rawhide truck hauling ass out of here, kicking up about a mile's worth of dust in its wake.

I looked over at my car; it appeared unmolested.



Hopefully, it still had some gas.

A moment later, sitting in the hot seat, I slipped the key into the ignition. Praying hard, I turned the key. The engine started with a roar. I still had more than half a tank.

*Thank God.*

## Chapter Twenty-four

*My mother's cemetery, late.*

I had been drinking all evening. Cindy was away in Santa Barbara with some girlfriends. Not a bad idea since I tended to spend the weekends watching football.

Alone for the weekend, I was free to drink. Whoopee. Only I didn't want to get so drunk that I couldn't enjoy football. That would just be stupid.

*Fuck football.*

Okay, now I *knew* I was drunk.

With the engine still running, I was parked along Vicente Street, next to the cemetery's entrance. My lights were off.



The cemetery was massive and rolling, covering many dozens of acres. Lots of dead bodies here. Of those bodies, I wondered how many had been murdered. And of those murders, I wondered how many went unsolved?

*At least one*, I thought.

Would be an interesting, if not macabre, poll.

It was after hours. The cemetery was black and empty. Through the low wrought-iron fence, I could see the gentle sweep of the landscape, which was populated with black oak trees. There were no tombstones in this cemetery; rather, brass nameplates embedded in the grass. Those who cared did not allow the grass to overgrow the nameplate. I was one of those who cared.

I wondered if ghosts haunted the cemetery. If so, I wondered how many were now watching the Mustang and the drunken man inside and if they remembered what it was like to get drunk. I wondered if I really believed in ghosts.

On this night, with the full moon shining overhead, with too much alcohol coursing through my veins, it was easy to believe in ghosts.



I drank from a warm can of beer nestled between my legs. The beer tasted horrible.

The glass inside my car was steaming over. My leather seats were cold to the touch. I was sweating, could feel it collecting above my brow. Soon it would roll down my cheeks and nose. I always sweat when I drink too much. Not sure why. Maybe it excites me.

I finished the beer and crumpled it in my hand. I picked up the bouquet of flowers from the seat next to me and stepped out of the Mustang. The cool night air felt heavenly against my hot skin. A soft breeze swept through the graveyard, rustling the branches of the many trees. That is, I hoped it was a breeze, and not some poor lost soul.

Using one hand to pivot, I jumped the low fence, kicking my legs up and over.

On the other side, I staggered down the grassy slope, crossing over the final resting places of the dead, mumbling drunken apologies, until I stopped in front of a familiar nameplate near a small oak tree.

I stared down in numbed silence.

The brass plate glistened in the residual city light. Today was November 2nd, my mother's birthday. There were no flowers on her grave, of course,



for she had no family and no friends, other than me. I set the bouquet across the grave, in the area of her chest and her clasped hands

I closed my eyes and saw my mother as I always remembered her: beautiful and radiant, smiling warmly down at me, alive and healthy. I imagined her taking the flowers from me and kissing me on the cheek, then holding me at arm's length, cocking her head.

“Thank you, Jimmy, they’re beautiful.”

I opened my eyes. The cemetery was empty. The grass looked black, and my mother’s nameplate was hidden now in a blur of tears. She was down there somewhere, beneath my feet. The woman who loved me with all her heart.

“Happy birthday, ma.”

## Chapter Twenty-five

Parents of the deceased are always difficult calls, and this one was no different. Over the phone, I explained to Edna Clarke, Willie’s mother, who I



was. She was confused at first, but eventually agreed to meet with me.

An hour later, I parked in front of a stylish Tudor revival in the Fullerton Hills. I turned my wheels into the curb, as any good car owner should.

At the door, I knocked firmly. As I waited, I admired the door. Cut glass, brass trim, heavy oak. Hell, my knuckles were still smarting from the firm knock.

Footsteps creaked. A murky figure appeared in the opaque glass. The deadbolt clicked, and the door swung open. An elderly woman smiled at me. She was wearing reading glasses. Behind the narrow glasses, her amplified eyes were red. I smiled back. She asked if I was Jim Knighthorse and I said the one and only. She invited me in, and in I went.

I followed her into a living room bigger than my apartment, and we sat across from each other on red leather sofas. A mohair throw rug connected the two couches. Behind me was a black Steinway piano.

"Would you like something to drink, Mr. Knighthorse?"



“No thank you, ma’am. I just have a few questions.”

She nodded. Her eyes were dull. She didn’t gesture. She just sat there with her hands clasped in her considerable lap. Was probably a hell of a comfortable lap.

“First off, I’m terribly sorry for your loss. I know it’s difficult. I’ve dealt, and am still dealing with, a family loss of my own.”

The dullness in her eyes faded, to be replaced by legitimate concern. “Who did you lose, dear?”

“My mother.”

Her eyes watered up. “I’m so sorry, dear.”

“You keep calling me dear,” I said. “And I am liable to cry.”

I don’t know why I said that. Perhaps because she reminded me of my own mother. Or perhaps she was a mother who had lost her only son, and I was a son who had lost his only mother. We were a good match.

“You can cry, Mr. Knighthorse. I won’t mind.”

“Someday,” I said. “I might take you up on that offer.” A very fat black cat walked into the living



room. Along the way he rubbed up against anything he could, and finally rubbed up against me. Good choice. I scratched him heartily behind his ears. He seemed to enjoy it, if the purring was any indication. "I understand your son lived here with you, Ms. Clarke."

"Yes."

"Did he own any credit cards?"

"Yes, but they were in my name."

"Have you received the latest credit card statement?"

She frowned a little and bit her lower lip. "No, not yet."

"Can you do me a favor, Ms. Clarke, and call the credit card company and see what charges your son made prior to his death."

She looked at me and sat for a moment, thinking. Then she got up and crossed the room and stepped through a doorway. She returned with a credit card and a cordless phone. She sat back down again and dialed the number on the back of the card. She waited, her round knees bouncing nervously. Next, Ms. Clarke punched in the credit card number.

"The last charge was at a Chevron station in



Barstow," she reported. "Thirty-eight dollars."

"Enough for a full tank of gas," I said. "What day was it?"

She clicked off the phone. "The last day I saw him alive."

She was rubbing her upper arms with her hands. Tears were in her eyes. I got up from my couch and slid next to her and hugged her tightly. Her shoulders were soft but strong. She was all mother.

"But I don't understand, Mr. Knighthorse."

"Neither do I."

"Did someone make sure he ran out of gas that day? Is that what you are implying?"

I waited a moment, breathed deeply. I filled my lungs with the soft perfumed scent of her.

"Yes," I said, "that's what I'm implying."

"But the police—"

"The police are good, but they are overworked. It's not their job to look for a murder where one doesn't appear to exist. Makes for less paperwork that way."

"But you—"

"I am not the police. And it is my job to look deeper into this. And since I run my own agency, I



don't believe in paperwork."

I told her about the shootout in the desert, about how someone had wanted me dead as well. How I thought the attack on me was related to her son's death. As I talked, she covered her mouth with her palm, and wept silently.

"I'm going to find answers for you," I said, "I promise."

## Chapter Twenty-six

They were waiting for us on the practice field, laughing and joking, butting heads like young rams, stretching, generally relaxing and conserving their energy for the grueling practice that was sure to come.

I approached with the other coaches through a gate in the chain link fence. Earlier, I had been introduced to the rest of the staff, and now I was wearing a maroon polo shirt, polyester shorts and a whistle. The shirts and shorts were too small. I looked like a pro basketball player from the eighties,



if basketball players had shoulders like a bull. But at least I had a whistle, and sometimes that's all that matters.

As we approached, all eyes shifted to me, the new guy. *The white new guy*. The players were all wearing their generic practice jerseys, which made distinguishing them from one another nearly impossible. Yet I knew Coach Samson knew them all by shape, size and probably smell.

The team was 1-4. One win and four losses. This might be Coach Samson's first losing season in 27 years.

Unless, of course, I could do something about it.

The fall afternoon was bright—and hot. The kids were already sweating under their football pads. In heat like this, I did not miss the extra twenty pounds of equipment strapped to my back.

Coach Samson blew his whistle and the players fell in, forming seven remarkably straight rows.

I stood before the team with the other coaches. The faces behind the face masks were all black. I could feel their eyes on me. Sizing me up. Watching me, the *Whitey*. Probably wondering who the hell I



was and why I was here.

They were too young to remember me.

And now they would never forget me.

Coach Samson stepped before them; his massive shadow fell across the practice field. Hell, one of the biggest shadows I'd ever seen. The others stood with their hands casually behind their backs, inspecting the integrity of the seven lines of young men.

As Coach Samson spoke, his deep voice boomed easily to the back of the columns, and no doubt to the apartments far behind the field. "The man you see before you is white, in case you haven't noticed." There were some chuckles. I smiled, too. "Despite this liability, he went on to become one of the biggest badasses I have ever had the pleasure to coach. Hell, he single-handedly filled that trophy case you see in our gymnasium."

I tried not to blush.

"This man went on to play at UCLA, and if not for one hell of a disgusting injury to his leg he would probably still be in the pros." He paused, his eyes sweeping his team. "So, can any of you tell me who this man is?"



Half the hands went up.

“Anderson.”

A voice spoke up from the middle of row three. “He be Knighthorse, coach. He hold every record here.”

Samson looked at me and grinned, but didn’t hold the grin too long, as that would be uncoachlike. “They know you, Knighthorse.”

“As well they should.”

Samson shook his head and seemed to hold back a smile of amusement. “He’s here because I asked him to help us. And, brothers, we need all the help we can get. Coach Knighthorse would you like to say a few words?”

The sun angled down into my face. I’m sure my cheeks had a pinkish hue to them. I never felt whiter in my life.

I inhaled, filling my chest. Screw the speech.

“Who wants to hit the *Whitey*?” I asked them. *Hitting*, as in tackling drills, or recklessly hurling one’s body into another. Reckless only if you didn’t know what you were doing. And most high school football players didn’t know what the hell they were doing.



Samson looked at me and raised an eyebrow. Some of the players laughed. One kid in the front said, "But you ain't wearing any pads," he said, then added, "coach."

"I graduated from pads long ago."

More laughter.

"I'll hit the Whitey," said a big kid from the back.

"Come on up," I said.

He came up and stood before me, face sweating profusely behind the facemask. Skin so dark it looked purple. A big boy, he outweighed me by about a hundred pounds.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said.

"I promise I won't cry," I said. "Now get down in your stance."

He squatted down as sweat dribbled off the narrow bars of his facemask. He reached forward and knuckled the grass in front of him with his right hand, a classic three-point stance. Most of his weight was on his hand.

I assumed a similar position about seven feet in front of him, but my weight was more evenly distributed.

I nodded to Samson.



The coach blew his whistle.

And the kid *burst* forward, charging recklessly headfirst. With my arm and shoulder, and a lot of proper technique, I absorbed his considerable bulk and used my legs to thrust upward. He went careening off to the side. Landed hard, but unhurt.

Some gasps from the players. I think I had just brushed aside their best athlete. I helped him to his feet and patted him on his shoulder pads. He was embarrassed.

To help him save face, I said, "I got lucky."

He grinned and shook his head in what might have been amazement and went back to his place in line. I looked out at the other players. Others were smiling, laughing. Maybe, just maybe, Whitey wasn't so bad after all.

"It's mostly about technique and heart, and some skill," I said. "But you can make up for lack of skill with heart and hours in the weight room." I surveyed them. "So who wants to hit like that?"

All hands shot up.

I grinned. "So who else wants to hit the Whitey?"

The hands stayed up. Despite himself, Coach



Samson threw back his head and laughed.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

Sanchez and I sat in my Mustang outside Harbor Junior High in Anaheim. A low vault of cobalt gray clouds hung low in the sky. We were eating donuts and drinking Diet Pepsis, the staples of surveillance. In a few minutes school would be out.

"You ever going to get a new car?" asked Sanchez, sipping his diet soda with one hand, and working on a glazed with the other.

"No."

"How about some air conditioning?"

"How much is air conditioning?"

"Eight, nine hundred bucks."

"No."

We waited some more. I think I dozed. I felt an elbow in my rib, but might have dreamt it.

"You're snoring."

I sat up. "Not anymore."

"Some detective you are."



"You're the one detecting," I said. "I'm sleeping."

"I bought the donuts, which means you're on my time."

"Fine," I said. "You have a picture of the kid?"

Sanchez removed from his shirt pocket a folded up page torn from a school yearbook. He pointed to a goofy-looking kid with big ears. "He's our man."

"What's his name?"

"Richard."

We drank some more Diet Pepsi. Occasionally, a cold wind rocked the Mustang, whistling through the cracked windows.

Sanchez dozed.

Later, I elbowed him, pointing.

Richard had emerged from the school's central hallway with a pack of kids. The pack boarded a waiting bus. We gave pursuit. Along the way, we watched Richard shove a red headed kid's face into the bus's rear window. Perhaps amplified by the glass, the freckles along his forehead were huge. Judging by the way that the redhead resigned himself to his fate, I surmised this was a daily routine.

"I really don't like this kid Richard," said Sanchez.



"Yup," I said. "Then again, the other kid is red headed."

"True."

The bus dropped Richard off, along with a half dozen other kids. We followed Richard home from a safe distance. Along the way, we watched him turn over three trashcans and knock over a "For Sale By Owner" sign in front of a house.

Sanchez said, "I ought to bust his ass for vandalism."

"You realize we're trained investigators following a twelve-year-old kid."

"Kid or no kid, he took part in a pre-meditated beating of a defenseless eleven-year-old. My defenseless eleven-year-old," said Sanchez. "And I'm the only trained investigator here. You're just a rent-a-dick."

"Hey, we both fell asleep."

The kid turned into an ugly white home, and promptly chased away an ugly orange cat off the wooden porch. He went inside. Sanchez pulled out a notebook and wrote something down.

"What are you doing?"

Sanchez checked his watch. "Noting the mark's



time of movements, assessing the daily routine.”

“Did you include abusing the redhead?”

Sanchez ignored me. When finished, he snapped the notebook shut. “Same time tomorrow, but this time we bring Jesus.”

“Good,” I said. “I could use some more ice cream.”

## Chapter Twenty-eight

I was in the desert city of Barstow, otherwise known as the Great Las Vegas Rest Stop. I wasn't resting. I was actually working, sitting in front of a microfilm machine on the third floor of Barstow Junior College library.

Earlier, a rather pretty college student with hair so blond it was almost white showed me how to operate the machine. I might have flubbed my first few attempts just to be shown the process all over again.

Now, after being thoroughly trained, I zipped



through some of the oldest issues of the *Barstow Times*, currently scanning headlines in the 1880's. Barstow is an old city, and its newspaper is one of the oldest in the region. Next to me, sweating profusely, was a regular Coke. I love regular Coke, and sneak it in when the mood strikes. After driving through 100-degree weather in a vehicle with no air conditioning, the mood struck and I ran with it.

The headlines were fairly mundane. Cattle sold. Drops in silver prices. Heat waves. Oddly, no mention of terrorists, nuclear fallout, Lotto results, or presidential scandals.

I was looking beyond headlines at what would be considered the filler articles. Most historians agree that Sylvester died no later than 1880. He was found in 1901. Like a good little detective, I was going to sift through every page of every newspaper published between January 1, 1880 and December 31, 1900.

I may need some more Coke.

Most of the news was indeed about Barstow, but there was the occasional mention of neighboring Rawhide and its wealthy family, the Barrons. From all accounts, the three Barron boys were hellraisers,



always in some scrap or another, constantly bailed out by their wealthy family. Fights, shootouts, drunken misconduct, and wild parties. They were the Wild West's equivalent to rock stars. Their raucous exploits often made the front page, along with pictures. I suspected I was seeing the birth of the paparazzi.

It took me two hours to go through the years 1880 and 1881. At this pace, I would be here all night. I wondered if the cute librarian would pull an all-nighter with me.

In March of 1884, I came across something interesting. One of the Barron boys, Johansson Barron, had been in a barroom fight with a silver miner. According to the article and witnesses, it wasn't much of a fight: the Barron kid stabbed the miner from behind. The miner was later treated for a superficial wound to his left shoulder, but appears to have been okay.

A week later, the very same miner disappeared.

His disappearance rallied the whole town, probably because he had had the guts to stand up to a Barron. A thorough search of all the local mines was conducted. Search parties scouted the local



hills. Nothing. The miner was gone, leaving behind a wife and five children.

The miner's name was Boonie Adams.

I thought about Boonie Adams some more, then looked at my watch, in which I started thinking about lunch. I decided to get the hell out of Dodge. Or at least Barstow.

As I headed back out into the desert, with a fresh Coke nestled in my lap, I was feeling giddy. I was fairly certain I had found my man, and luckily there was one way to know for sure.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

It was after hours and we were with Sylvester. Jones T. Jones was chain smoking. Wet rings circled his armpits. For the ninth time, I told him to breathe and not to get his hopes up.

"This feels right," he said for the tenth time.

If I had told him that I suspected Sly was really a woman and I had proof that her name was Bertha,



Jones would have said the same thing: *this feels right*.

"Well, don't get your hopes up," I said.

"Too late, they're up. Way up. Besides, I've lived my whole life with my hopes up. I'm not afraid to get them dashed every now and then. Getting your hopes dashed builds character."

"Then this might be a character-building exercise."

"So be it," he said. "I enjoy living life with my hopes up. Keeps me out of therapy and off of the mood-enhancers."

It was after eight p.m. The store was closed for the night, and most of the lights were out. I was keenly aware that I was currently being watched by about two dozen shrunken heads. Rubber, granted. But shrunken nonetheless. And I was keenly aware that I was standing in front of a very dead man. One of the deadest men I had ever seen. Hell, if I wasn't so tough, I might have been nervous.

"This store gets creepy at night, huh?" said Jones. Perhaps he was a mind reader. Or perhaps he saw me look nervously over my shoulder.

"Hadn't noticed," I said.



"We hear voices at night, you know. And sometimes we show up in the morning and the displays are knocked over."

"Maybe it's mice."

Jones wasn't listening. "Say, do you investigate the paranormal as well?"

"No."

"Too bad, I could have thrown some more work your way."

"More publicity for the store?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. Jones was shameless. "I'll do whatever it takes to get more customers in through those doors."

"Even make up ghost stories."

"If I have to," he said. "But these are real."

"Sure," I said. "Now help me move this."

And so we spent the next few minutes turning the display case away from the back wall. Soon, Jones was gasping for air, which was funny since I was the one doing all the work.

"That's good," I said.

Jones's skinny body was crowding me. I glanced at him over my shoulder.

"Sorry." He took a step back, but I could still feel



his hot breath on my neck, which smelled a little like chicken wings and tobacco.

For some reason, my stomach growled.

Jones jumped. "You hear that?"

"That was my stomach," I said.

"Oh," he said, but inched closer to me anyway.

We had already moved the heavy Plexiglas case away from the wall. Ignoring Jones, I stepped around the case and examined Sly with a handy pen flashlight I kept on my key chain.

Before me, the dead man's back looked like the surface of some bizarre, distant world, complete with gullies and basins and arroyos. The splotchy skin, which looked shrink-wrapped to his bones, rippled in corrugated waves, giving the impression of perpetual motion, which was kind of ironic for a man frozen in place for all eternity.

I stepped closer, raised the flashlight up to Sly's shoulder.

My breath fogged on the glass before me. Next to me, Jones's own breath came quicker and faster. He was either going to climax or have a heart attack. I wasn't sure which would be worse.



Exposure to the elements had caused many irregularities in Sly's skin. One such irregularity was near his left shoulder blade. It was about an inch long. A tear in his mummified flesh.

No, not a tear. It was a clean cut.

An unhealed knife wound.

I stepped carefully around the display case and looked the dead man in the eyes, or what was left of his eyes.

"Howdy, Boonie," I whispered. "It's been a long time."

## Chapter Thirty

I returned from my two-hour lunch break in time to see three men kick open my office door. Actually, one of them was doing the kicking; the other two hung back, crowding the upstairs iron railing. All were wearing stylish cowboy hats with the brims rolled into uselessness. Two of them were holding pistols.

Their backs were to me. I had been climbing the



exterior stairs, coming up along the side of the building. My building is L-shaped. My office is located on the top floor in the nook of the L. They hadn't seen me, and to keep it that way, I strategically stopped climbing.

Now with the door kicked open, they looked a little confused. Maybe they thought I had been hiding inside, cowering with fear. The one doing the kicking stuck his head inside the door. He popped back out and motioned the others to follow. As they spilled into my office, I climbed the rest of the stairs two at a time and removed my pistol and entered behind them.

They were all big men, broad shouldered, wearing jeans and tee shirts. I glanced down. My doorjamb was demolished.

"Turn around and I'll shoot," I said.

They flinched, and one considered turning. I drew a bead on him. But then he thought better of it and froze. Best decision of his life.

"Good boys. Now the two goons are to bend down slowly and set their guns on my office carpet. Ignore the sorry condition of the carpet. And, yes, that's a bloodstain in the center of the room. Don't



ask.”

They did as they were told. And they didn't ask.

“Okay, this next part could get tricky, and really depends on how coordinated the goons are. I want them to sort of kick their guns back to me without turning.”

They were both coordinated enough, kicking back their guns with their first try, although the one on the right stumbled a bit. The guns skittered to a stop next to me, and I kicked them into the far corner of the office. Actually, considering the size of my office, the far corner really wasn't that far.

I stepped around the three men and slid into my leather chair behind my desk. I held my gun loosely in front of me.

“Everyone empty your wallets,” I said.

“What?” said the third man. He was quite a bit older than the two goons. Not to mention he looked vaguely familiar. He'd recently had some plastic surgery done. His cheeks were as taut as two Samoan war drums.

“I need some cash to fix my door,” I said. “Unless you would prefer I call the police?”

They started for their wallets.



"Not so fast. One at a time. You, on the left."

"Me?"

"No, my left."

"Who, me?"

"Yes, you. You first. Nice and slow."

He reached back and slowly removed a fat wallet.

"Good, now drop it on my desk."

He did so, and I went through this routine with the others. I next removed a total of two hundred and eight-two dollars. Then, using my scanner, I made copies of all three of their licenses. "For my records," I said, grinning.

I tossed back the wallets and studied the photocopied licenses before me. The two young thugs were brothers; the older man was the father.

"You're running for a House seat," I said, recognizing the name.

Tafford Barron looked sick to his stomach, sweat running down his too-smooth face. His sons' names were Jack and Bartholomew. Both were just a little older than I was, although certainly not as handsome.

"Which one's Bartholomew?" I asked.



The one on the right—my right—nodded. “I am.”

“What do you think of your parents naming you Bartholomew?”

He shrugged. “Don’t mind it so much.”

Tafford said, “Look, can we get on with this, I have things to do today.”

I looked at the older Barron. “Like putting together a campaign to run for Congress?” I asked. “Or more breaking and entering?”

“We weren’t going to hurt you,” he said, shrugging. “We just wanted to talk.”

“So talk,” I said.

“We want you to back off the case,” he said sheepishly. “Of course, it was supposed to sound a little more menacing than that.”

“I’m hard to menace,” I said.

“I gather that.”

“So why should I back off this case?”

“You mind if I sit?” he asked.

“I mind.”

He inhaled and continued standing. “Because I’ll pay you ten grand to drop the case.”

“Does that come out of your election fund?”

“Look, pal, this is serious business, and I don’t



want you sticking your nose where it doesn't belong."

"I make a decent living sticking my nose where it doesn't belong."

"Decent? Look at this dump. Take the money and get yourself a respectable office." He paused. His too-tight face was flushed with heat.

"Will you also include a cowboy hat like yours?"

He blinked. "Sure."

"And the name of your plastic surgeon. He's done a marvelous job."

He inhaled. "Will you take the money and go away?"

"No."

He was furious. Tafford was used to having his way. His sons were agitated, shifting from foot to foot. They were used to their father having his way.

"Taff, did you have one of your boys ambush me in the desert a week ago?"

"No," he said. "I don't need any more dead bodies in my town, and I certainly don't need any more bad publicity."

Strangely, I believed him. Didn't seem his style to set me up in the desert, or to ambush me. He was more of the in-your-face, you've-been-warned type.



"Of course, getting arrested for breaking and entering wouldn't help my public image much."

"No," I said.

"Pretty stupid, in fact," he said.

"Yep," I said.

"Christ, what was I thinking?"

"You weren't."

"We just wanted to scare you."

"I'm terrified."

He shifted where he stood and looked at his open palms. He looked like a man waking from a bad nightmare. His two sons hadn't stopped staring at me. Perhaps they were soaking in what a real man should look like.

I said, "Taff, this mess isn't going to go away by paying me off. Someone killed Willie Clarke, and someone tried to kill me. You have a killer loose in your town."

Now he looked just plain sick. I almost shoved my trashcan over to him in case he was going to lose his lunch.

"Tell you what," he said. "You find the killer and I'll give you the money."

"Sounds like a job," I said.



“Consider it one.”

“When it’s over, I’ll send you a bill.”

Tafford nodded. “Can we go now?”

“Yes,” I said.

And they did, although I kept their money.

Consider it a retainer.

### Chapter Thirty-one

Across the hallway from Cindy’s lecture hall was a classroom that was rarely, if ever, used. Best of all it was rarely, if ever, locked. It was furnished with a dozen or so of those wraparound desks with attached plastic chairs. Wraparound desks and I don’t get along. Mostly because they were made for people half my size.

So I positioned two of them near the classroom door, where I used one to sit and the other to prop my ankles up on. From that position, sitting in near darkness, I could see down the hallway in either direction, and had a clear shot of the elevator that



opened onto Cindy's floor.

It was late, almost 10 PM. My feet were up on the desk in front of me, ankles crossed, hands folded across my stomach. In the hallway next to my door, the drinking fountain gurgled. The gurgling kept me company, like an old friend. An old mentally challenged friend. I had spent the last ten minutes trying to discern the different chewing gum scents wafting up from under the desk, when the elevator chimed open.

A heavy-set, middle-aged woman stepped out, blinking rapidly and peering around. Unremarkable, if not for the fact she was wearing a heavy coat, as this wasn't exactly heavy coat weather. Hell, this wasn't exactly heavy coat country. Sensing a clue, I watched her closely.

She came hesitantly toward me. Or, at least, towards my part of the hallway. She had short black hair, perfectly trimmed bangs, and thick eyebrows that needed to be plucked or weed-whacked. She stopped in front of me, her back to me, and gazed up at Cindy's lecture hall doors as if they were the gates to Heaven.

There was a slight hump in her upper spine, and I



wondered if the Humanities building here at UCI had a bell tower. Then again, maybe she was carrying something heavy inside her coat.

The hallway was silent. The fountain gurgled. I could hear her breathing through her nose, saw her shoulders rise and fall with each breath.

And then, amazingly, she turned. I have no idea why. Maybe she heard me breathe. Maybe she sensed my overwhelming *manliness*. Maybe she had eyes in the back of her head.

Either way, she turned and looked right at me. We stared at each other. Her nose was a little wide, complete with a mini hump. Chin absent. Certainly not beautiful, but neither was she unattractive. I judged her age to be about forty. Didn't look much like a student, but she certainly could have been. In the least, she looked like she was up to something.

"Hello," I said.

Her mouth dropped open. Her tongue spilled out over her lower teeth like a pink tide. And then she was moving. Quickly. Back to the elevator. There, she punched the button hard enough to have hurt her hand. The elevator, which hadn't gone anywhere, opened right up. She turned her face away from me



as the door closed around her.

I would remember that face. Especially those eyebrows.

When she was gone, I eased my feet off the desktop and onto the floor. I stood and moved over to the bank of classroom windows. From there, I had a clear shot of the main entrance to the building below.

I waited.

My breath fogged on the window before me. I resisted the urge to write: *I Heart Cindy*.

The door opened below, yellow light spilling out. A male student exited, followed immediately by Bushy Brows.

A tall man met her outside. He came out of the shadows of the building and the two argued for a bit, and then left together. They headed down a side trail that led to the Staff parking lot, where Cindy kept her Jetta. I watched them go until they blurred into oblivion.

I think I just met her two stalkers.



Cindy was attending to a throng of admiring students. I waited in the back of the lecture hall and watched her. She spotted me and beamed me a full wattage smile that sent my heart racing.

When the last of the student groupies had dispersed, I made my way down to her desk and set a polished red apple on the corner of her desk. Cindy, who had been hastily shoving books and scraps of paper into her oversized handbag, paused and looked at the red delicious.

"Is that for me?"

"Call it a school boy crush."

Tonight Cindy's hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She knew I liked her in a ponytail. She crammed the last of her junk into her bag and walked around the desk, looked around her room, saw that we were alone, and kissed me full on the lips.

"Mrs. Franks never did that," I said.

"Who's Mrs. Franks?"

"My fifth grade teacher."

"You had a crush on her, too."



“Yes,” I said. “May I carry your oversized handbag?”

“Would be a shame to waste all those muscles.”

Outside, I draped my free arm over her small shoulders. Because I was a foot taller than she was, holding hands was difficult. She was, however, the perfect height for hugging, and so we worked with nature rather than against it.

“Have you ever noticed that you were naturally selected to be the perfect height for me to hug?” I asked.

She nodded. “I’m nearly certain that’s what nature intended when I grew to be five foot five, on the off chance of meeting you someday.”

“Nature works in mysterious ways.”

“The *Lord* works in mysterious ways.”

“A Darwin quoting the Bible.” I said. “What is the world coming to?”

We were walking through a verdant, tree-filled section of the campus the students called Middle Earth, although I had yet to see a hobbit. Beyond, the sun had set, although the sky was still alight with its passing. Our smog-enhanced sunsets, with their pinks and oranges and purples, are out of this world.



Along the way to my car, I described my encounter with the bushy-browed woman. Cindy, amazingly, knew of her, flunking her last semester.

"You think she could be one of the vandals?"

I shrugged. "No way to know. Tell me more about her."

Cindy frowned. "Well, she was an older student, very opinionated. Outspoken Christian. Seemed to take it as a personal affront that my great grandfather was the evil Charles Darwin."

"For some, akin to Hitler."

"I'll buy that, at least on the hate-o-meter."

Now we were driving west along University Way, wending our way between stately trees, behind which were dormitories. The Mustang's windows were down. The evening air was laced with a 50/50 mixture of nature and exhaust, which, out here, is a pretty healthy percentage. Cindy looked good in my car. Her brown eyes were watching me drive. She often watched me while driving. I think she might have thought I was cute. With her ponytail, and in the old Mustang, we could have been two teens back in the sixties out getting milkshakes.

"She ever threaten you?" I asked.



“Never.”

“Why did she flunk?”

“Failed every test.”

“On purpose?”

“Hard to say,” said Cindy.

“If so, maybe by failing the tests, she was refusing to allow a Darwin to influence her thinking. Thus keeping her spirit pure.”

“I think you might be right.”

There was something in her voice. I glanced at Cindy. There were tears in her eyes.

“You okay?” I asked.

“You don’t think I’m the devil do you?” she asked.

Cindy was a rational person. Intelligent, maybe even brilliant. Athletic and beautiful. And she was a Darwin. But she was a person with feelings, and she was hurting.

“Only in the bedroom,” I said.

She laughed and I pulled her over on the bench seat, stretching the seatbelt to the max. She put her head on my shoulder, and I took my little Darwin to dinner.



## Chapter Thirty-three

On a chilly Tuesday morning, with the sun hidden behind patchy fog, I parked in front of a single story house in Buena Park, near Knott's Berry Farm. It was seven in the morning, earlier than I am accustomed to working, but sometimes I don't make the hours. On the seat next to me were two ventis, which, when translated from Starbucks to English, means two large coffees. Lots of cream and sugar for me, of course.

Retired Los Angeles Police Department homicide detective Bert Tomlinson was waiting on the cement porch, sitting in a wicker chair. Twenty years ago, he had been the original homicide detective assigned to my mother's murder.

As I approached, he smiled warmly, stood and shook my hand.

"Right on time, kid," he said. He checked his watch. "I head out to yoga in thirty minutes, and after that my day's booked with grandkids. And yes, I am the oldest one in yoga."



"You look younger than me," I said.

He laughed. "I'll accept fifty, but certainly not thirty-ish."

I wasn't too sure about that. The man seemed to defy the aging process, and should probably write a book on how he did it. Bert's face was line free, despite the fact that I knew he was over sixty. He weighed maybe a buck fifty, but looked strong enough to pull a people-powered rickshaw.

I handed him the coffee. "Almond mocha easy on the cream, large. As requested."

He sniffed the container. "My one and only guilty pleasure."

"I have too many to count. Oreos being high on my list."

"I refuse to acknowledge the existence of Oreos. It's easier for me that way. As far as I'm concerned, Oreos and Nabisco went belly up."

"What about the Oreos you see in stores?"

"As far as I'm concerned the bags are empty."

"You have a vivid imagination," I said.

"Comes from being a homicide investigator. You think like the killer. Some you even think like the victim. Both of which can steadily drive a man crazy."



"I do the same thing," I said, sipping from my coffee. "When I look for a missing cat, I try to think like a missing cat."

He chuckled. "You live in Huntington Beach?"

"Yes."

"My boy lives there with his family. Owns and operates the Huntington Beach Surf Museum. He'll be here any minute with his three kids. We get them every Tuesday and Thursday."

I heard noises from within the house, the creaking of floorboards, the bang of pots and pans. The neighborhood was nice, but not great. Above the rooftops, rising up like the mother of all phallic symbols, was the Knott's Parachute Ride. At the moment there was no one parachuting. The park opened later.

"I remember you," said Bert. He spoke softly. I had the impression he had once shouted a lot in his life, and now he was making up for it. "You were just a kid. Although granted you were the size of most adults. Anyway, I would never forget your mother. I followed your career here and there in the papers. You did well in high school and even better in college. You were one of the best."



That meant a lot to me, coming from a man who had left a lasting impression on me. We shared one experience: we both had seen my mother's body that night. And after his investigation, Bert knew more about my mother than any other living soul on this earth. Probably even more than my father, who was a grade-A asshole.

We were silent. Bert sipped his coffee. A car drove slowly by. In the car, a woman was talking animatedly on a cell phone, and, I think, putting on make-up. Yikes.

The screen door opened behind us, and a slender older woman came out, carrying a tray of homemade cinnamon rolls. She left the tray on a potholder and smiled kindly down at me. She patted me on the face and went back into the house.

"Even Gerda remembers you, kid. Anyway, she made these for you. They're lowfat, made with applesauce instead of oil, and Splenda, instead of sugar."

"Um, sounds good," I said.

He grinned. "Try one

I did. At least it was hot.

"Very good," I lied. "Please thank Mrs.



Tomlinson."

"I will," he said. "So you are a detective now."

"Yes. Perhaps it was inevitable."

"How's that working out?"

I shrugged. The cold from the concrete porch was seeping up through my jeans, numbing my buttocks. "It's still a new agency. I like what I do. I seem to be good at it."

"You've got the instincts, then."

"I suppose."

"So you waited before looking into your mother's murder."

I nodded. "I wanted to know what I was doing before I looked into it. Didn't want to screw things up. Just wasn't ready yet, I suppose."

"So do you know what you're doing now?"

"Yes."

I took a deep breath and told him about the day my father arrived with the pictures. Bert listened without comment, sipping from his coffee, which he cradled in both hands.

When I finished, Bert frowned. "I know about your parent's last day. Went over it in some detail with



your father. However, he never mentioned the pictures.”

“My father had them developed and forgot about them.”

Bert set his coffee cup down, put his elbows on his knees and steeped his fingers in front of his face. He contemplated his steeped fingers.

“Your father admitted to having numerous affairs. Would have been high on our suspect list had he not been out with you at the time of her death. Excuse me if I offend, but I didn’t like him. There was always something different about your dad, something off. Something cold and calculating. Everything added up to him being the killer.”

“Except for the fact that he was with me.”

Bert nodded. “Except for that.”

I took in a deep breath, filling my lungs to their max, and just held it. How could my father keep those pictures from me? How could he not care? My father, I knew, was a different sort of killer. He had been a sniper in the military, with many confirmed kills to his credit. A hair’s breadth away from being a sociopath, he held little regard for things living, and even less regard for things dead. In my opinion, he



was a hell of a dangerous man to have loose in our streets. But there he was, out in LA, running one of the biggest detective firms in the city, and making a shit load of money at it, as well.

Bert was no slouch. "Obviously something was in the pictures."

"Yes," I said.

"Tell me about them."

I described them in detail, especially the three photographs of the young man.

Bert was looking at me. "Sounds like he took an interest in your mother."

"Yes."

"It's not much," said Bert. "But it's something."

"Yes."

"Any idea who the young man is?"

"No, but I will."

"The picture's twenty years old. Might be hard to find him."

"For a lesser human being maybe," I said.

"But not you."

"Nope."

"You're going to bring her killer to justice if you find him?"



“No. I’m going to kill him the same way he killed my mother.”

“Slit his throat?”

“From ear to ear.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“Good.”

He looked at me from over his steaming cup of joe. “I did my best to find him,” he said.

“I know,” I said. “I read the police report. You worked your ass off.”

“There were no leads. No clues. Forensics was in its early stages back then. Your mother had no enemies, and no friends for that matter. Your father had no motive for wanting her dead by hiring a killer—hell, they were even working on their relationship at the time of her death. She left behind no money. She wasn’t seeing anybody on the side. She wasn’t pregnant. From all accounts, she was a sweet woman.”

“She was beautiful,” I said. “She had that.”

“Yes, she was.”

“And someone could have wanted that. Wanted her physically, and then slaughtered her when they were done with her.”



"Yes," said Bert. He looked away. "It's the most likely scenario."

"A random rape and murder," I said.

Bert Tomlinson nodded. He looked at me again and set his big hand on my knee. He inhaled deeply and patted me once.

"Go find him, son. Find him for me, too."

A black SUV pulled in behind my Mustang. Like a prison break, three young children spilled out of the back seat and up the walkway and into their grandfather's arms. Bert laughed and fell back as the children swarmed over him like a litter of puppies.

"Who are you kids?" he asked, chuckling, completely succumbing to the unconditional love.

"Your grandkids!" they all chimed in at once. Now they were trying to tickle him. There were two girls and one boy. All were within a few years apart. The girls, I think, were twins.

"It's like this every time," said a male voice in front of me. "They love him more than anyone on the face of the earth. Definitely more than me."

I looked up. The middle-age man in front of me



was handsome. Tan and in good shape. Blond and blue-eyed. He gave me a winning smile, full of white teeth. His face was weathered and he looked a little older than he was, probably due to the fact he spent a lot of time in the sun, which was easy to do in Huntington Beach. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place him. I stood. He held out his hand and I shook it.

"Walt Tomlinson," he said, introducing himself.

"Jim Knighthorse."

He held my gaze a moment, and then nodded. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Knighthorse." He turned to his father, who was buried somewhere under all the grandchildren. "I have to get running, dad. I'll see you tonight."

Bert raised a hand and waved. "See you, son."

Gary left, and I wasn't too far behind. Bert waved to me from the porch even while his grandson swung from his arm.

## Chapter Thirty-four



The morning haze hadn't yet burned off, and the sun was still hiding up there, somewhere. I considered getting some donuts, but didn't want to overdo it, as I had already had breakfast and something that resembled a cinnamon roll.

*At least it was made with love.*

I passed a donut shop. Then another. I came upon a third.

My willpower shattered, I hung a U-turn and made my way back to the third donut shop, and left a few minutes later with a half dozen bars and cakes and crullers, two-thirds of which were chocolate. To wash them down, I got some chocolate milk. Chocolate may or may not be an aphrodisiac, but it sure as hell was a Jim Knighthorse picker-upper. I was giddy with anticipation.

I paid two bucks and parked in the public parking near the pier. I could have easily parked in my parking space under my apartment building and walked across the street and saved myself a fistful of dollars. But what the hell, I was feeling wasteful. I ate my first donut.

The beach was mostly quiet, although the faithful surfers were out here in droves. The waves were



choppy, but that didn't discourage the diehards. And in Huntington Beach, they were all diehards. I ate donut number two.

If I turned my head a little, I could see my apartment building across the street. My apartment was there on the fifth floor, overlooking Main Street. And next to my apartment, through an open sliding glass door, I could see my Indian neighbor dancing in his living room. Jaboor was wearing only cotton briefs and was singing into a microphone, although it could have been a TV remote control. He paused in front of the glass door and shook his ass for all of Huntington Beach to see. I ate donut number three. When the ass-shaking was done, he boogied away from view.

A cool breeze blew through my cracked open windows.

I contemplated the breeze. Donut four.

Outside, I gave the last two donuts, both maple bars, to the first bum I found. He seemed genuinely pleased and started on them immediately, despite the fact that they were not chocolate. Beggars can't be choosers, after all.

I crossed over to the pier, where a handful of



fishermen were fishing. Not a single woman in the bunch. Behind my Oakley wraparounds, I scanned the fishermen carefully, wondering what the blond punk would look like now.

He would be near forty. At twenty, he had looked like hundreds of other surfers. Blond, tanned, healthy, good-looking. What did he look like now? Most lifelong surfers didn't allow their bodies to go to pot. No, if he were still surfing, he would still be fit and trim. I had to assume he was still surfing. It was all I had to go on.

If so, he would still have his tan. Still have his blond hair.

And if he was a lifelong surfer, he would still live in the area, or not far from here. Hard to give this weather up, unless he moved to Mexico, like some die-hards do.

But at the time he hadn't been surfing, right? He had been fishing. But he looked like a surfer. His hair was stained blond by salt and sun. I knew he was a surfer. But that didn't mean he was still surfing. Maybe he got married and moved to Riverside to start a family.



Still, if he were a surfer at heart, even with a job and family and a long commute, he would find a way to the waves. It's in the surfer's blood. They can't escape the siren call of the waves. It's a lifelong passion.

Well, I had 40 or 50 years left on this planet. That should be enough time to cover all the beaches.

I spent the afternoon there at the pier, searching faces behind my shades. The sun did eventually burn through the low cloud layer, and when it did, and when most of the fisherman went home, I did too. Just a hop, skip and jump away.

### Chapter Thirty-five

I was parked two rows down from Cindy's Jetta with a clear view of the walkway down from the east side of campus. Without a Staff Parking permit, I was risking a ticket.

The night was young and I was hunkered low in my seat. I am six foot four, so hunkering is difficult. On the floor between my feet was a six pack of Bud



Light.

I drank the first beer.

Clouds obscured the night sky. The wind was picking up, blustering through my open windows, bringing with it the metallic scent of imminent rain. Students drifted in and out of the parking lot, using it as a sort of shortcut into campus.

Like a chain smoker, I finished beer number two, started on three. Drinking in the car...not exactly a role model for today's youth.

A light drizzle began to fall, turning the dust on my windshield into a thin film of muck. The drizzle turned into something more than a drizzle, although I wasn't sure what that might be. Heavy drizzle? In southern California we don't have many words for rain. We do, however, have nine different words for *tan*.

My windshield morphed into a surreal canvas as splattering raindrops fused with parking lot lights. Living art.

Which reminded me. I hadn't painted in a while. Maybe I should. Except lately I didn't feel much like painting. Instead, I felt like getting drunk every second of every day.

I opened beer number four. Two left. I considered



getting more. Really considered it, but that would mean leaving the parking lot. Leaving Cindy's car unattended. Derelict in my duties as boyfriend and bodyguard. And driving with a heavy buzz probably wasn't a great idea.

Still, another six-pack sounded good. Too good.

*Shit.*

I needed to find my mother's killer. I needed to catch him, and I needed to serve justice, and I needed closure. No kid should find his mother dead. No kid should have to see what I saw.

It's a wonder I'm not more fucked up.

Hell, after what I've been through, I should be allowed to drink as much as I want. Maybe I would talk to Cindy about that.

Or not.

## Chapter Thirty-six

An hour after my last beer, an hour in which I spent debating getting more, I saw a shape emerge from the oak trees lining the parking lot. The shape



was holding something heavy.

I sat up a little in my seat, blinking through my mild buzz, trying to focus on the stumbling figure, which, I was certain, was a small woman.

She was dressed in black and wore a wool cap. She paused momentarily behind the rounded fender of a newer-style VW Bug and waited for a student at the far end of the parking lot to move on.

Once done, she crept forward again, passing in front of my Mustang, where I had a good look at her. Dark hair pulled tightly back. Straight bangs. Eyebrows in bad need of plucking. She was carrying what appeared to be a full paint can.

Her name, I knew, was Jolene Funkmeyer.

I scanned the surrounding parking lot, looking for her male accomplice but didn't see anyone suspicious. Maybe tonight she was going solo. Taking some stalking initiative.

She kept to the shadows, as any good stalker should, and moved quickly from car to car. By my best calculations, she was heading towards Cindy's sporty red Jetta, which was parked directly beneath one of the parking lot lights.



Funkmeyer hovered at the perimeter of the light, momentarily confused. Like a vampire witnessing the sun after a long night out raising hell. Finally, mustering some inner stalking courage, she stepped forward into the light and promptly tossed the contents of the paint can across the hood of Cindy's Jetta. Bright yellow splashed everywhere, even onto some of the other cars.

Then she bent over the hood and feverishly began finger-painting. Tongue sticking out the corner of her mouth. As she did so, working her way around the hood of the Jetta, I called the campus police.

I hung up and waited. The figure in black continued writing. Her face gleamed wet in the drizzling rain. Her thighs were now covered in yellow paint. Still she wrote. Perhaps she was writing her dissertation. Her face was mostly hidden, but I could see that her hair wasn't entirely black; it was also streaked with gray.

As she wrote, she looked up occasionally to scan the parking lot. Luckily, she was alone. Or thought she was alone.

She continued her magnum opus.

I watched.



Just keep writing, darling.

Movement beyond the oak trees. I looked up. Bounding along a narrow path was a three-wheeled campus security vehicle, packed with police officers. Like a scene from the Keystone Cops. Either they were here for the vandal, or someone had lost a stray golf ball.

In an explosion of grass and twigs, the vehicle burst over a curb and into the faculty parking lot, a powerful beam swept across the hoods of the car. Like a deer caught in headlights, Funkmeyer froze in mid-scrawl and looked up. Her mouth dropped open. Then she tried to go a couple different directions at once, finally decided on one, and dashed through a row of cars and into the night. As she ran, her hands flashed yellow. Like a beacon.

The campus police made a hard right and gave chase, cutting across a connecting swath of grass. I watched until everyone disappeared from view around the performing arts building.

I stepped out of my car and walked over to Cindy's Jetta. The woman had made quite a mess of things. I read her surprisingly neat writing:

*Darwin was wrong. You live a lie. You will burn in*



hell.

I went back to my car, resuming my vigil.  
One stalker down, one to go.

## Chapter Thirty-seven

Cindy and I were in bed together. Ginger the dog was lying on the comforter between us. Her little face was scant inches from my face. Her little doggie breath wasn't so little.

"She needs a doggy mint," I said.

"She doesn't have bad breath," Cindy said.

"I beg to differ."

"You've done enough begging for tonight."

"True," I said. "Still, I'm surprised you can't see the green radioactive cloud hovering over her head."

"You have a sensitive nose."

"I have a sensitive something else, too."

"Sometimes too sensitive."

"Let's change the subject."

Ginger got up and stretched, legs vibrating down into the bed. She turned two circles, lay again and



burrowed her little muzzle under her front paws, sighing loudly, absently licking her front paws, eyes closed. I'm not even sure she was awake.

"Any leads on the other vandal?" she asked.

"I'm looking into it," I said. "According to the police, Jolene Funkmeyer denies having an accomplice."

"The word 'accomplice' suggests something more grandiose than vandalism."

"How about vandal buddy?"

"Better."

"Anyway," I said, "turns out Jolene has been arrested before."

"For?"

I hesitated. "Arson."

"Shit."

"Spent a year in prison."

"What did she burn?"

"An abortion clinic in Buena Park. No one hurt. The clinic had been vandalized weeks on end prior to the arson."

"So the vandalism escalates into something more than vandalism."



I nodded again. "She was arrested with her boyfriend."

"You have his name?"

"Chad Schwendinger."

"You think he's our man?"

"A good chance," I said. "The Irvine Police checked out his last known address this afternoon. He moved out long ago. And no leads where he might be. Yet."

"Maybe he's been shacking up with his vandal girlfriend."

I shook my head. "I checked out her place this afternoon. She lives alone. Although one neighbor mentioned she had seen a middle-aged man in a BMW come by on a few occasions."

"Maybe he will want revenge for the arrest of his girlfriend."

"What he wants and what he gets are two different things."

"But you'll still watch over me just in case?"

"Like a hawk," I said.



Sanchez and I were in my car on a Sunday afternoon, parked outside the big Lutheran church on Fifth and Edinger.

"He's the last one. Name's Ricardo Gomez," said Sanchez, consulting a list of names. There were eight names on the list, seven of which were crossed off.

"You do realize we're outside a church," I said.

Sanchez wasn't listening. "Ricardo hasn't been alone in nearly a week. This might be our only chance to nail him."

"I think you've let this go to your head."

Sanchez looked at me. "Hell, this went straight to my head the day I heard my boy was in the hospital. This went straight to my head the day eight boys kicked his face in."

"Take a deep breath," I said.

He ignored me. "Besides, we're doing the neighborhood a service. My son has single-handedly broken up this so-called gang. According to his school principal, these kids have been harassing students all year, not to mention vandalizing



property.”

“Did the principal know what happened to your son?”

Sanchez nodded. “And he knows my son is picking them off one at a time.”

“What did he say about that?”

“Hallelujah.”

“That because your kid’s name is Jesus?”

“Hay-zeus, asshole.” Sanchez looked at his big cop watch. “Church will be out soon.”

“Kid named Jesus kicking ass at church,” I said. “Maybe it’s the Second Coming.”

There was a box of donuts balanced on the console between us. I had insisted on getting the donuts at the Von’s grocery store this time, which often had better donuts than most hole-in-the-wall chains. Sanchez thought getting donuts at a grocery store was sacrilegious but he ate them anyway.

“Church is out,” Sanchez reported, leaning forward eagerly. “And there he is, walking home alone.” I thought Sanchez might wet his pants. He pulled out his notepad and made an entry. I leaned over his shoulder and read the entry: *11:53 AM. Sunday. Church out.*



“Don’t you have murderers to catch?” I asked.

“Not on Sundays,” he said. “Day of rest.” Then he made another entry: *Intercept target. Next Sunday. Noon.*

“Target?” I said. “You need to get a life.”

“I’ll get a life after next Sunday.”

“You have a sprinkle on your chin.”

“Fuck you.”

“Such language at church.”

## Chapter Thirty-nine

I met Rawhide’s assistant museum curator at a coffee shop in Barstow. I was nursing a Diet Coke when Pamela McGovern arrived straight from work, wearing low heels, jeans and a red cowboy shirt.

“Would you like something to drink?” I asked her.

“Coffee would be nice.”

“In a coffee shop? Surely you jest.”

She smiled at that. I think she thought I was funny. Or retarded.



The waitress was older than the surrounding rock-encrusted hills, although she was sprightly and had a certain spring to her step. She took our orders. One coffee, black. One refill of Diet Pepsi, also black. Everyone at the table laughed at that one. I was on a roll.

“So what did you want to see me about?” asked Pamela, leaning forward on her elbows. She was as cute as I remembered, dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. I was flattered by the intensity of her gaze, as if I was the only person important enough to look at in the diner. I happened to agree.

“Just have a few routine questions about Willie Clarke.”

Her gaze intensified. “I’m not supposed to be talking to you, Mr. Knighthorse. I could get fired.”

“I know,” I said. “Which is why we are meeting secretly in a coffee shop, and why I am bribing you with coffee. I promise to make this quick.”

She inhaled deeply. Held it for a few seconds and then let it out. The mother of all sighs. “How can I help you?”

Our drinks came, with two complimentary biscottis. The old gal winked at us and shuffled off in



a springy sort of way.

“Could you describe your first meeting with Willie Clarke?”

She shrugged. “It was about two months ago. He just showed up out of the blue one day asking about the mummy.”

“What did Jarred think of that?”

“Jarred didn’t like it. Or him.”

“Why?”

“I can’t say for sure. I can only speculate.”

“Speculate away.”

“Jarred’s trying to make a name for himself in Rawhide. He purposely staked out Rawhide because very little has been written on it. He calls the town an untapped vein.”

“Fitting for a mining town.”

“Yeah, he thinks he’s pretty clever.”

“So Jarred didn’t exactly roll out the welcoming wagon for Willie.”

“Exactly. Jarred was just plain rude. Willie was just doing his job. Which, I might add, was an impossible task. I mean, how many historians before him have looked into Sylvester’s identity?”

“A million?”



She grinned. "Okay, maybe not that many, but there have been a lot."

"Maybe it takes a detective."

"Someone like you?"

"Stranger things have happened."

"I'll believe it when I see it. Anyway, Jarred doesn't own Rawhide, and he certainly doesn't own its history. Willie had a valid reason for being here. After all, the man who now owns Sylvester hired him. And all Willie wanted was to be shown the site where Sly was originally discovered. Against Jarred's wishes, I agreed to help Willie."

"How did that sit with Jarred?"

"Oh, he was furious. But I didn't care. Willie was sweet. And harmless. I mean, he really didn't know what he was doing out here. He was barely out of graduate school. Hardly makes him a qualified historian, and certainly no threat to Jarred."

"Tell me about the trip with Willie."

She did. She met Willie in Rawhide on a Saturday morning, her day off. They were just about to head out into the desert when Jarred showed up out of the blue and insisted on joining them.

"Insisted?" I asked.



“He wouldn’t have it any other way, and told me in private that he didn’t know if Willie’s intentions were honorable or not. What a load of crap that was.” She actually snorted, which was very unbecoming of her. “Willie was nothing but sweet.”

“Was Jarred jealous?”

“I don’t know. If so, he never showed much interest in me before.”

“Maybe he’s blind.”

“Thank you, Mr. Knighthorse. But to be honest, at the time, Jarred seemed to be on something. He was jittery, excited, as if he was amped on a half dozen espressos.”

“So what happened next?”

She shrugged. “Jarred insisted I go alone with him in his truck. Willie was to follow us.”

“There wasn’t enough room in Jarred’s truck for the three of you?”

“Sure, if we all sat together. But Jarred thought Willie would be uncomfortable.”

“Okay,” I said. “Go on.”

“We drove out to the site, with Willie following behind us in his own truck.” She paused and leaned



forward, leveling her considerable gaze on considerable me. "Get this: once we arrive, Jarred suddenly changes his tune. Now he couldn't be more helpful."

"What do you mean?"

"Now he's answering all of Willie's questions. Laughing, joking, having a good time."

"Why?"

"I dunno. Maybe he was finally coming around. After all, Willie was easy to like."

I thought about this. While I thought about this, I drank from my Diet Pepsi, which had been sweating profusely, condensation pooling on the Formica table.

"Did anything unusual happen?" I asked, reaching for something, anything. "Anything out of the ordinary?"

She shook her head. "Not that I can think of."

I continued reaching.

"Did Jarred ever leave the two of you for any reason?" I asked. "Was he ever alone?"

She thought about that.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I can't think of anything else."



That seemed to satisfy her. She sipped on her coffee and suddenly started nodding. "Yes, actually. He was alone."

*Bingo.*

"Tell me about it."

She did. It happened just after they arrived in the desert. Willie had come prepared, of course, with bottled water and sunscreen, etc. But Jarred, apparently making a last minute decision to head out into the desert, had not. In fact, he was completely unprepared. So halfway down the trail, the town historian went back up to fetch some of Willie's water from the truck.

"Willie's water?" I said.

"That sounds funny, huh."

"Yes," I said, but ever the professional, I continued on. "And Willie gave Jarred the keys to his own truck?"

"Yes."

"Where the extra water was?"

"Yes."

"And Jarred went alone?"

"Yes."

"How long was Jarred gone?"



She thought some more. "As long as it takes to hike halfway up the trail and back down again. We were at the site by the time Jarred came back."

I had been on that same trail. In fact, I had been shot at on that same trail. Altogether, it was about a half mile straight down a narrow rocky path. I mentally calculated how much time it would take to climb halfway back up and then down again.

"Thirty minutes?"

She shrugged. "He might have been gone a little longer. Maybe forty-five minutes or more. Willie and I were nearly done examining the site by the time Jarred returned."

Fifteen minutes unexplained. Long enough to sabotage a vehicle?

I said, "And when he returns he's suddenly helpful and friendly."

"It was the strangest thing. But yeah, he's answering questions and offering information."

"Quite a change."

"Yes, I was happy to see it," she said. "Finally, he was being nice."

"So then the three of you leave in separate vehicles."



“Yes.”

“Except you and Jarred made it back to Rawhide and Willie doesn’t.”

She sucked in some air. Tears rapidly filled the corners of her eyes. The wetness amplified her eyes and made them look bigger than they were.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” Her voice cracked. “When we left, I looked back a few times to make sure he was following us.” Tears were coming freely down her face. She had caught the attention of some people in the shop. She continued, “At some point we lost him. Because when I looked again, he was gone.”

“Where were you when you lost him?”

“On Burning Woman Road. We rounded a bend and suddenly he wasn’t there.”

Burning Woman was the single lane road that eventually connected to the I-15. A very long stretch of highway. Very long and very lonely.

She continued through her sobs. “I thought maybe he had pulled over to make a phone call, or turned around to go back to the site on his own.” She shrugged. “Or maybe he knew of another way out of



there. I'm not exactly sure where Burning Woman heads off to."

"So what did you do when you saw he was gone?"

"I told Jarred to go back."

"And did he?"

"No."

"Why?"

"He said Willie was fine, that he had probably gone another way home, and that we had things to do at the museum."

"I thought you said you had a day off."

She nodded. "Jarred said we had a shipment come in last night, and he wanted me to catalogue it for display later in the week."

"Hardly pressing."

"Nothing at the museum could be considered pressing."

"Did you see Willie with a cell phone?"

"No, but he had called earlier to let me know he was running a little late."

"Did he call you while driving?"

She nodded again. "He was just heading off I-15 toward Rawhide."



“Do you still have his cell number?”

She reached and opened her purse and removed her wallet, from which she removed a white business card. The cell number was hand-printed on the back of it. She handed it to me. “I know what you’re thinking, Mr. Knighthorse.”

“What’s that?”

“If Willie had had his cell phone, why didn’t he call for help.”

I smiled encouragingly. *Go on*, my smile said.

She continued, “And if his cell phone had worked earlier in the desert it probably would have worked from Burning Woman, too.”

I let her keep talking. She seemed to be on a roll.

“So the question is: what happened to his cell phone?”

“The million dollar question,” I said.

## Chapter Forty

After my meeting with Patricia, I bought myself a 12-pack of Bud and checked into the Desert Moon



Motel near Barstow's big outlet mall, which, coincidentally, had prices similar to regular malls.

The motel room was ordinary, although this one came with a bonus double bed and a lot of stuffy air. Now forced to make a decision, I stood in front of the double beds, thinking. Finally, with the air conditioner only managing to sputter semi-cool air, I opted for the bed closest to the window.

Once settled, I had Domino's deliver a large cheeseburger pizza. I found a college football game and drank much of the beer and eventually ate the whole pizza, tossing the empty box on the carpet between the two beds, along with the empty beer cans. Gluttony at its best. The game droned on. I drank on. Cindy called a few times and each time I tried to hide the fact that I had beer breath, until I remembered she was a hundred miles away. Still, I think she knew, although she didn't say anything.

Just watching the game was making my leg hurt. So I turned it off and limped across the room and over to the window and looked out across the black expanse of desert. The motel was on the fringes of town. I cranked open the window. A hot wind touched my sweating face. The wind was infused with sage



and desert lavender and probably muskrat turds. I pulled up a chair, put my feet up on the windowsill and cracked open another beer.

I awoke the next morning in the same straight-back chair with the window open and the air conditioner chugging away, still holding a half-full can of beer.

So I finished the beer, looked at my watch. It was just before 9:00 AM. The Rawhide museum opened at 10:00. I had just enough time for a McDonald's McGriddle!

I found Jarred's address in the Barstow phone book. He lived in a condominium off of Somerset Street, in what would be considered downtown Barstow. At half past ten, I parked across the street.

My windows were down and my shades were on. The day was blistering. Heat waves rose off my hood. There was another sausage McGriddle in the bag for the ride home. I could hardly wait. Hope it didn't spoil in the heat. A chance I was willing to take.

I stepped out into the heat, opened my trunk and returned to my front seat with a plastic case. From



the case, I lifted out what locksmiths call a pick gun. Next, I pulled on some latex gloves.

With the pick gun in hand, I got out of the car again and crossed the street. The sidewalks were empty. People were at work or indoors with their AC's running.

On the bottom floor, I found the unit I was looking for and knocked.

I listened, my senses alive and crackling. I could have heard a desert muskrat scratch its balls.

Nothing. No desert muskrats and no yipping dog, either.

Good.

Nowadays, pick guns are the way to go for any locksmith. They operate on the laws of physics: action verses reaction, using the transfer of energy to compromise most locks. At the door, I slipped a slim needle into the keyhole and pulled the pick gun trigger, releasing the internal hammer, which caused the needle to snap upward, throwing the top pins away from the bottom pins. Now I adjusted the thumbwheel, then the tension wrench—and heard a satisfying *click*.

I turned the doorknob and stepped inside.



## Chapter Forty-one

The condo was stifling, and very still, which led me to believe it was empty. I clicked the door shut behind me, turned, and found myself standing in the living room. A massive mahogany entertainment center was to my immediate right. There was an old couch in front of me, and the kitchen was to my left. Sweat immediately trickled down my sides. The air was thick and hard to breathe. I considered opening the freezer door and sticking my head inside.

Nervous excitement fluttered in my stomach. I wasn't entirely sure what I was looking for, but finding Willie's cell phone would be a start.

The living room was cluttered with fast food wrappers. Hell, there were fast food wrappers on top of fast food wrappers. In New York, rats would have had a field day in here. But out here in the desert, the remains of his meals had gone to a regiment of ants.

I stepped over the trail of ants and headed to the first bedroom. The room itself was a disaster,



clothes everywhere. Ironically, the hamper was empty. Jarred must have been a lousy shot. The bed was so unmade it appeared to have never been made. Three of the five drawers in his dresser were empty. The other two were full of socks and boxers. I looked under the bed. More clothes.

Next was the adjoining bathroom. The light and fan were both still on, and the air was thick with mildew, despite the fan. Water pooled in the center of the bathroom floor. Five or six colognes lined the cabinet below the mirror; three of them toppled over on their sides. The lower half of the mirror was filmy with dried water spots. Shaving scum lined the sink bowl. On the other side of the mirror was a rusted fingernail clipper, Band-aides and wrinkle cream. Maybe it was a man's wrinkle cream.

The second bedroom was used as an office, and apparently it was Jarred's Holy of Holies. Utterly immaculate. Hell, it even looked freshly vacuumed. His computer was on a desk in one corner of the room. I considered going through his computer files, but doubted I would find the cell phone there. Piles of research books were stacked next to his printer, along with dozens of manila folders. A trashcan next



to the desk was filled to overflowing with wadded paper. I un-wadded a few. These appeared to be false starts to the history he was writing on Rawhide. From what I could tell, he had a fair command of the English language, although he used too many commas for my taste. I opened the cupboard above his computer desk. It was mostly empty, other than a small pile of blank CD-ROMs ready to be burned.

I left the study and went back through the kitchen and out through the sliding glass door to the backyard. It wasn't a real backyard. It was a condo backyard, with just enough dirt and grass to give the impression of a backyard. Parallel brick fences ran from the sides of the condo to an attached building. I crossed the yard in three strides and stepped into the semi-attached garage.

I flipped a light switch, and a dusty bulb over the doorway sputtered to life.

The garage was mostly empty, apparently primarily used to house Jarred's truck. There was a washer and a dryer and a folded up ping-pong table. The table was covered with cobwebs. Damn waste. Next to the ping-pong table was a dartboard bristling



with plastic red and yellow fletches. Boxes were stacked here and there.

I decided to check the boxes stacked here, rather than there, and within minutes sweat was dripping steadily from my brow and I felt as if I were being slowly cooked to death in this sweat box of a garage. I imagined my corpse being found hours from now, baked to perfection.

Most of the boxes were filled with books. Others were home to black widow spiders. I shuddered. Enough with the spiders, already. I stood there in the garage, hands on hips, wondering if I was barking up the wrong Joshua tree.

Maybe Willie Clarke really did run out of gas. And maybe Jarred had nothing to do with it.

Maybe.

I needed a better plan. There were too many boxes. And certainly too many spiders. If Jarred had indeed sabotaged Willie's truck, how would he have done it?

Standing in the middle of the garage, I closed my eyes. Sweat trickled down my spine. Hell, sweat trickled down *everywhere*.

I pictured Jarred heading back up to Willie's



truck. Pictured Jarred using the keys to unlock Willie's truck door. Pictured Jarred stealing the bottles of water and cell phone. Pictured Jarred using a siphon hose, sucking on one end, getting the gas flowing, and nervously standing there in the desert while the precious fuel pumped out. Pictured Jarred using some of the water from the bottles to clean out the siphon hose. Pictured Jarred putting the empty bottles and the hose and a cell phone into a...what?

I opened my eyes.

A gym bag. At least, that's what I would have used.

I would have ditched the gym bag in the desert, but Jarred had Patricia with him. So the gym bag probably went home with him. Where it has stayed because the last thing Jarred expected was a search of his home.

I scanned the garage again. There, on some plastic storage shelves in the far corner, was a red gym bag.

I sucked in some air and, mentally preparing myself for the possibility of more black widows, crossed the length of the garage, pulled down the



gym bag. I set it on some boxes and opened it.

Inside were two empty one-gallon bottles of Arrowhead water, a five-foot length of garden hose cut on both ends, and a cell phone. I flipped open the cell phone, turned it on, waited. Music chimed. It still had one bar of battery power left.

Using my own phone, I dialed Willie Clark's number. My finger shook while I dialed. When finished, I pressed send. More shaking. I sucked in some hot air, waited.

Waited.

The phone in my hand came to life, vibrating and ringing.

## Chapter Forty-two

I met Detective Sherbet at a McDonald's in downtown Fullerton across the street from the local junior college. The Fighting Hornets, or something. Half the customers who weren't Fighting Hornets were fighting mothers with kids. I came back carrying a tray filled with burgers and fries and sugar



cookies to the table we had staked out in the corner of the dining area.

"Sugar cookies?" said Sherbet.

"With sprinkles," I said. "The sprinkles, of course, do not imply I am a homosexual."

Sherbet started on the fries. He ate three at a time, mashing them together to form one huge super fry. Grease glistened between his thumb and forefingers.

"Why would you say something like that?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Seems to be a concern of yours."

He shook his head. "Now don't go bringing up my kid again."

"How's the kid?"

"Asshole," he said. "The kid's just fine. In fact, I gave up his neighborhood singing and dancing recital this evening to meet you, so this better be good."

"Singing recital?"

Sherbet shrugged, looked a little embarrassed. "It's a sort of one-man show. Or a one-kid show. And the kid's pretty good. Draws a fairly large



neighborhood crowd. Stages it in our garage. He bakes cookies with his mother all afternoon, and serves them to anyone who shows up. It's quite a production."

"He'll be disappointed you're not there."

Sherbet stopped eating. "Yeah, he will be."

"Maybe I should make this quick," I said.

He sighed. "Yeah," he said. "Maybe you should."

"You love that kid."

"Yup."

"Even though he's not like you."

"I do. Would be easier if he were more like me."

"It's okay that he's not. Still your boy."

Sherbet was about to speak when I jumped in.

"Let me guess: you want to change the subject."

"Lord, yes." His fries were gone, and he started in on the Big Mac. "So what do you have for me?"

"I might just have a killer for you," I said. In fact, I *knew* I had a killer for him, but I couldn't let on to Sherbet that I had broken into Jarred's condo. My search was illegal and would raise questions about evidence tampering. Jarred could walk. And I could lose my P.I. license.

"Okay, I'm interested," he said. "Tell me about it."



So I did.

Sherbet listened silently, working on his Big Mac, taking surprisingly delicate bites for someone who ate his fries three at a time. When I was done, he snorted. "Even though this Jarred went back for some water, doesn't mean he sabotaged the vehicle."

"Sure," I said. "But it gives Jarred opportunity. And since Willie Clarke was later found without his water, or his cell phone for that matter, there is some room for doubt."

Sherbet mulled this over, staring at me, chewing. The detective had me by about twenty years, but his face was smooth, nearly wrinkle free. His eyes never stopped working, as if he were continually sizing me up. There was grease on his chin, which caught some of the light and gleamed brilliantly.

"Sure, I'll give you that. If this kid, Willie, brings some water out, there should be some evidence of the bottles. I can tell you there was none. Kid brings his cell phone, he should have it; he didn't. Kid buys gas, he should have some; he didn't." Sherbet paused. "Don't forget he was also found nearly ten miles from his truck. Could have tossed both the



empty water bottles and the dead cell phone, and ten miles of desert is a lot of heat and sand to search for a fucking cell phone and some plastic water containers.”

“Two gallons of water should have gotten him to the main road,” I said. “Or at least kept him alive long enough for a passing vehicle to spot him.”

“Sure, if he didn’t get lost first and waste the water.”

“We are going in circles,” I said. “Dancing.”

“We are not dancing,” he said defensively. “What else do you have?”

“The way Jarred appeared that Saturday morning unannounced. The way he changed his tune once he returned from Willie’s truck. The way he refused to go back to see if Willie was okay.” I was leaning forward, my food completely forgotten. A few tables down a student was doing homework with some headphones on, a white cord attached to an iPod sitting on his table. “Taken individually, yes, sounds like I’m reaching for straws. Taken as a whole, we might have something here.”

“Okay, so we might have something here. What’s Jarred’s motive for sabotage and murder?”



I shrugged. "Notoriety and prestige."

"Notoriety and prestige?" he said dubiously. A crumb had fallen from his mouth and disappeared into his thick arm hair. I wondered how many other crumbs had been lost in there. "That doesn't make sense."

"Not to you or me, but to Jarred it makes perfect sense. He is a young historian with something to prove. He staked out Rawhide as his very own. He was going to make a name for himself there, even if that name was only known in very limited circles."

"Have you been to Rawhide?"

"Yes."

"It ain't much."

"No. But it's untapped history."

Sherbet was done eating. He wadded up the Big Mac wrapper, sat back and folded his arms over his rotund belly. The plastic bench creaked under his weight. "So he offs his competitor."

"Yes."

"So what do you want from me?"

"I want you to dust Willie Clarke's truck for prints."

He shook his great head. "Of course there will be



prints, Knighthorse. Jarred admitted to going back for water. They're probably all over the doors."

"Sure," I said.

Sherbet thought about it some more, and then the light went on. "The gas cap."

"Bingo," I said.

### Chapter Forty-three

I was on my back doing crunches behind my desk when the cell rang. Not missing a beat, I reached inside my pocket, removed the phone and flipped it open.

"Knighthorse."

"What the hell's wrong with you?" said Sherbet.

"I'm doing crunches."

"Crunches?"

"It's not easy being beautiful."

He ignored me. "We got the search warrant."

I stopped crunching, lay flat on the floor. "Go on."

"Jarred's prints were all over that goddamn gas cap, not to mention along the center console."



"Where the cell phone might have been located."

"Exactly."

"So when are you going in?" I asked.

"Tonight, when he gets home. He needs to be there for the search to be valid."

"Of course."

"But you knew that," he said.

"Yes."

"Sorry. I forget some private dicks know their shit."

"This one does."

He was quiet. I waited. I could hear him breathing.

"And Knighthorse?"

"Yes."

"Please tell me we won't find your prints at the condo."

"You won't find my prints at the condo."

"Good. Have you been there?"

"In passing."

Sherbet paused. If I listened closely enough I could hear his mustache lifting and falling with each breath. "In your expert opinion, Knighthorse, is there anywhere in particular we should look once we get



there?"

"If I were conducting the search, I would focus on the garage. Of course, that's just my expert opinion."

"Of course," he said. "Anything else?"

"I figure if he siphoned the gas, he would need a hose, and if he stole the water jugs, he would need somewhere to stash them."

"Like a bag?"

"Would be my guess."

## Chapter Forty-four

Sanchez, Jesus and I were at a Baskin Robbins near Anaheim Stadium, or whatever the stadium is called these days. I had printed out three free child scoop coupons from the internet, courtesy of a major web page celebrating its fifth anniversary. We waited twenty minutes in line along with dozens of other customers, each holding similarly printed coupons. Sanchez folded his up and put it in his pocket. I think he was embarrassed. I didn't care. Free ice cream!



Afterward, sitting at a heavily dented metallic table, Sanchez examined his child scoop of rocky road, holding the cone daintily between his thumb and forefinger. "We spent twenty minutes in line for this?"

"Yeah," I said, "Isn't it great?"

Sanchez snorted.

Jesus said, "I think it's cool."

"Good kid," I said. "Besides, beggars can't be choosers."

"I'm not a beggar," said Sanchez. "I happen to have a real job with a steady income."

"Steady income is overrated. Where's the adventure?"

Sanchez shook his head. "The kid moved."

"Which kid?"

"The last kid on the list."

"But we saw him just last week at church."

"Yeah, well, now he lives in Florida with his grandparents."

I looked at Jesus, who was just finishing off his single mint and chip child scoop. "So you ran him out of town," I said to him.



Jesus shrugged. He was concentrating on the last of his ice cream. "I still owe him. He can run but he can't hide."

I said to Sanchez, "Are we buying plane tickets to Florida?"

"No. We're going to let this one slide."

"Big of you," I said.

"I still owe him," said Jesus.

"Not so big of him," I said.

"Hey, I'm only twelve."

"And what have you learned from all of this?" I asked.

Jesus shrugged, and started crunching on the waffle cone. I had finished mine in precisely three bites, as had Sanchez, who dropped his big hand on his kid's shoulders. "Answer him."

"One girlfriend at a time," said Jesus. He sounded as if this were a terrible punishment.

I said, "You do realize there are some guys who go their entire junior high and high school years without having a single girlfriend?"

"I know. I feel sorry for them." Jesus looked at me, grinning. "I mean, I feel sorry for you."

I looked at Sanchez. "You told him?"



"Hey, I was trying to make the same point. You just happened to come up."

"Thanks."

"Hey, I used you because the kid happens to look up to you," said Sanchez. "Why, I'll never know."

Jesus said, "You really never had a single girlfriend?"

"Girls are trouble," I said. "Besides, I had plenty in college."

"But I think girls are fun—"

"Not too much fun," said Sanchez, looking at his kid.

"No, dad."

"I was busy in high school," I said.

"What could be more important than girls?"

"Football."

"I played football in high school, too," said Sanchez, shrugging. "And I had girlfriends. No big deal."

"I took football seriously."

"So did I."

"I wanted to play in the pros," I said. "I had a plan. Girls would just get in the way."

"But that's the idea," said Sanchez. "Girls are



made to get in the way. Sometimes it's nice when they get in the way."

"Right on, dad," said Jesus. He raised his hand. "High five."

Sanchez left him hanging. "But you made an exception for Cindy."

I said, "Cindy just happened to be the most special girl in the world."

"I think Cindy's hot," said Jesus, and Sanchez elbowed his kid hard enough to nearly knock him out of his seat.

"So do I," I said. "So do I."

## Chapter Forty-five

I was in my office with my feet up on my antique mahogany desk, careful of the gold-tooled leather top, re-reading Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, when two things happened simultaneously: Jarred appeared in my office doorway pointing a rifle at my forehead, and my desk phone started ringing.



I did what any rational human being would in the presence of a ringing phone. I answered it.

Sherbet was on the other line. "We're outside Jarred's condo. He never showed."

"No shit," I said.

Jarred kicked the door shut behind him and stepped deeper into my office. He quickly scanned the office, keeping the rifle on me. It was an old fashioned Colt .22. The kind one would find in a place like Rawhide, which is probably where Jarred got it.

Sherbet asked, "Any idea where he might be?"

"A fairly good one," I said.

"Then where is he?"

"Take a guess."

Jarred was walking around the desk, keeping the rifle on my face.

"He's with you," Sherbet said.

"Good guess."

"You need help?"

"Probably not."

"But it wouldn't be a bad idea."

"If you insist," I said.



"I'll send a car around."

At that moment, Jarred yanked the phone cord out of the wall. The line went dead. "Have a good day," I said, and hung up.

"Who the fuck was that?"

"Grandma," I said. "She tends to worry about me."

"She should worry about you, because you are fucked, Knighthorse. Fucked. Do you understand me? Fucked!"

"If I'm hearing you correctly," I said, "I appear to be fucked."

"Put your hands flat on the desk where I can see them."

He caught me. I was inching toward my desk drawer, where I kept my Browning. I sighed, rested both hands on the tooled leather top of the desk.

"The oils from my palms might stain the tooled leather top of my desk."

"Fuck your desk."

Jarred had a sort of wild-eyed look about him. The sort of look my teammates had before big games, a look fueled by a lot of adrenaline and nerves and the certainty that you were going to hurt a



lot of people in a few hours. Or be hurt. Jarred was still wearing his Rawhide-issued red cowboy shirt and jeans. He was sweating through his cowboy shirt. Must have gotten himself pretty worked up on the drive out here. His thinning hair was disheveled and his glasses had slid to the tip of his sweating nose. He didn't push them back up.

"They were waiting for me outside my condo," he said, spitting the words at me.

"They?"

He shoved the gun in my face, just inches from my nose. I could smell the gun oil, could see faint scratches along the steel barrel. "Don't fuck with me, Knighthorse. The cops. The cops were waiting for me." He snapped the gun away and started pacing in front of my desk, keeping the gun loosely on me. Jarred looked insane. He was sweating profusely now. Swallowing repeatedly. "Patty told me you spoke to her the other day. She must have told you something."

"She told me you went back to the truck for water."

"Nothing wrong with that."

"Except we have your prints on the gas cap,



Jarred."

"What do you mean?"

"We know you sabotaged the truck."

He looked at me from over his glasses. Sweat dripped from the tip of his nose, landed on my tooled leather. I would have to wipe that clean later. For now, I had bigger fish to fry.

"Give me the gun, Jarred."

"I can't."

"If you shoot me, you get the death penalty."

"Maybe that wouldn't be so bad."

I shrugged. "Where you stand now, a good lawyer talks the D.A. down to second degree murder."

Jarred was shaking. I could literally see the sweat spreading from under his armpits.

"I didn't kill anyone."

"Say that to Willie Clarke."

Jarred dropped into the client chair opposite me. The gun was pointed away from me. If I wanted to, I could lunge across the desk and wrestle it away from him. I wasn't in the lunging mood. Besides, I didn't think it would come to that.

"I didn't mean to kill him."

I said nothing.



“I just did it to scare him away, you know?” He paused, ran his hand through his hair. “I gambled on Rawhide. I visited there as a kid and fell in love with it. It stayed with me all these years.”

“Maybe it’s the cowboy in you.”

He ignored me. I was used to being ignored. He continued. “So when I was casting around for a theme for my masters, Rawhide naturally came to mind. It was a good fit. I had a true love for American history, in particular Western history. I did some research and discovered nothing of any significance had been done on the town, and I knew I had found my purpose. I sold my condo in Boston, moved out west. I’ve poured my heart and soul into that little town.”

“And then in waltzes Willie Clarke.”

Jarred instinctively gripped the weapon in his lap. “He was fresh out of graduate school, but there was a sort of—”

“Cockiness?” I offered.

“Yes. A cockiness to him that I found infuriating. Which is probably why I don’t like you.”

“Sometimes I don’t like me, either.”



“Seriously?”

“No; I love me.”

Jarred rolled his eyes. I think he might have thought about swinging his gun up to my face again, but decided against it. “Willie sounded so confident, so fucking sure of himself. As if he really thought he could unearth Sly’s identity.”

“Can’t have that.”

“Sly was mine,” he hissed.

“If anyone was going to discover Sly’s identity,” I said, helping, “it would be you.”

His eyes sparkled. “Yes! Exactly. Sly’s one of the West’s most intriguing mysteries.”

“So you removed the threat. The threat being Willie.”

“Hell, what the fuck was I supposed to do?”

“Not kill him. Work together. Share the glory.”

Jarred was shaking his head. “I worked too hard and long to do that. Still, I didn’t mean to kill him. I just wanted to scare him. I didn’t want him to come back.”

“Sure,” I said. “You scared him to death.”

A shadow crossed under my doorway. The cavalry was here. Any minute now, they were going



to barge in here, probably knock my door off its newly restored hinges. I couldn't let that happen.

"Give me the gun, Jarred."

He pushed his glasses up higher on his nose; they promptly slipped back down. He looked at me. His eyes were wide and reddish, perhaps irritated by his sweat. "I can't go to jail. Father would be very disappointed in me."

More shadows. It was going to get ugly in here. And I was still scrubbing the last of the bloodstains out of my carpet.

"He's very renowned, you know. Teaches at Princeton. He didn't approve of me coming out to Rawhide. Thought it was beneath us. Thought it was a mistake."

"Boy was he wrong," I said.

Jarred gave me a half smile and pushed his glasses up. "They're coming for me, aren't they?"

I kept my eyes on him and nodded my head slowly. I didn't like the tone his voice had suddenly taken on. Somber and distant, a voice empty of hope.

"You were talking to the police earlier, weren't you?" he asked.



“Just give me the gun, Jarred.”

“I think...not.”

“They’ll shoot you.”

“Now there’s a thought,” he said. “Would make things a lot easier, wouldn’t it? My parents would be disgraced, sure. But at least the matter will be done with short and quick.”

“Don’t do this, Jarred. It’s not worth it.”

“Not worth it? Oh, I think it is.” He looked at me, smiled. Pushed his glasses up. His eyes weren’t right. His lower lip trembled. “Tell my dad to fuck off for me.”

“Tell him yourself.”

“Later, Knighthorse.”

He swung the rifle around and, in a practiced motion, stuck the muzzle in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

## Chapter Forty-six

It was a week later. Cindy and I were in bed together, where we belonged, watching the local



nightly news. Ginger the dog was burrowed under the covers between my ankles. Now, after twenty-five minutes of grisly murders, missing kids and reports of unsafe foods and medicines, came the feel-good story of the day—wrapped around, of course, another murder.

There, on Cindy's 19" TV screen in her cozy bedroom was Jones T. Jones's hawkish face and gold hoop earrings.

Jones was standing in front of Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe, before a crowd of reporters. For the cameras, Jones ditched the cheesy used car salesman facade and adopted a more somber expression and tone. Peppering his speech liberally with references to his store, Jones announced that with the help of private investigator Jim Knighthorse—yes that Jim Knighthorse of football fame—they had not only uncovered the name of the mummy, but his original murderer.

The camera cut to a young male Asian field reporter, who then went on to explain, in a butchered and confusing summary, the role that Tafford Barron's ancestor, yes that Tafford Barron who is



currently running for a House seat, had had in the murder of Boonie Adams.

"You were mentioned on the news!" Cindy squealed, turning off the TV. "And in a non-football capacity. I'm so impressed."

"Impressed enough to sleep with me?"

"What the hell do you call what we just did thirty minutes ago?"

"Not sleeping."

Ginger shifted positions and pressed her cold nose into my anklebones. I shivered involuntarily.

"I don't like this Jones T. Jones chap," said Cindy. "He reminds me of a used car salesman."

"He's worse than that," I said. "He's selling dead men. So to speak."

"Oh, yuck."

Ginger raised her head. I knew this because a section of the comforter between my feet rose up. It dropped back down a moment later.

"Business is already picking up," I said. "And I just received my final check from Jones. Want to go to Sir Winston's?"

She shook her head. "Too snooty."

I hugged her tightly. "My kind of gal."



"So what are you going to do with the bonus?"

"Take you to dinner. Buy you pearls and diamonds."

"Or get caught up on your bills."

"Or that," I said. "Or I could always use it to start a new life in the Bahamas. Maybe run a juice bar on the beach."

"Can I come?"

"Only if I can refer to you as my bikini babe."

"Deal," she said, then frowned.

"Something I said?"

"No. It's this Jones T. Jones character. Just doesn't seem right that he's still profiting from Boonie's murder."

"I agree," I said. "Which is why I took the liberty to research Boonie's kin."

"You didn't."

"I did."

"Judging by that smug grin on your face, I would say that you found them."

"I did. Or some of them who still happen to live in Barstow. I suggested to them that Boonie should receive a decent burial with his family present. And they agreed. One old lady, a great great



granddaughter, actually cried.”

“And what does Jones T. Jones think of this?”

“Oh, he won’t like it at first, but he’ll cave in, and work the funeral into a huge propaganda stunt. Believe me, in the end, Jones will have profited very well from Boonie’s murder.”

“Speaking of which, explain to me again what happened to Boonie’s killer. The news sort of jumbled it.”

“A hundred and twenty years ago, young Johanson Barron gets in a barroom fight with Boonie Adams, stabbing Boonie in the shoulder. A week later Johanson somehow lures Boonie out into the desert, shoots him and leaves him to die. A month later, the Barron family, perhaps aware of this killing, quietly ships Johanson out of Rawhide, where he eventually winds up in Dodge City. Where, I might add, he eventually hangs for a different murder two years later. So justice was served, so to speak.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I happen to be an ace detective,” I said. “That, and I had the help of Rawhide’s newest curator, one Pamela McGovern.”

“Will this somewhat scandalous news hurt Tafford



Barron's chances of running for Congress?"

"One can only hope," I said. "A good spin doctor can probably get him out of this scrap, but we'll see."

"Did you eventually find Jarred's father?"

"I did."

"Did you relay the message?"

"It was a dying man's last request," I said. "What else could I do?"

"Was it hard for his father to hear?"

"He broke down crying, so I think so."

"Like pouring salt in the wound," said Cindy.

"Yes," I said.

"But you had to do it," she said.

"Yes."

Street sounds came from below, especially the sound of a loud muffler. In fact, I heard it pass on several occasions. As it was coming again, I got up out of bed, padded across her hardwood floor, and glanced out her third story window in time to see an older model white BMW chug slowly down the street. Black exhaust spewed from the muffler. I frowned.

"You okay?" Cindy asked.

"Yes."



“What is it?”

“Nothing,” I said, and came back to bed.

“So tell me,” said Cindy, snuggling against me, her breath hot on my neck. “Was it Jarred who shot at you in the desert?”

“We’ll never know for sure, but I think it’s a safe bet. A Rawhide maintenance truck was getting serviced not too far from where we had met for lunch. He could have easily swapped vehicles.”

“Why bother swapping vehicles if his intent was killing you?” Cindy asked. “With you dead, there would be no witnesses.”

I shrugged. “In case he didn’t kill me; in case there was a witness.”

“I’ve never had anyone shoot at me,” she said, shuddering under the covers. “I would be terrified.”

“At first, but then survival supercedes fear.”

We were silent some more. Ginger snored contentedly between my ankles. A helluva heating pad.

“Do you think you’ll coach again next year?” Cindy asked.

Our team had played its final game tonight. We finished the season on a high note, winning by a



huge margin, the biggest in quite some time. In fact, we had won four of the last five games, which, coincidentally, was when I was hired on as an assistant coach. Coach Swanson had asked me back next year.

"I told him I would think about it," I said.

"But I thought you really enjoyed it."

"Oh, I do. But a coach needs to give more of himself. Hell, most coaches commit their lives to their teams."

"You were busy with the mummy, and with my stalker."

"Of which, one is still on the loose," I said.

"What's his name?"

"Chad Schwendinger," I said. "No wonder he turned out bad."

"I'm not worried," she said. "I have my big strong man to protect me."

I was quiet, thinking about the stalker, about coaching, about the mummy, about my mommy. And through it all, I mostly thought about having a beer.

"Maybe next year I can take some time off from detecting to coach."

"You look like a coach. Did I ever tell you that?"



The kids look up to you. I was watching them tonight. They were hanging onto your every word down there on the sideline."

"I think everyone should hang onto my every word."

"I know you do," said Cindy. "Speaking of your word, are you ever going to ask me to marry you?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"When I'm out of debt."

She was silent, meditative. She stroked my bicep. "I would also want you to stop drinking before we're married."

I nodded, but said nothing. Damn, I wanted a drink. Now.

"Maybe you need help," she offered.

"Probably."

"But you don't want to get it."

"I like drinking," I said.

"So you would rather get drunk than marry me?"

"I want both."

"You can't have both, Jim. You need to make a decision."

I turned and faced her, our noses touching. I



inhaled deeply. She was staring up at me, the whites of her eyes luminescent. "There is no decision to make. I won't lose you again. But can we give this a little time?"

She burrowed her face into the crook of my neck and kissed me softly.

"Yes," she said sleepily. "We can give it a little time."

## Chapter Forty-seven

Cindy spent the next few minutes flinching spasmodically into sleep. When she was snoring softly, I eased out of bed and padded quietly into the kitchen and opened the fridge door and removed a cold can of the thing that had been obsessively raging through my thoughts for the last hour. And it wasn't a Diet Coke.

Cindy allowed me to keep a case of beer at her house, as long as I didn't go through it too quickly.

That, of course, was the challenge.



So I was sitting in the darkness at the kitchen table working on my third Miller Light, contemplating a fourth, when I heard the familiar rumble of the muffler. I parted the curtains and looked down onto the street below as the same older model BMW pulled up along the curb, stopping in the shadows just outside a splash of lamplight.

I sipped from the can, stared down. I forgot about wanting a fourth beer.

The driver killed the engine and the lights. The tinted window rolled down and a man's pale face appeared. If I wasn't mistaken, as his jawline caught some of the diluted street light, he was looking up at Cindy's condo.

I finished the beer and spent the next ten minutes staring down into the small squarish window three floors below, staring so hard that sometimes the window blurred into a hazy black amorphous mass. Luckily, blinking remedied this problem.

I watched it some more, and decided it was time for a chat. I pulled on a light jacket, because even I get cold, and stepped out of the condo and into the cool night air. I worked my way between the rows of condos, through a security gate and out toward the



street.

Once there, I saw that the driver had stepped out of the car and was now rummaging through the trunk. The trunk lid blocked his face. Below the corner of the rear fender, and glowing slightly in the diluted street light, I could see a pair of dirty sneakers. Whoever he was withdrew something from his trunk and set it by his feet.

Light reflecting dully off its plastic surface, it looked vaguely like a slightly deflated football, if footballs had handles and spouts.

Gas can.

Pale hands reached up for trunk lid. Shut it softly.

And I found myself looking into the face of a very shocked, very heavy-set middle-aged man with a thick head of receding hair. Sort of the Roger Staubach look. He was wearing a black Members Only jacket and black sweats, as any good stalker should. He couldn't have looked more startled, eyes bulging and mouth working.

"Run out of gas?" I asked.

The look of astonishment quickly turned into something ugly. He bared his teeth and reached inside his jacket, shouting: "Darwin is the devil."



But before he could remove his hand, I pushed off the fender and punched him full in the face. His arms windmilled, flinging what appeared to be a gun into the nearby bushes. He collapsed straight to the ground.

“Only in the bedroom,” I said. “A devil only in the bedroom.”

He held his face and moaned and bled. I rolled him over and removed his wallet from his back pocket, hoping against hope I had gotten the right man. And I had. Chad Schwendinger. Hell of a name.

No wonder he turned out bad.

## Chapter Forty-eight

Yesterday, in a small desert town called Apple Valley, ol’ Boonie was finally put to rest amid much fanfare. Jones T. Jones was there. He even shed a tear, which may or may not have been legit. Anyway, I thought he was going to miss his mummy. They had gotten along so well together.



I was still drinking too much, but that was not insurmountable. That was fixable, and someday when I had put my own mother's murder to rest, I would put my drinking to rest, too. And then I would ask a certain someone to marry me.

But first things first.

A door to my right opened and a bespectacled young man with no chin poked his head out. He was dressed in a white lab coat. "It's ready, Mr. Knighthorse."

"How did it turn out?"

"Great, I think. You can thank the marvels of modern technology."

So I followed him in. Took a seat next to a flat-screen computer monitor that was turned away from me.

"Here you go," he said. And turned the monitor toward me. "Twenty years, just like you asked."

On the screen before me was the headshot of a white Caucasian male of about forty. I leaned a little closer, aware that my beating heart had increased in tempo, thudding dully in my skull. The man on the screen had not aged well. His face was weathered



from too many years in the sun and surf. His blond hair was turning a dirty blond, almost gray. Blue eyes and white teeth.

It's called age progression technology, and it's used to identify runaways and kidnap victims. The man on the screen before me was the eighteen-year-old kid from the pier, the kid who had taken an interest in my mother. Except in the age progression photograph, he wasn't a kid anymore. He was a man. An older man who clearly loved to surf and still lived in Huntington Beach. An older man with three adorable kids who loved their grandfather. An older man who was the son of the homicide detective who investigated my mother's murder.

"I hope this helps," said the technician.

I was finding breathing difficult.

"Are you okay?" asked the technician.

The room was turning slowly. From somewhere very far away, I heard the technician ask again if I was okay.

I felt sick and stumbled out of the small room and found the nearest bathroom and threw up my lunch and breakfast. I flushed the toilet and sat on the seat and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and



tried to control my breathing.

I sat like that for a very long time.

*The End*

(To be continued in *Hail Mary*, coming Summer 2011 to your favorite ebookseller.)



# ELVIS HAS *NOT* LEFT THE BUILDING

A MYSTERY THRILLER

by

J.R. RAIN

**ELVIS HAS NOT LEFT THE BUILDING**

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### *Dedication*

To my brother, Jason. A true storyteller.

### *Acknowledgment*

A very special thank you to Sandy Johnston for all her help.

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Elvis Has *Not* Left the Building

The Dream

“What’s your name?”

“Elvis Presley.”

The dream is always the same. I’m in jail. No, I’m in an interrogation room, being questioned for an alleged crime. A murder. My *own* murder.

Somehow, I’m able to see through the one-way mirror. Watching me, hidden behind the glass, aren’t just the homicide detectives, but everyone I had ever known, including my ex-wife, my daughter, my mother and even my still-born twin brother, Jessie, now full-grown and looking remarkably like me in my heyday. The media is there, too, of course. Always the media. Every reporter in the land is standing there, watching me, writing fiercely, covering the mother of all tabloid stories.

I feel sick, nauseous. My world is crumbling around me. The accusing detectives smile wickedly and shine a powerful desk lamp directly into my eyes. Cigarette smoke fills the air, hanging there like

a roiling gray curtain, filling my nostrils and stinging my eyes. One of the officers blows more of the stuff directly into my face.

“What’s your real name?” he asks me.

“Elvis Presley.”

“Bullshit.” More smoke, more lamps, more light.

“What’s your full name, goddammit?”

“Elvis Aaron Presley.”

“He’s dead!” screams the detective.

“No,” I say carefully. *“I’m not.”*

From behind the one-way mirror, which looks, in fact, more like a window, someone suddenly bursts into tears. It’s my daughter, and she buries her face in her mother’s shoulder. I’m not supposed to be able to see this display through the one-way mirror, but I can. I always can. Apparently, in my dreams, I have X-ray vision.

I’m still staring at my weeping daughter when a hand turns me violently around, forcing me to look up into a glaring light. I can’t see who’s silhouetted before me.

“You killed him,” says the voice. The voice sounds like it could be my own.

"No, I didn't," I say. "It was a hoax."

"A hoax?" The voice grows enraged. Now it sounds like a multitude of voices, a cacophony erupting from my legions of fans. A universal outlet for all those I had let down, hurt, or disappointed.

"I needed out," I say, babbling, nearly incoherent. "I needed to start over. Everything...everything was so crazy."

I hear more weeping. I turn my head around. It's still my daughter. Always my daughter. Always weeping. And it kills me. She won't look at me, and it breaks my heart more than you know.

"Look at what you've done to her," says the voice, and now I'm sure it's my own voice.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Say it to *her*."

I look over at my baby, my mouth open to speak, but no words come out. Someone smacks me hard across the face, rocking me. I nearly topple out of the chair. My hands, I realize, are tied behind me, as if I had been kidnapped.

"*Who are you?*" screams the voice.

"Elvis—"

"Bullshit."

"Who are you?"

"I don't know. Not anymore...."

"Who are you?"

And here is when I always wake up, tears streaming down my cheeks, always alone in my tiny single apartment in Los Angeles, just down the road from the various studios where I had made so many of my early films. My blankets are often on the floor and I'm usually covered in sweat. My head often pounds from the usual hangover. I usually never go back to sleep. I don't want to dream the dream again. I don't want to see my daughter's pain.

* * *

This morning was no different.

I awoke with a start, bolting upright, momentarily disoriented. My blankets were on the floor again, as if I had been fighting a monster in my sleep. I could still hear the accusing voice in my head, but this time it belonged to my twin brother—my *dead* twin brother who had died at birth. I heard his voice now, clearly, eerily, reaching up through the depths of my subconscious and down through the ages, spoken in a voice that sounded remarkably like my own.

"Today is our birthday, Elvis. But, of course, since

I was born dead, today is also my *deathday*. Ironic isn't it?"

Yes, I thought, *ironic*.

I sat back in bed, closed my eyes, ran my fingers through my thick hair. Tomorrow I see my shrink.

Thank God.

Chapter One

This is going to hurt.

My apartment was empty. I was standing in my bathroom, dressed in boxers and nothing else. I was about to look very foolish and I was glad there was no one else here to witness it.

Hell, I was almost embarrassed for myself.

With one of my own songs playing in the background, I slowly started gyrating my hips. Just a little. Nothing too wild. Nothing like I used to do. And already I could feel a tingle of pain going up my back.

Yeah, this is going to hurt.

But I wanted to do it. I *had* to do it. For quite

some time now I had felt the itch.

And it was a hell of an itch.

I picked up the pace a little. I felt clumsy and out of sync. I stumbled once or twice as my bare feet slapped against the cold linoleum floor. One of my swaying hips nailed the bathroom door knob, sending the door itself slamming back into the bathroom wall. I think the drywall might have cracked.

But I continued doing my thing. My crazy thing.

Mercifully, the clumsiness quickly faded. Amazingly, wonderfully, flashes of my old self came back. I quickly worked up a sweat. My belly, round and full, pulled on my lower back. The strain was nearly unbearable.

God, I needed to lose weight. So easy to let yourself go when you don't care.

But, lately, I had started caring. And slowly but surely I had started changing my diet. A salad here. A banana there. Venti mochas reluctantly switched to grande mochas.

I tried another move. A patented move. One that had driven the women of the world crazy—

I swung my leg and hip out, and screamed in

pain. I lurched over the bathroom sink, gasping. Something pulled. I hunched there over the bathroom sink, gasping, sweating, staring at myself in the mirror. Gray hair. Custom-built face. Wrinkles.

God, the wrinkles....

It's hell getting old.

A loud knock on my front door. I sucked in some air, willed myself to stand upright. On knees that were already stiffening, I made my way to the front door, limping slightly, knuckling my lower back.

I checked the peephole. It was my eighty-year-old downstairs neighbor, Mrs. Haynesworth. I opened the door.

"Sorry for the noise, Mrs. Haynesworth."

"Well, my granddaughter's asleep. And all that banging up here." She squinted at me, peering through her remarkably thick glasses. Sometimes I thought she knew my super-secret identity. Then again, with her eyesight, I always shrugged off the feeling. "What are you doing up here, anyway?"

"Trying out my dance moves."

"Dance moves? Mr. King, you're far too old to be dancing. You might hurt yourself."

I smiled. "I'll keep the noise down, Mrs."

Haynesworth. Have a good day.”

She continued peering at me as I closed the door. I hobbled into the kitchen—and popped a Vicodin or two.

Or three.

Chapter Two

The doorbell rang.

I was sitting in a comfortable loveseat I had scavenged for free from Craigslist.com, watching a TV that I had recently found on the side of the road, surrounded by tables and lamps and artwork that I had purchased for cheap from local garage sales.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

It was the middle of a bright winter day and I was watching Oprah, of course. What else was there to do? I liked Oprah. I think she and I would have gotten along just fine. Anyway, she was having a special tribute to the King, being that it was his birthday.

That it was *my* birthday.

Sitting beside her were two women: Elvis

Presley's ex-wife and his daughter. Both looking radiant. Both looking breath-takenly beautiful, especially his daughter. *My daughter*. Of course, my daughter also looked sad and lost and heartbroken. Always sad. Always lost. Always heart broken.

Damn.

The doorbell rang again.

I ignored it and, entranced, continued watching Oprah's special tribute to the King, and when the show was finally over, when I had seen enough commercials for feminine hygiene products to last a life time, I was a total emotional wreck. Hell, the collar to my polo shirt was even wet with my tears. Oddly, my knuckles hurt as well—and not just from my arthritis. Apparently, while watching the show, I had been clawing the hell out of the armrest of my recently acquired love seat. In fact, I had torn the seam of it a little. Damn. Then again, perhaps it was already torn? Hard to tell with free furniture.

Oprah waved goodbye to the camera, and as she did so I watched my daughter look away and bite her lower lip, seemingly stifling a sob.

Damn.

As the show went to commercial, I heaved myself

up from the sunken love seat, somehow straining my right knee in the process. The roadside TV didn't come with a remote, so I manually clicked the thing off the old fashioned way. As I did so, high on a bookshelf next to the TV, I found myself staring at a picture of the very same girl who had just been sitting next to Oprah. Except the girl in the picture was a little girl and she was sitting high on her tiny pony, smiling the world's biggest smile. *A girl and her pony, it's a beautiful thing.* She had loved that pony and she had loved me. She looked so happy back then, so alive and happy.

So how could I break her heart?

Therein lies the rub.

She hasn't looked happy in some time. Trust me, I know this. I study every picture I can get my hands on, minutely, agonizing over the details. Was she healthy? (Yes, from all indications.) Was she happy? (No, not for a long time, but I've been wrong before.) And today she had looked utterly and completely miserable. The sadness in her distant, round eyes ran as deep as wells.

Outside, someone started a lawnmower. I sighed

and stepped over to the living room window. Outside, a small Hispanic man was pushing a lawnmower across a swath of grass that ran in front of my apartment complex. Sweat streamed down his caramel-colored skin. The lawnmower was almost as big as he was.

Up the street, double-parked, was a UPS truck. A bum was currently urinating on its right rear tire. The bum had just managed to stumble away before a fit young man with hairy legs trotted out of a nearby apartment complex and hopped up into the truck and sped away.

And that's when I remembered the doorbell.

Ah, yes, all that damn ringing.

I moved away from the window, past Kendra the Wonder Kat, who currently lay sleeping in a furry striped ball in the center of my reading chair—no doubt dreaming of mice and toys and things that go squeak in the night—and opened my front door.

Bright sunshine poured in. Painfully bright sunshine. I shielded my eyes, blinking hard, and there, sitting on the little-used welcome mat, was a thick envelope.

The package was addressed to *E.P.*

Chapter Three

I sat at my kitchen table with the package. The small hairs at the back of my neck were standing on end, as if a goose had walked across my grave.

Or perhaps across my *brother's* grave.

Despite myself, I looked over my shoulder, peering down the short hallway to my bedroom. I was alone, of course. Still, I had a sense that I was being watched, and I *hate* that sense.

I turned back to the package, a package that was addressed to one *E.P.*

Hands shaking, heart hammering, I tore through the padded envelope with a thick and slightly broken fingernail, and removed a clear plastic box containing a watch. On the face of it was Elvis Presley dancing, doing that crazy thing he does with his legs. The watch even showed the correct time. Inside the padded envelope was also a tightly folded piece of paper. I took it out and, with increasingly unsteady fingers, unfolded it.

It was hotel stationery from the Embassy Suites here in Los Angeles. Just two words were written across the middle of it in small, neat cursive: *Happy Birthday*.

I stared at the letter for some time, my mind running through a possible list of stalking candidates, and came up with nothing. Finally, I opened the plastic case and put the watch on—and kinda liked it. It would go well with my already sizable collection of Elvis memorabilia. I'm a nerd like that.

My cover was blown, that much was for sure. By whom I did not know, and how long before *Access Hollywood* came knocking at my door, I didn't know, either.

Numb and sick to my stomach, I pushed away from the table and went over and sat at my desk in the far corner of the living room. I found a plain manila case folder and wrote "Stalker" on the tab. There, now it was official. I had me a stalker. I slipped the note inside, along with the padded envelope, and filed the whole thing away in my dilapidated filing cabinet that I had gotten for free from a retired doctor.

In my bathroom, from the medicine cabinet, I

found my little bottle of pick-me-up pills. Vicodin. My preferred drug of the day. I tapped out three fat pills, poured myself a cup of sink water and knocked them back one at a time like a whooping crane downing sardines.

In the kitchen, from a cupboard above the sink, I found my not-so-hidden bottle of Jack Daniels. I unscrewed the cap and drank it straight, and I kept on drinking until I finally felt better.

Chapter Four

We were at a Starbucks in Silver Lake, which is a hilly district east of Hollywood. Yes, there was even a lake here. Granted, it was a reservoir surrounded by an eight-foot high chain-linked fence topped with barbed wire, but, hey, that's L.A. for you.

I was eating a \$1.60 old-fashioned chocolate donut that tasted remarkably like a .60 cent old-fashioned chocolate donut. Across from me, drinking a mocha something-or-other, was an old friend. A

very *trusted* old friend. Clarke McGuire was a defense attorney here in L.A. Five years ago, Clarke hired me to help clear one of his clients of murder. The case started simple, but ended bad. Very bad. Someone had ended up dead, and Clarke and I had been at the wrong place at the wrong time, and suddenly we had a body to dump. And so we did, together, in the desert, in a grave we dug together. Call it a bonding experience. Now we shared a secret that we would take to our own graves, and since we were sharing secrets, I had let him in on a big one of my own.

Now Clarke McGuire, defense attorney, with his perfectly bald head and too big hands, was one of only three people on Earth who knew that Elvis Presley was living in obscurity in L.A. and working secretly as a private investigator.

Unless you counted the stalker.

Without looking up from his newspaper, Clarke said, "Happy birthday, by the way."

"Is that why you splurged for the donut?" I asked.

"That, and because you're broke again."

"Well, you're a day late," I said. "My birthday was yesterday."

"I'm a day late, and you're a dollar short."

"Oh, brother," I said.

Clarke chuckled to himself, turned the page, snapped the paper taut.

Starbucks was filled nearly to capacity. We sat alone in a corner, near the front entrance, at the only rectangular table the place offered, a table which was designated for the handicapped. I knew this because a little yellow wheelchair was routed into the wooden surface. I wasn't handicapped, and neither was Clarke. By all rights, this was an illegal coffee affair.

"We're sitting at the handicap table," I said.

"I know."

"Neither of us is handicapped," I said, "unless we count your baldness."

"Baldness isn't a handicap."

"Should be."

He shook his head. His *bald* head, that is. "I tried calling you yesterday," he said. "Your phone was off. Wanted to wish you a happy birthday."

"I hate my birthday."

"I know."

I was quiet. Clarke was reading the *L.A. Times*,

or at least pretending to. More often than not, I caught him watching me. Clarke was a good friend, my only friend, but he was also infatuated with me. Sometimes I wished I had never divulged my secret to him. Surprise, it turned out he was quite the Elvis fan. Lucky me.

"She was on TV yesterday," I said. "Oprah."

Clarke nodded; he knew who *she* was. "How'd she look?"

"Beautiful," I said. "And sad. Always sad."

I was tracing the engraving of the wheelchair with my finger, listening to the chatter of orders at the nearby counter, everyone speaking a secret Starbucks language, meaningless to the uninitiated. I was suddenly wishing my drink had something stronger in it than just a shot or two of espresso.

"I'd do anything to see her again, Clarke."

"I know."

"Just one minute. One hug."

"Dead men don't give hugs."

"Thank you, Davy Jones."

He chuckled and turned back to his paper. We were silent some more. Starbucks was alive and

well and running on caffeine. A few minutes later, without looking up, Clarke said, "I have a job for you if you're interested. Missing person case."

Working was good for me. It kept me sane. Kept my thoughts in check, my mind in check. It was damn easy for my life to spiral out of control if I let it. Working hard and helping others kept me grounded, alive. It also put food on my table.

"Tell me about it," I said.

"Missing female. Twenty-two, an actress. Missing now for three days."

"Haven't heard about it."

"And you won't. The mother wants to keep this quiet, if possible. Her daughter has a movie coming out this fall, and the mother doesn't want the bad publicity."

"Nice to see her priorities are in order."

Clarke shrugged. "Not my business," he said. "Ideally the girl is found safe and sound and the public is none the wiser."

"Except the public might have leads to her whereabouts."

"What can I say," he said. "I'm just their attorney."

"Fine," I said, "What does the LAPD have so

far?"

"So far nothing, which is why the mother is hiring every available PI she can find."

"Even old ones?" I asked.

"Even old ones," said Clarke. "I told her that you're the best in the business at finding the missing, that, in fact, it's your specialty."

I finished the last of the donut. "Sometimes they're found dead, Clarke," I said.

"I know," he said. "I left that part out."

Chapter Five

She was an Elvis Presley fan and she was dying.

I knew this because the *L.A. Times* did a write up on her in the Community section of the paper. I had been flipping through the paper after Clarke left Starbucks. It's hard to miss a color photo of a little girl with an Elvis wig and sideburns and dressed in rhinestones and wearing my aviator glasses. Well, hard to miss for me, at least. I stopped turning the pages and read the article. She was in the final

stages of leukemia, and her prognosis was not good. Although not stated directly, the impression I got from the article was that she should have been dead months ago. Miraculously, she hung on, and on the days when she was feeling better, she would entertain the other kids with her Elvis impersonation. Apparently, she was pretty good. Most striking was that she was a foster child, having spent her life predominately in the California foster program, having never found a home. She was only seven and my heart broke for her.

Which was why, an hour or two later, I found myself in the Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles, making my way down an empty, carpeted corridor with flowers in hand. *Flowers and a special gift.* I was in the pediatrics oncology wing, where they treated children with cancer.

I approached the nurse's desk, manned by two nurses. One of them looked up at me and smiled.

"How can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Beth Ann Morgan."

She smiled warmly. "Ah, our little Elvis. She's been getting a lot of attention with that article. Lots of flowers and cards." She pointed to a nearby room.

The door was open and from within I could see an abundance of flowers and bobbing helium balloons. "But no one has come to see her personally."

I nodded, unsure of what to say, and so I spoke from my heart. "I was touched by her story."

The nurse studied me, nodding. "We all are. She's very special to us." She studied me some more. "Obviously you are not family."

Left unsaid was that I was obviously not family since Beth Ann Morgan had no family. I shook my head. "No, ma'am, but I would really like to see her."

She continued looking at me. "She's very sick. She's taken a turn for the worse."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but I would still like to see her."

Now we had gotten the attention of the other nurse, and both of them were looking at me. The second nurse said, "Well, see if she wants any visitors. It couldn't hurt."

The first nurse nodded and stood. "Okay, but one of us will be with you at all times."

"I understand."

"Who should I say you are?"

“Just tell her I’m a fellow Elvis fan.”

She grinned. “Aren’t we all.”

She disappeared into the nearby room, and a moment later she came back. “Okay, Beth Ann will see you.”

Chapter Six

The figure on the bed was tiny, wasting away.

Beth Ann was still wearing her Elvis wig and sideburns, although the left sideburn currently sat askew on her face. She was wearing a rhinestone jacket. It was something cheap, probably from a Halloween shop. Her plastic Elvis aviator glasses were sitting on the swing-out table next to her. As I stepped into the room, I found her sitting up in bed, although I sensed she had recently been asleep. Still, she smiled brightly at me, and there was no indication in her smile—or in her sweet face—that she was very near death.

The nurse sat in a chair behind me and allowed me to approach the little girl, and I did so, stopping

at the foot of her bed. Her feet projected up through the thin fabric of the hospital comforter about halfway down the bed. She was a tiny little girl; no doubt getting tinier each day, wasting away.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Beth Ann."

"That's a pretty name. My name's Aaron."

Her eyes widened briefly. Lord, she looked ridiculous in her Elvis wig and sideburns. Ridiculous and damned cute. I wanted to hug her. I also realized that she was, no doubt, bald beneath her wig.

"Elvis's middle name was Aaron," she said.

"Oh, really?" I said. "You know a lot about Elvis, huh?"

"I know *everything* about Elvis! I love him!"

"Do you know when he was born?" I asked.

"January eighth, nineteen thirty-five."

"And when he died?"

"August sixteenth, nineteen seventy-seven."

"Wow, you do know a lot about Elvis."

"I told you."

"Yup, you sure did. I believe you now."

"I'm an expert."

"I can see that," I said. "So why do you like Elvis so much?"

Her face lit up. "He's so cute."

"Cute?" I said. "You're too young to think he's cute."

"No. He's cute no matter how old you are."

It was hard for me to argue with that logic. "What else do you like about Elvis?"

"He was the best singer *ever*. But I don't just like him. I *love* him."

"Excuse me. I stand corrected."

"But I also love him because he is my friend."

"Your friend?" I said.

"I mean, I know he's not my *real* friend, but sometimes when I look at his pictures or watch his movies, or listen to his music, I think he is talking to me, or singing to me, or looking at me, and he makes me so happy because I don't feel so alone."

I almost lost it right there. Tears sprung to eyes, but somehow I kept it together. I said, "I'm sorry you feel so alone, sweetheart."

"It's okay. I'm used to it."

I looked over at the nurse sitting behind us. The

woman, obviously exhausted, had her eyes closed and seemed to be dozing, but I doubted it. She was sneaking in a break, true, but I suspected she was also listening to every word, as well.

"So what's your last name, Aaron?" the little girl asked, sitting up some more.

"King," I said.

"Serious?"

"Serious," I said.

"But Elvis was known as the King."

"Perhaps it's just a lucky coincidence," I said.

She studied me, pursing her lips slightly. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Seventy-four."

She started counting rapidly on her fingers, and when she was finished, she looked completely confused. "Elvis would have been seventy-four, too."

"Wow, now that is a coincidence, isn't it?"

"What does *coincidence* mean? You keep saying it."

"It means that life can be very interesting sometimes."

She shrugged, but seemed to like my answer,

and smiled brightly. Her smile broke my heart because, really, she had nothing to smile about. Nothing but Elvis.

"I brought you some flowers," I said.

"I like flowers!"

I noted that she only *liked* flowers, but she *loved* Elvis. I held out the flat box. "I also got you this."

"What is it?"

"You'll have to open it and see." The moment the words came out of my mouth I realized my mistake. She didn't have the strength to open the box, much less hold onto it. "But maybe I can open it for you," I added.

"Sure!"

And so I did, setting the box down on the foot of her hospital bed and untying the red ribbon. As I pulled the lid off the box, Beth Ann sat forward in bed, trying to peer into the box. I next lifted out one of my original rhinestone jackets I had worn back in the early seventies. Beth Ann's jaw dropped, and it kept on dropping.

"It's Elvis's jacket," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Is it real?"

“Very real.”

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh!”

“Would you like to try it on?”

“Are you serious?”

“Well, it’s yours now. You can do whatever you want with it.”

“I want to wear it!”

“I’m sorry, she can’t,” said the nurse behind us. “She’s hooked up to an IV.”

But with a little pleading on my part, and a lot of begging on Beth Anne’s part, the nurse gave in, and a few minutes later, after some careful maneuvering, the jacket was on the little girl and the IV was back in place. Except the jacket looked more like a glittering robe on her, but I don’t think she cared much. She snuggled deeply in it, and ran her little hands over it for quite a while, all while making tiny, imperceptible little noises.

“That was awfully nice of you,” said the nurse.

“It’s the least I could do.”

She patted me on the shoulder and slipped around me and sat back in her chair. She closed her eyes and said, “Trust me, you could have done far less.”

I smiled, but she didn't see me smile. I looked back to Beth Ann, who was still caressing the sleeves.

"Elvis really wore this?" she asked, her little noises finally forming into words.

"Yes," I said.

"You swear?"

"I swear. It was, in fact, his favorite."

"But how do you know—?"

Beth Ann never finished her sentence. In fact, her words seemed to have gotten stuck somewhere in her throat. She looked up at me so sharply that her Elvis wig flopped over to one side. She ignored the wig and studied me carefully, and, for the second time in a matter of minutes, her mouth dropped open. This time it stayed open. It took the innocence of a child to see through me.

"Elvis?" she said.

I looked back at the nurse, but the nurse appeared to be asleep. I turned to Beth Ann and raised my finger to my lips. "Our secret, okay?"

She nodded, or tried to. Her eyes had somehow grown another inch or two in diameter. I don't think she had blinked in a long, long time.

“Would you like for me to sing to you?” I asked.

She nodded again, and now tears filled her eyes and spilled out. I picked up a nearby plastic chair, brought it over to the side of her bed, and sat next to her. I gently took her tiny hand in mine and cleared my throat. And then I sang to her quietly, my voice low and meant only for her. As I sang, my old voice broke often, especially when I looked into this little girl's eyes, this forgotten girl with no family or home, no parents or brothers or sisters. A sweet little angel who spent her own time cheering up other sick kids by dressing up as Elvis and singing to them. I squeezed her hand gently as I sang songs I hadn't sung in thirty years. Sometimes Beth Ann sang with me, and hers was the sweetest voice I had ever heard in my life. But then she would grow weak and stop and just watch me with her impossibly huge eyes and hold my hands and cry softly.

And when the nurse finally touched my shoulder and told me that Beth Ann needed to rest, I leaned down and kissed the little girl on her forehead.

“Will you be back?” she asked.

“Every day,” I said.

Except she didn't have another day. The next morning when I returned bearing more gifts—a pair of my original aviator glasses and a signed album cover—the same nurse who had sat with us looked up from the pediatric desk, shook her head sadly, and told me Beth Ann had passed in the night.

I heard later she had been buried in my jacket, and that most of the hospital staff had been there at her funeral.

Rest in peace, little darlin'.

And now, every Saturday evening, an old man who sounded remarkably like Elvis Presley, sang songs to the children at Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles, carrying on Beth Ann's tradition.

It was the least I could do.

Chapter Seven

Kelly was my on-again/off-again girlfriend. Mostly we were *off-again*, as we had some serious issues. Mostly they were trust issues. As in, she didn't trust me. As in, she felt I was holding something back. Ya

think? Presently, we were *on-again*.

"I have a confession," she said.

Don't we all, I thought.

I waited. We were in a small restaurant here in Echo Park, a one-time cop-shop called The Brite Spot—and it was a rather bright spot on a fairly bleak stretch of Sunset Blvd. We were sitting across from each other in an old-school booth with deeply padded vinyl cushions. Kelly, normally calm and confident, was looking increasingly nervous and agitated. She was drinking some freshly squeezed orange juice and couldn't decide whether to hold it or set it down. I was having decaf coffee, which I didn't have any problem holding. As I sipped, the steam from my coffee obscured Kelly's face into a sort of wavering, haunting mirage of a one-time beautiful actress who had taken the non-enhancement high road and let herself age gracefully. Now, too old to find steady work, she worked behind the scenes managing young talent. Well respected in the industry, I knew her to be fair and honest, a true bright spot of her own in this sometimes seedy business.

"I've hired a private investigator," she said

suddenly, blurting out the words.

I said nothing, although my heart rate immediately doubled the moment her words registered. I waited, viewing her from over the coffee mug, using it to hide my face. The Brite Spot didn't serve alcohol for reasons unknown. I hate that.

Kelly took a swig of her orange juice, knocking it back. Very unlady-like. I continued saying nothing. Continued hiding behind my mug until I could get control of my emotions.

"Yes, a private investigator," she said again, averting her eyes from mine. "I know how secretive you are and I knew this would upset you, but I don't care anymore, Aaron. For us to move forward—for our relationship to really move forward—I need some answers, and I'm not getting them from you."

I finally set down my steaming mug. A private investigator was digging into my past, perhaps even at this very moment. A past that needed to stay hidden. A past that needed to stay dead to the world. Blood pounded in my ears.

Kelly, unfortunately, was a one-woman gossip mill, unable to keep even the smallest of secrets to herself. Hell, half the rumors in Hollywood were

spread because of her. It was because of this that I could never fully trust her with my own secret. One of the reasons why we were mostly an off-again couple.

When I disappeared from the world, I knew dating and having a girlfriend would be risky. Secrets were spilled, and mistakes were made. Which was why I mostly hadn't dated, and why I lived alone. You can't divulge secrets when you're alone.

Of course, all that went out the window the day I met Kelly. It wasn't love at first site, granted, but the chemistry was right and the connection was real. But my inability to trust her with my innermost secret continued to sabotage our relationship. She knew I was holding back, and it was driving her crazy.

It was a quagmire, sure, but I did my best to navigate through it. And if it meant fibbing to her on occasion, well, that was just too bad. Too much was at stake.

"I see I've upset you," she said. Her fingers were moving rapidly, touching everything within reach. Currently, she was molesting a fork.

I reached out and took her wrists gently, calming her. Now was not a time to show anger—or even

panic—over what she had done. I had to diffuse the situation *now*. True, I had taken great pains to conceal my past, even from the most aggressive of private investigators; still, anyone could get lucky and stumble on something I had missed.

As an investigator myself, I knew that as a fact.

I said, “I should have been more up front with you, yes. But I’m very private by nature. I don’t mean to be. I’m sorry.”

“Jesus, Aaron, we’ve been dating for nearly three years and I feel I barely know you.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” I said. “I’ll work on it.”

“Then work on it now, dammit.”

“What would you like for me to do?”

“Tell me something I don’t know, Aaron. Hell, tell me anything.”

“Anything,” I said, thinking hard. I had a very detailed script that I used as an old standby. I recalled it now.

In that moment, two cops came in and sat in the booth behind Kelly, wearing the tighter uniforms of biker cops. Or, as I like to think of them, the cool cops.

“Where were you born?” she asked.

“California.” A lie.

She frowned, picked up a spoon. Set it down again. Twisted her napkin. Untwisted it.

“Yes, you’ve told me that. Aaron, my investigator tells me he can’t find any birth records in California. Or anywhere, for that matter. Can we talk about that?”

I had to give her something now or she would keep pushing, and keep pushing, and her investigator would keep investigating, and this could all blow up in my face.

Luckily, I had a little something prepared.

“I grew up poor, Kelly. I’m not proud of that; in fact, it’s damn embarrassing. I was schooled at home. I never went to high school or college. My father died when I was young and my mother was too sick to work.” I took a deep, shuddering my breath. “I dropped out of school at age thirteen and have been working ever since. Look, it’s a time of my life that I would just as soon forget.”

Hell of a performance, if I do say so myself. My voice had even cracked a little. Who said I couldn’t act?

Kelly opened her mouth to speak, but nothing

came out. The napkin in her hands had been twisted into shreds.

"But why no birth certificate? Why no military records, no real estate records, or marriage records, or even credit history earlier than a few decades ago. There's nothing."

I looked at her for some time. She held my gaze defiantly. In the past, I would have changed the subject. She knew that. But she was pushing this, and unless I gave her something to chew on, something that would really hold up, this woman could potentially cause my whole house of cards to come tumbling down.

"Kelly, I've done some bad things in my past. I was in trouble. I would have gone to jail...unless I gave up some names."

I kept my voice low and even. No one heard, no one cared, and no one knew what the hell we were talking about. The cops were talking quietly among themselves while keeping a casual eye on those around them. Kelly caught on to me immediately.

"So you gave up the names," she said, conspiratorially. She was loving this, perhaps too much.

“Yes.”

“And now you’re in the witness protection program.”

“Could you say that a little louder?”

“Sorry.”

The waiter came by, a very metrosexual-looking kid with rectangular glasses and mussed hair. He topped off my decaf, asked Kelly if she wanted more OJ. She shook her head sharply once; he got the hint and split.

She said, “Can I ask what you did that was so bad?”

“No, not yet,” I said, mostly because I didn’t know yet myself. “Let’s pace this a little, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, but I could see that she was humming with excitement, bursting with a need to spread this news. I felt bad for lying, but the bigger picture was far more important.

“This has to be our secret, okay?” I said.

She nodded slowly. Almost reluctantly. “It will be, I promise.”

“If you can keep this one secret, perhaps I will tell you more. But you have to prove to me that you can

keep this one."

"You sound like you're lecturing a little girl."

"Well, you are fifteen years my junior."

"Okay, fine," she said, sticking out her bottom lip.

"I can keep a secret."

"You need to call your investigator off, too."

"Okay, I will," she said.

We were silent. Three loud young men came into the restaurant, spotted the cops and quieted down immediately. Kelly reached out and took both my hands. Her palms were moist.

"I'm sorry, Aaron. I really am. I know this isn't easy for you."

I couldn't let her off the hook. I needed this issue to go away, and I needed to show her how much I was bothered by this. Perhaps then, in the future, she would think twice about pulling another stunt like this.

"No, it's not easy," I said. "Not to mention your private eye might very well jeopardize my life. Kelly, who I was in the past is dead. You have to let that go."

She nodded slowly, and then more vigorously. "I understand, and I'm sorry. I'll call him off tonight." She kept holding my hands, running her thumbs over my

thick fingers. "Maybe with this out in the open we can finally move forward. Do you want that?"

I looked up at this beautiful woman who had put up with me for the last few years. Sure, we had our ups and downs. Sure, the *downs* were mostly because of me and my secrets. But she had persevered. She loved me and did not want me for my wealth or fame or because I was the King. She wanted me for *me*, because I made her feel good. And that made me feel damn good, too.

"Yes," I said, squeezing her hand. "I want that."

Chapter Eight

Dr. Vivian Carter was a small woman with big glasses. She was also my therapist, and as I stepped into her office and eased down into her wingback chair for my weekly appointment, I could feel the weight of her considerable stare upon me now; a weight, no doubt, made more considerable due to her incredibly thick glasses.

A month ago, in one long rambling session, I

disclosed to Dr. Vivian my super-secret Elvis identity. I never intended to, but I found myself trusting her deeply, and since all my other problems were tied to this one big issue—this one epic issue—then I was going to have to come clean.

And so I did.

Now, of course, the good Dr. Vivian thought I was a nutcase. And why shouldn't she? Just another loony claiming to be Elvis. Still, *this* loony had given her evidence—*proof*—that I was, in fact, Elvis Presley. Whether or not she chose to believe the evidence was another matter.

Now we were in her office, located on the ground floor of her stately two-story bungalow-style home here in Echo Park. Dr. Vivian sat behind an executive desk that seemed entirely too massive for her small office. Had she been a male therapist, I would have suspected penis compensation issues. Being a female therapist, as it were, I was out of theories. The blinds behind her desk were partly open and the sun was pouring in. As I looked out the window, the small shadow of a small bird flitted by and alighted on a nearby skeletal tree branch. The bird twittered pleasantly. Seconds later, the

silhouette of a cat appeared on the window's ledge, creeping toward the bird.

Ah, the wheels of life keep on turning....

Dr. Vivian was forty-seven, petite, and quite the looker; that is, if you liked the nerdy type. And with her it was easy to like the nerdy type. Luckily, no pocket protector.

Admittedly, I had the hots for her. In a bad way, actually. Officially, she was a family and marriage counselor. Unofficially, she took a sort of holistic approach to people and their problems, which is what appealed to me in the first place. After all, I didn't want to know *why* I was messed up. I wanted to know the *greater purpose* behind why I was messed up.

"What would you like to talk about today?" Dr. Vivian asked, completely unaware of the cat stalking the bird directly behind her. And, no doubt, completely unaware that I had it bad for her.

"Let's talk about me for a change," I said.

She smiled but said nothing. Dr. Vivian didn't find me nearly as entertaining as I found myself.

"Actually," I said. "I would like to talk about who I

really am.”

“Who you really are?” she said, and I could hear the slight disapproval in her voice.

“Unfortunately, doctor, I still think I’m Elvis.”

She shifted in her chair and tapped the eraser end of her pencil against a poster-sized desk calendar spread over the surface of her voluminous desk. Numerous scribblings covered the desk calendar. Unfortunately, I was sitting too far away to read the scribblings, although I was admittedly curious. What did therapists scribble about, anyway?

“Fine, let’s talk about it. So what is it, exactly, that you want from me, Mr. King?”

“I want you to believe me.”

“To believe that you are Elvis Presley?”

“Yes.”

“Last week I had a patient tell me he was God.”

“Did he turn your Liquid Paper into wine?”

Again, she didn’t smile.

“You see my point,” she said.

“Yes. You deal with a lot of crazies.”

“We don’t use the term ‘crazy’ here. Delusional, perhaps.”

“You think I’m delusional?”

"My beliefs are not the issue here."

"I beg to differ," I said. "I need a therapist who believes me, who believes *in* me. A therapist who does not patronize me."

"You're asking a lot of me," she said.

"I think you're up to the challenge."

She studied me. "The easy diagnosis is that you suffer from a dissociative identity disorder."

"In English."

"You think you're someone else."

"Maybe I should have picked Brad Pitt, then."

"This isn't funny, Mr. King."

"Of course not," I said. "So what's your diagnosis?"

She took in some air, held it, tapped her pencil on the calendar some more, then looked me squarely in the eye. "You don't have a dissociative identity disorder."

"I don't?"

"No, Mr. Presley, you don't."

* * *

I stopped breathing. Had I heard her right?

A hint of a smile touched her lips, then spread to her entire face. As it did, a fabulous weight fell from

my shoulders and I nearly wept.

"You gave me proof the last time we met," she said. "I checked your proof. Everything checked out." She suddenly stood, leaned across her desk and held out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Elvis Presley. I'm Dr. Vivian Carter."

Too stunned to speak, I reached numbly across her desk and took her hand.

Chapter Nine

"You believe me then?" I asked.

She didn't immediately answer, nor did she release my hand. Instead, she stood there looking down at me, her eyes searching every square inch of my face. Beyond Dr. Vivian, framed nearly perfectly in the window, was the silhouette of the tomcat sitting motionless on the window ledge. The bird, clueless, went about its business energetically, hopping contentedly from branch to branch. Finally, the good doctor released my hand and sat back in her chair.

"I do, Mr. King, but this is highly irregular."

"Highly," I said.

"You have a lot of issues."

"More than you know," I said.

The lens of her considerable glasses caught some of the afternoon sun, nearly blinding me. From behind her desk, she carefully crossed one leg over the other, and from where I sat, I could see some of her exposed knee. Hubba hubba.

"So what made you finally believe me?" I asked.

"The list of names you provided. The plastic surgeon, in particular."

"You called him."

"I did."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing at first. Until I gave him the password. Cute."

"Well, we all have a little hound dog in us, doctor," I said. *Hound dog*, was, of course, the password. Dr. Castro, my plastic surgeon so many years ago and a wonderful friend, had been sworn to silence. Unless he was given the password. "So what did Dr. Castro tell you?"

"He described the surgery he performed on you."

Radical face-altering surgery. Nose job, chin implant, reshaping of the ears, mouth, eyes.” She paused, studied me again. “He did a wonderful job, you know. You look nothing like him—or you. You know what I mean.” Her face actually reddened.

“Yes,” I said, smiling. “I know what you mean.”

“But now I can see the similarities.”

“Lucky me.”

The clock on the wall behind me ticked loudly, filling the big room with its small noise. The bird hopped over to another branch, then to another, moving ever closer to the statuesque cat.

Dr. Vivian said, “Admittedly, I was slow to move forward, slow to believe. I mean, you have to understand my hesitation.”

“I understand.”

“But everything checked out. Everything. Especially the surgeon.”

I smiled. “And here you thought I was crazy.”

She smiled back at. “The verdict is still out, Mr. King. You did, after all, fake your own death.”

“You should try it sometime; it’s very liberating.”

She ignored that. “We’re going to have to start over with your sessions, you know.”

"I understand."

"Everything has changed. I mean, you went from being Aaron King to *Elvis fucking Presley*."

"Such language for a therapist."

"I think our once traditional doctor/patient relationship might have flown out the window."

Much like the bird. It suddenly darted off the branch, swooped down, then disappeared from view. The tom watched it go, flattening his ears, his wound-up energy dissipating in an instant. He flicked his tail once, then slinked off.

Dr. Vivian was studying me, completely unaware of the drama behind her. "You have issues with guilt," she said. "And now I see why. You abandoned your daughter."

"You get right to it," I said, shifting.

"You're paying me to help you, not gush over you."

"How much to gush over me?"

She ignored that. "You take painkillers to deal with your guilt."

"You're good," I said.

"You want to stop the pain."

"Yes," I said. "Very much so."

“Life is pain, Mr. King,” she said.

“I’m not sure I wanted to hear that.”

“Life wasn’t meant to be easy. At least, not at first.”

“Not at first?”

“Life is about living, and making mistakes. But more importantly, life is about learning from mistakes. With growth, mistakes are not repeated, and thus the path becomes smoother. You are stuck in a cycle of repeating your same mistakes.”

“So what do I do?” I asked.

“It’s time to learn from your mistakes, Aaron. It’s time to grow up.”

“I’m too old to grow up,” I said.

She smiled and might have gushed a little. “You’re never too old.”

Chapter Ten

Although not pink, I do drive an old Cadillac. Granted, it’s not the ideal vehicle for a part-time private investigator, but the windows are tinted and it’s roomy enough—both key ingredients to a

successful surveillance. And for picking up chicks.

I parked along a curb in front of a massive colonial home. Next to the curb was a sign that read: *Tow Away After 8 p.m.* I checked my watch. 2:33 PM. I liked my chances.

The home was near the Sunset Strip, just around the corner from a night club called the Key Club. Been there a few times myself to watch some of the local rock bands. You can take the man out of rock, but you can't take the rock out of the man. Sometimes on Monday nights, from the back of the club, nursing a beer, I watched the lead singer of Metal Skool entertain the frenzied young females with his gyrating hips. There was a time when I would have been arrested for such gyrations. He could thank me later.

The morning sky was overcast and threatened rain. Perhaps the sky would have felt more threatening if this hadn't been L.A. I've lived here for nearly thirty years and still can't get used to the perpetual sunshine. Granted, I liked the sunshine, and it had done wonders for my health, but I was still a sucker for some good old-fashioned gray skies.

The colonial house, complete with Corinthian pillars and alabaster lions, was massive and brooding. The front lawn was manicured to perfection.

As I approached the house, a deep-throated dog began barking. And with each step that I took, the dog's barking grew louder and more frequent. As if on cue. I looked around and didn't see any dog—nothing in the front windows, and nothing along the side of the house. *Maybe it's inside and can sense me. Or smell me.* Either way, it sounded big and vicious and I kept my eyes peeled.

As I crunched up the crushed seashell drive, apprehension crackled through me, and it had nothing to do with the dog. Indeed, it was an old fear born from years of living in hiding, or living on the run, so to speak. *Would this be the person who finally sees through my disguise, see beyond my reconstructed face, and sees the real me? Would this be the moment when my cover is finally blown?*

Crazy, I know, but the fear was real, and it lived within me.

The drastic plastic surgery was, of course, nearly foolproof. Nearly. Still, the apprehension persisted.

And so what if I was found out. Would that be so bad?

Probably not. After all, wouldn't I then be able to see my baby girl again? *And why should she want to see you? You faked your death, split, and left her behind.*

Could I make her understand my motives? Hell, did I even understand my motives? And what about the embarrassment of being discovered? Especially the embarrassment of being discovered living in near poverty?

Jesus, it would be off the charts.

Anxiety gripped me again, completely. My throat constricted. I paused there on the driveway and forced myself to take a deep breath. My chest expanded out against my red Hawaiian shirt. I continued breathing deeply, in and out. The faux dog continued barking a steady staccato. I sensed someone watching me through the big bay windows in the front.

In and out. Deep breaths. Better, better.

Heartbeat slowing. Another breath. Calmer. Good, good. *It's going to be all right, big guy. No one's seen through your disguise yet.*

But what about the package yesterday with the Elvis watch?

At the thought of the package, my heart rate picked up again. Blood pounded in my ears. I felt like turning around, going home, and crawling into bed with a six pack of Newcastle. Someone out there *knew*, and they were toying with me.

I hate when that happens.

I looked at the massive home in front of me. A stiff wind rustled my thinning hair. A girl was missing. A young starlet. She needed help. Her family needed help.

Could I be of help? Wasn't I just a washed-up old man?

Yes and no. I had been working as an investigator for many years now. I specialized in finding the missing. I had helped many, many people.

I'll deal with whoever sent the package later. Hell, it's not the first time I've dealt with a stalker. Granted, it's been a while; still, this will be no different. Okay, maybe a little different. There was a lot more on the line this time: My reputation. My identity. My everything.

*Deep breaths, big guy. It's going to be okay.
I was going to be okay.*

Breathing. Lungs expanding. Heart rate lowering. And the more I was able to control my breathing, the calmer I became.

The sun was shining. The dog was barking, and I was moving forward once again, with some degree of confidence. My disguise would hold and I would see about helping these people and their missing daughter.

I stepped onto the wide wooden veranda and knocked on the front door.

Showtime.

Chapter Eleven

The door opened almost immediately, and a tall woman holding a glass tumbler materialized in the doorway. She was wearing a terrycloth robe and pink slippers.

"You're late," she said.

"Sorry, ma'am."

"You're the investigator, I assume?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're awfully polite."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Where you from?" she asked.

"The South, ma'am,"

"Ah," she said, nodding, as if that explained everything.

She was standing in the doorway with her left arm tucked under her right. Her glass tumbler dangled from her right hand. Something clear was inside it, mixed with clinking ice. Lean bicep and tricep muscles rippled under her paper-thin skin. Veins undulated in places most women did not have veins. At least, not in my day. She was tanned beyond reason. Welcome to Hollywood. Somewhere in the massive edifice behind her I heard a vacuum cleaner running. Other than that, total silence. At least the dog had stopped barking.

She continued standing in the doorway. She wasn't sure about me and wasn't sure she wanted to hire me. I knew the drill. I was old. And, in her mind, no doubt too old to do the job. I was used to the drill,

and wasn't offended. Well, not that much, anyway.

"You don't really have a dog, do you?" I said.

"What an odd thing to say."

"Only odd if it's not true."

She studied me a moment longer. "It's motion-activated. A security measure installed by my paranoid husband—God rest his soul—a few years ago. It drives me ape shit. How did you know?"

"Because it was driving me ape shit, too."

She smiled. Ah, camaraderie. She was quite a beautiful woman, actually. About twenty years my junior. Her long, slender nose was red. Her cheeks were red. Everything on her face was red and swollen and puffy. Days of crying. Actually, she looked a little like me after days of drinking.

Still, she wasn't impressed enough to let me in. "Clarke said you find missing children," she said.

"I do my best," I said.

"Even adult missing children?"

"Yes," I said. "Even adult missing children."

"Do you have any of your own?"

"Yes."

"Then you know," she said. "Or, you can imagine...." her voice trailed off.

"Yes," I said. "I can imagine the hell you are going through."

"Will you help me find my daughter, Mr. King?"

"I will do everything in my power, ma'am. I promise you. No stone unturned and all that."

She looked at me some more...and a weak smile appeared. "Do I know you? You look familiar."

"I get that a lot. Most people say I remind them of their grandfathers."

"Yes, maybe that's probably it."

"May I come in, ma'am?"

"Please, call me Dana. And, yes, of course, where's my manners?"

She stepped aside and I was finally permitted entry. She closed the door behind me and I followed her through an ornate foyer and into a massive sitting room. Nice place. Back in the day, I could have lived quite well here, thank you very much.

"Would you like something to drink, Mr. King?"

"Coffee would be fine."

She showed me into the sitting room before stepping through an arched doorway and down a hallway. Her feet padded for a while along the polished wooden floor. Long hallway.

The sitting room was cozy. A central hearth dominated the room, surrounded by an elaborate wrought-iron grate in a creeping ivy design. With this being southern California in late March, there was, of course, no fire. But if there had been, it would have been damn cozy. I moved around the room, lightly touching the fine furniture as I went. I stopped in the far corner at an ornate, and slightly abused, Steinway piano. The keys were exposed and I pressed one or two, each sound sending a thrill straight through my soul. My God, I loved music. I believe it's the closest thing humans have to real magic, and I was happy to have contributed to it.

"My mother gave me that piano," Dana said. She was standing in the doorway, holding a silver tray of steaming mugs. "It's been in the family for nearly eighty years. I know it's an eyesore, but I still play it."

"Oh, really," I said, genuinely intrigued. "What can you play?"

"Anything, really. But mostly songs from the fifties and sixties, from my teens."

Do you know any Elvis? I wanted to ask, but didn't.

She set the tray down on the coffee table, then crossed over to the piano, where she sat on the bench. She motioned for me to sit next to her and I did. She absently pressed one or two keys. Somber notes. Our legs touched.

"Do you play an instrument, Aaron? I'm sorry, may I call you Aaron?"

"Yes, of course."

"Please, call me Dana."

"Yes. You said that."

"I'm sorry, I'm not thinking straight these days," she took in some air, doing her best at small talk, "You're from the South, you say?"

"Near there, yes."

"So you're a true Southern gentleman."

"I try."

"And do you play an instrument?"

"Yes, a little guitar." I said, then admitted to something I hadn't admitted to in nearly thirty years. "But mostly I used to sing."

"Oh, really? Where?"

Now my heart was really pounding, but, dammit, it felt good talking about singing again.

"You know, mostly church choir stuff."

"I bet you have a beautiful voice."

"*Had*. That was long ago."

"Perhaps you should take it up again," she said, pressing more keys. "You're never too old, you know."

I smiled. "Perhaps."

Chapter Twelve

We moved over to the couch, Where Dana told me more about her missing daughter, Miranda.

Mother and daughter were inseparable, closer than best friends. Miranda was a rising film star and had just wrapped shooting her fourth movie in New York, which should be out in time for summer. She had lived a charmed life up to this point.

"Do the police have any suspects?" I asked.

"None that I'm aware of. You'll have to ask them."

Dana picked up a metal picture frame and handed it to me. It was her daughter, and she was gorgeous. A spitting image of her mother, only younger and more vibrant. She instantly reminded

me of my own daughter.

“Describe the day she went missing,” I said to Dana with-out taking my eyes off the picture. “What were you doing?”

“I was home painting, which I do as a sort of hobby, although sometimes I sell them on eBay.”

I nodded politely. People ramble, especially under stress.

“Miranda was in and out all day, as usual. Tanning salon, shopping, grabbing some food. I was happy to see it, because she had been moping around here for the past few days prior to that. After-filming blues, I figured, as the movie had wrapped a month or so earlier and I think she was feeling lonely and out-of-touch. The last time I saw her—” Dana paused, sucking some air, willing herself forward, “The last time I saw her she had popped into my art studio upstairs and asked if I wanted anything from Trader Joe’s. I barely looked up. I told her no, and then she was gone. Outside, I heard her car start up and leave and I haven’t seen or heard from her since.”

I nodded sympathetically, looking away from the picture. “When did you suspect something was

wrong?"

"I called her two hours later. We almost always keep in close contact with each other, like an old married couple. But she didn't pick up. I tried again twenty minutes later, and then kept on trying until I thought the worst. I think I called the police sometime in the middle of the night."

I waited a few seconds as she gathered herself.

"That was six days ago," she said.

"And what happens when you call her cell phone now?" I asked.

"It goes straight to voicemail. Only now her voicemail is full—mostly with messages from me, sounding more and more hysterical, no doubt."

"Does Miranda have a boyfriend?"

"No, but she had been texting one of her co-stars in her new movie. They seemed to have hit it off rather well."

"Where does he live?"

"New York."

Dana looked like she was on something, and she probably was, and I didn't blame her one bit. Anything to get through this nightmare.

“How long have you been a private investigator?” she asked.

“Thirty years or so.”

“What did you do before?”

“Oh, I was in the entertainment industry.”

“My daughter’s in the entertainment industry.”

“I know,” I said, and thought: *So is mine.*

“You are older than the other detectives,” she said.

“I’m older than most.”

She grinned. “But maybe that’s a good thing, maybe you can bring your experience to this. Yes, I like that. Instead of worrying about your age, I can focus on your experience. Maybe your age will, in fact, be an asset.”

“Sure,” I said gently.

She was nodding vigorously, as if she had just discovered the key that could unlock this whole investigation: an older PI with years of experience behind him.

“Will you help me find her, Mr. King?”

“So I’m hired?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then, I will do everything in my power to bring

her home," I said.

Her emotions reversed on a dime. Now she sank in on herself. Literally. She instantly looked deflated and withered, like a plant without water. A mother without her daughter. She sat there on the couch looking at me, her chin pressing against her sternum, her head too heavy to support.

"I'd like to see her room now," I said.

Dana nodded and showed me the way up.

Chapter Thirteen

I followed her up a wide curving staircase, moving past a great expanse of wall which was covered in family portraits. Ever alert for clues, I studied closely as we ascended.

There was a wedding portrait of a younger version of Dana, looking beautiful and radiant and far too tan. She was hanging happily onto the arm of a dark-haired, bright-eyed young man dressed to the nines in a spiffy tux. I assumed this to be her deceased husband. More pictures of the newlyweds

and some family members no doubt long since departed, and then the upper half of the wall, as we continued up, was completely dominated by Miranda in various stages of growing up. There was Miranda missing a tooth, with eyes so big to seem almost unreal, and one of the cutest, roundest faces I'd ever seen. Destined to be a star. Miranda in the Girl Scouts. Miranda riding a horse. Miranda on a class field trip, already head and shoulders cuter than any of the other kids. Miranda in junior high and beginning to look like a young lady. Miranda in high school, but now the cute little girl was gone as she began blossoming into the striking woman she would soon become.

The pictures tapered off, and we presently reached the upstairs landing. Dana led me down a surprisingly narrow hallway, made even more narrow by the placement of bookshelves and small ornate tables. Expensive-looking vases filled with fresh flowers adorned the tables. Or rather, upon second glance, they had been fresh a few days ago. Now they were wilted. She stopped at the last door to the right.

"Here it is," she said. "Take as long as you need."

“Has anyone else been through this room?” I asked.

“Yes, the police.”

“And no one since?”

“No.”

She looked up at me some more, her eyes searching my face, and I saw the profound depth of her desperation and pain. She nodded for reasons known only to her, then turned and went back down the hallway and on down the stairs.

I let myself into Miranda’s bedroom.

Chapter Fourteen

Fresh air and warm sunshine poured in through the open bedroom window. The room itself was large and bright and cheery. No clothes were strewn across the floor, no jeans draped over the backs of sitting chairs. Nothing was knocked over or spilled. Someone had tidied the place up. I had known a few starlets in my day. Their rooms didn’t look like this.

The fresh air was also suffused with a combination of lotions, sprays, ointments and whatever else it took to look glamorous in Hollywood today.

Dominating the room was a four-poster bed with sheer gossamer curtains, pulled back and tied with red velvet ropes. The first thing I did was cross the room and heft the mattress. Nothing underneath. No revealing Polaroids. Not even a pea. I haphazardly poked the sheets back into place, and moved on.

Next was an antique vanity desk with a hand-carved ornate mirror and matching stool. A neat row of cut glass bottles lined the base of the mirror. I opened the vanity's three tiny drawers. The first two were empty, and the third contained an expired driver's license. I studied it. Younger, perhaps just out of high school, very pretty. I put it back, shaking my head.

Don't hate me because I'm beautiful.

I turned and scanned the room. Against the far wall was a closed door. Like a well-used deer trail through a thicket of forest, the polished wooden floor leading up to it was heavily worn and faded.

Miranda's closet, I presume.

I presumed correctly. Under the inadequate light of a single dusty bulb, a sea of tiny clothing stretched as far as the eye could see. Well, at least as far as these old eyes could see. In actuality, the closet itself was about the size of my bedroom at home—and smelled a whole lot nicer.

I went to work, methodically checking every pocket of every jeans, shirt, slacks, short, dress and things indescribable, at least indescribable to guys like me. I didn't find much. One partially open cough drop, a handful of change, a wadded up five-dollar bill and one bar receipt. I left the cough drops and money behind, but I put the receipt into a pocket of my own. Although I didn't step out of a magical wardrobe, I felt as if I were exiting a fantastical, Narnia-like world of sparkly tops, sparkly blue jeans and sparkly shoes.

Don't knock it. You used to sparkle, too.

Back in the bedroom, I next went to all paintings and pictures hanging on her bedroom walls, checking behind each, hoping for a clue, but finding none.

The final piece of untouched furniture was a cherry wood dresser in the far corner of the room.

The top was mostly covered with dozens of picture frames featuring Miranda and many of her friends. Miranda had beautiful friends. Like attracts like. In one of the picture frames—a Minnie Mouse picture frame, in fact—Miranda was smiling for the camera, showing her perfect teeth. Chin slightly dimpled. Light in her eyes. Cheekbones kissed by the gods. A nice picture, certainly, if not for the haunted look in her eyes.

The same look my daughter sometimes had.

I pocketed the small frame to keep for my files. No one would miss it. I next worked my way down through all the dresser drawers, rummaging through shorts and mittens and socks and tank tops and undergarments. I felt each of the socks, looking for anything hidden; nothing. The bottom drawer was empty save for a lacquered cigar box. I lifted it out and cleared a space on top of the shelf and set it down. I opened it. Inside was a ticking Minnie Mouse watch and dozens and dozens of love letters, many dating back to what would have been Miranda's high school years, which, if my math was correct, would have pre-dated text messaging.

I read through some of them since Miranda's

privacy had disappeared the moment *she* disappeared. Most of the letters were written by a kid named Flip. Yeah, *Flip*. Apparently he and Miranda had been an item back in the day. A clue? Maybe, maybe not. At any rate, I rummaged through the letters until I found one with the kid's last name on it. Flip Barowski. I confiscated it and a couple of others, tucking them behind the picture frame in my back pocket.

I was just putting the cigar box away in the bottom drawer when a voice spoke behind me.

"I can assure you, Mr. King, that you won't find Miranda in there."

Dana was standing in the doorway. I stood, perhaps a little too quickly. Immediately lightheaded, I steadied myself on the dresser.

"No, ma'am, I don't suppose I would."

"But you're very thorough, I'll give you that."

"You're paying me to be thorough."

She frowned at that, but said, "I have guests arriving soon, Mr. King. Will you be much longer?"

I scanned Miranda's bedroom a final time. The afternoon sun was angling down through the western

window. Dust motes caught some of the sunlight, flaring brilliant and then disappearing. Other than her love for clothing and maybe even Flip, nothing else stood out, nothing tell-tale.

I hate when that happens.

I turned back to Dana, who was watching me closely with bloodshot eyes. Her pain was real and her hurt was deep, but I couldn't help but wonder why she was hurrying me along.

"No," I said. "I'm done here."

She showed me down the hallway and down the stairs and then through the front door, which she shut quietly behind me. I stood there a moment on the front porch and sensed her presence just behind me. I think I heard her weeping, but I couldn't be sure since I had activated the faux dog alarm again.

I moved down the crushed shell drive, got in my car and drove around the block and parked further down the road with a clear view of Dana's big house. I waited an hour but no guests arrived.

Maybe they were late.

Kelly and I were in Best Buy looking at a lot of stuff I couldn't afford. I was hoping to get a new printer, but I wasn't liking the prices. Luckily, there was always Craigslist.

"I could buy you a new printer, you know," said Kelly, holding my hand. "We can call it an early birthday present."

"Thank you, but no thank you."

"You're a stubborn bastard."

"It's called being old-fashioned."

"But I make more money than you, and I want to help you. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, but that's where the old-fashioned part comes in."

"You can't let a woman buy you something that you need."

"Something like that," I said.

"The guy is supposed to be strong, the provider."

"You got it."

"Even when the provider hasn't done much providing, even for himself."

"Even then," I said.

"I think it's just silly pride," said Kelly.

"Silly pride is all I have left," I said.

We were now strolling through the TV section, admiring big screen TVs that looked wider than my apartment wall, and clearer than my windows. I should really clean my windows.

And that's when I heard it. One of my old songs. Hearing an old song of mine, anywhere, always had an effect on me. And what sort of effect depended on my mood. If I was feeling happy and at peace with the world, hearing one of my old songs always put a smile on my face and reminded me of the good ole days. If I was in a shitty mood, hearing one of my old songs was the absolute last thing I wanted to hear. And, apparently, this Elvis chap was everywhere, and so it was a rare day that I wasn't reminded of my past.

In this particular case, I was in a fairly lukewarm state of mind. Sure, Kelly and I had been snipping a little at each other, but it was all in good fun. And, sure, my finances weren't exactly where I wanted them to be, but I wasn't particularly stressed over it; at least, not at the present. The song, however, didn't appear to be coming from over the store's speakers,

and so I took Kelly's hand, searching for the source.

And what I found was highly unexpected.

I had heard of *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero*, of course. Any musician in the industry would have immediately taken note of popular video games that feature rock bands and rock songs.

Not too many things surprised me these days, but I was, admittedly, surprised to see this.

"Elvis Presley: Rock Band," said Kelly, picking up a box and examining the back of it. "Cute."

Three kids were crowded around the game, although only one seemed to be actually demoing it. By demoing, I mean he was using a plastic guitar and rapidly pressing various buttons built into the guitar's fretboard, all while a computer generated image of the King of Rock, Elvis Presley himself, sang "Jailhouse Rock" in front of a screaming, raucous crowd. On one side of the screen, multi-colored notes appeared and disappeared. I assumed the colors were associated with the colored buttons on the fretboard. No doubt the object of the game was to press the buttons in conjunction with the appearance of the musical notes, in a

simulation of playing a real guitar.

I found it fascinating, perhaps even more fascinating because the game featured *my music*. No doubt the royalties off this game alone would set me up for the rest of my life.

Dead men don't get royalties.

True enough, and dead men can't sue, either. Years ago, just prior to faking my death, I had set aside a small fortune to live off comfortably. That small fortune disappeared quickly, due in part to my own poor judgment and to outright theft by my money handlers. The money handlers hadn't been privy to my hoax and had promptly raided my account with news of my alleged death. With most of my money gone, I was soon forced to find real work; in particular, work that had *nothing* to do with the music industry. I answered an ad in the want-ads and soon ended up working for a local private investigator. The work was fun and challenging and I decided to keep at it. When the time came for me to get my P.I. license—and thus get fingerprinted—I had only mild concerns that the prints would come back belonging to one Elvis Aaron Presley, deceased. Back in 1977, when I had had my massive face-altering

plastic surgery, I also had the prints from all ten digits shuffled around. The procedure throws off most fingerprint databases and, luckily, it had thrown off the Department of Justice's database back in the early '80s, too. My ruse worked, and I was given my investigator's license.

Now, as I watched the kid rock out to one of my own songs, I could give a shit about all the royalties I was missing out on. All I wanted to do was play, too.

Kelly tugged on my arm to get us moving again, but I told her to hold on. She said fine and wandered off to look around.

When "Jailhouse Rock" came to an end, and the on-screen Elvis avatar bowed to the screaming crowd, the kid playing the game turned to one of his friends and said, "Beat that, bitch!"

The pull was too great. The chance to play one of my own songs and watch a computer generated image of me on-screen, was just too cool to pass up. I stepped forward, "Actually, do you mind if this old bitch has a try at it?"

One of the kids laughed, maybe at my joke, maybe at me. Or both. The one playing the game shrugged and handed me the fake guitar and even

showed me how to use it. He next started a new game for me, or a new song, and before I knew it, the computerized Elvis, circa 1968, was back on stage. Kelly, appearing like a groupie, was by my side again, shaking her head and grinning. "Why am I not surprised?" she said. "You always had a thing for Elvis."

"Maybe it's a man-crush," I said.

On the big screen in front of me, notes appeared and disappeared, traveling along a sort of blue highway and coming at me rapidly. I looked from the screen to my hand, and tried pressing the corresponding colored button.

"Too late," said the kid helping me. "You have to press them sooner, as soon as they appear."

I nodded, getting it. The other kid laughed again as I missed the next few notes, too. Hell, even the computerized crowd started booing.

"Just ignore them," said the first kid. "You'll get it."

He explained further: When the note reached the bottom of the screen, I was also to use the plastic strum bar, and for each successive note, strum again, using the music's beat and melody to help me gauge when to play.

Easy, right? No. The game, although simple enough, required ludicrously dexterous fingers. Perhaps too dexterous for my old hands, but I wanted to give it a shot.

After all, these were *my* songs, right?

After a few more seconds of failure, and laughing from the other kid, I eventually associated the colored buttons to my matching fingers. Playing the thing was all about rhythm and muscle memory, and luckily I had plenty of rhythm—and even some ancient muscle memory stored away in my old fingers. After all, I had played real guitars on real stages to these very songs.

The plastic guitar had a nice feel to it. I hadn't held a guitar in decades, but this was already bringing back old memories. Fond memories. Damn good memories, in fact.

"Hey, you're getting it," said the first kid.

"Not bad," said Kelly, nudging me with her elbow. "At least the crowd quit booing."

Now the song picked up in temp, and the notes and colors came at me faster and faster. My fingers, now fully warmed up, flew over the colored key pad. I

strummed when I was supposed to. I could almost—*almost*—imagine being back on stage and doing this for real.

More kids had come up to watch. The one who had been laughing wasn't laughing any more. My fingers, I knew, were a blur. My advantage was easy: I knew this song in my sleep. Hell, I knew the notes and chords in my sleep, too, even after all these years.

A couple of Best Buy workers came over as well, and now I heard people whispering behind me. I heard the first kid tell them that I had never played before. Someone else said, "No way."

Yes way, I thought.

I blocked them all out and finished the song in a flourish, strumming and pressing buttons so fast that I knew my fingers would be swollen and sore for days or weeks to come. And when the song was over, when the last button had been pressed, I realized I was gasping for breath and holding the guitar out in front of me as I had done countless times on stage. Sweat was on my brow; I might have been dancing, too, but I couldn't recall. I had been, as they say, in the zone and oblivious to those

around me.

When I opened my eyes and settled back on planet earth, the first kid who helped me was staring up at me in disbelief. Everyone, in fact, was staring at me. Even Kelly. Their faces ranged from humor to surprise.

I handed the guitar back to the kid, who was still staring me. "What?" I asked him.

"You were playing with your eyes closed," he said.

"Probably not a good thing, huh?"

"But you scored perfectly, hitting every note, without looking. It was incredible."

I grinned. "Sometimes you get lucky."

Chapter Sixteen

I was at a bar called Skippers in Hollywood, drinking Newcastle straight from the bottle and, thanks to a handful of Vicodins, working on one hell of a good buzz.

Booze and Vicodins. Don't try this at home, kids.

Normally, I take about five a day, but lately I've been noticing the effects were not the same. Not as strong. I felt good, sure, but not great, and sometimes the aches and pains came back sooner than anticipated.

Can't have that.

Nope.

Maybe I should start taking six or seven a day.

The idea appealed immensely. I reached inside my jacket pocket, found the bottle of Vicodins, popped the cap with my thumb, shook two more pills out and clicked the cap back on. All with one hand, a real pro at this stuff. Something I'm not necessarily proud of. Anyway, I knocked them back with a beer chaser.

Okay, so now we're officially up to seven a day.

Two weeks ago I had gone from four to five. Now it's five to seven.

I'm making bigger jumps.

Ten minutes later the prescription drugs were having the desired effect. Blessed numbness, followed by a stronger than normal buzz thanks to the beer. Suddenly, the stool I was sitting on didn't seem very stable. Maybe it was lopsided.

Funny, it wasn't lopsided when you first sat down.

No. It wasn't.

Seven Vicodins was a lot. Too many. And soon even that amount wouldn't be enough, would it? Soon I would be up to ten, fifteen, twenty. But you don't care, do you? Because you feel good now. You feel good and pain-free and life isn't so miserable because of the Vicodins.

Fuck the Vicodins.

Okay, I didn't mean that.

I drank some more beer and removed the framed photograph from my pocket. It was Miranda, of course, and she was staring back at me with a twinkle in her eye, a half-smile on her lips, her cheekbones high, her hair a flowing glossy wave of black. She was wearing an open-neck white blouse, and I saw behind the half smile. I saw an insecure little girl who still loved Minnie Mouse.

I took another drink and continued staring at the picture and thought of my own daughter again. And again.

And again....

"Is she your daughter?" asked the bartender. He was an older man with a thick mustache.

"Not quite," I said.

He grinned easily. "She's very beautiful," he said.

"Yes, she is."

At the back of the bar, near a small stage, there was some activity. I'm always on the lookout for stages. Call it a habit. Someone was setting up a karaoke machine.

Oh, goody.

The bartender moved away. I turned back to the picture, drank some more beer. Someone spoke into a microphone, testing it. Ten minutes later, someone else was singing something by Tom Petty. I liked Tom Petty. Ugly as sin, but I like him.

No one followed the Tom Petty act, and so the karaoke DJ filled the lull by singing "Love Me Tender" by Elvis Presley.

And butchered the hell out of it.

Disgusted, I set a twenty on the table and tried to stand but somehow tripped over the wobbly stool. I fell hard and loudly. The bartender was instantly by my side.

"Let me call you a cab, pal," he said, helping me

to my feet. "Or you can cool off over there." He pointed to some seats in front of the stage and motioned to the singer. "He sounds alright after a few beers."

I said something derogatory under my breath. Apparently, I wasn't a good judge of volume these days.

The bartender laughed. "Well, guy, if you think you can do better, why don't you give it a shot? Would probably clear your head a little."

"No...I can't," I said.

"Why not?"

"I don't sing anymore." The last time I sang was for little Beth Ann, but I was not yet in the habit of breaking out in song, especially when drunk.

"Anymore? So you used to?"

I hesitated. "Yes."

"C'mon. Let's sober you up." He took my arm and guided me through the mostly empty bar, and up onto the small karaoke stage. The DJ was still singing—and still butchering.

"Here's one for you, Rick," said the bartender.

Rick nodded and, still singing, found an extra microphone and tossed it over to me. Except I saw

three microphones. I swiped at the middle one, and missed. Someone in the crowd laughed. Rick, without missing a beat, picked it up and wrapped my hands securely around it. He smiled encouragingly. The small crowd clapped encouragingly. Hell, I was encouraged. But I was also nearly drunk.

I looked dumbly at the microphone. I hadn't held a microphone in years. Decades.

I swallowed hard.

"Love Me Tender" was still pumping through the speakers. Suddenly, I no longer cared that Rick had sounded bad.

I continued staring at the microphone. The crowd clapped louder. Rick nudged me, trying to catch my eye, but I couldn't tear my gaze away from the object in my hand.

The microphone.

The song continued playing. Rick continued butchering.

Rick gave up on me and moved to the opposite side of the stage, distancing himself from the drunk old man. He must have said something or gestured toward me, because there was a smattering of laughter.

Laughing at me.

I stared at the microphone.

The song ended and Rick put a gentle hand on my elbow and guided me off the stage and back to a booth. There I sat until I sobered, and while I sobered all I could think about was how perfect and natural the microphone had felt in my hand.

Chapter Seventeen

I was in Detective Colbert's office. We were both drinking Starbucks coffee from paper cups. The paper cups were wrapped with a thickish sort of brown sleeve.

"Here's a question for you, King," said Colbert. "Why don't these cups start with the cardboard sleeve, rather than slipping them on later?"

"As in built in?"

"Yeah, that's it, built in."

"Makes too much sense," I said.

He nodded. "Nothing much makes sense in that

place.”

“Nope.”

“How much did these two coffees cost you?” he asked.

“I bought a scone, too,” I said.

“What the fuck is a scone?”

“It’s Irish, I think, for stale bread.”

“So how much for two large coffees and a scone?”

“Twelve bucks,” I said. “And some change.”

“If you were trying to bribe me, King,” said Colbert. “Just give me the twelve bucks and change.”

“It’s illegal to bribe a cop.”

He held up his coffee. “What do you call this?”

“Damn expensive coffee.”

“Exactly. So what do you need, King? You don’t just show up here with coffee worth its weight in gold for nothing.”

“I’m working on the Miranda Scott case.”

Colbert was a small man with a thick neck. His fingers were short and blunt, which often made for the best fists. Those fingers were now laced around the coffee’s protective cardboard sleeve, safe from the heat within. He snorted.

“You’re the third private dick to come in here about this case, King. I happen to be a busy man, you know.”

“If you were any busier,” I said, “you would be a blur.”

He searched absently for the tiny hole in the lid, found it and sipped. “Fucking thing’s not even hot,” he said.

He pulled off the sleeve and tossed it in the wastebasket under his desk.

“Almost seems naked,” I said. “Without the sleeve.”

Colbert sat back and looked at me. “You come in here bribing me with cold coffee and insulting my investigative techniques.” He shook his head. “It’s a good thing I like you, King.”

“What’s not to like?”

“Your accent, for one. How long you fucking been in California?”

“Nearly thirty years.”

“And yet you still sound like you should be calling pigs.”

“It’s my Southern charm.”

He sipped some more coffee, turned in his chair

and looked out over Los Angeles. We were on the fifth floor of LAPD's downtown office. A chopper flew past the window, catching some of the bright afternoon sun. Colbert inhaled deeply. Not quite a sigh. He was too tough to sigh.

"We have nothing," he said. "And if we had something, that would be twice as much as we have now."

"Which is nothing."

"You got it."

"No leads?" I asked.

"Only one. A neighbor saw a white van parked along the street on the day she went missing."

"Plates?"

"Nope."

"Description of the driver?"

"Caucasian male. And that's it."

"No one approached him?" I asked.

"Nope; he was simply observed."

"And that's it?" I said.

"So far. We're following up with everyone she'd ever known. But no one can explain why she didn't come home from Trader Joe's or where she could be now. From all appearances, she's disappeared

off the face of the earth.”

“A random kidnapping?”

He shrugged. He still wasn't looking at me. Cops didn't like private investigators as a general rule. Which is why I played the kindly old man card and brought the coffee and tried not to trample on toes. I needed him, and I needed to know what stones had been turned.

“Maybe,” he said. “Hard to say. Maybe she just ran away.”

“She just finished filming a movie,” I said. “She presumably has a lot to live for. This is a very exciting time in her life. Why would she run away now?”

“Maybe she cracked under the pressure,” said Colbert.

“Being an actress is her life's dream.”

“So then maybe she's celebrating in Hawaii with her co-stars and didn't bother to tell dear old mom.”

“Except she tells her mother everything.”

“You think she's telling her mom about every guy she fools around with?”

“Doesn't everyone?”

He shook his head. "I still think she's out partying somewhere. Vegas maybe. She'll show up."

"Or not."

He studied me a moment. "You're here for the file," he said. He stretched his short legs under his desk and crossed his ankles. He didn't look like a man who was looking very hard for a missing girl. Maybe his instincts were right and mine were wrong.

"Well," I said. "Maybe just a peek."

"You promise to stay out of my hair?"

"I work on my own," I said. "I happen to be a helluva self-starter."

He thought about it, nodded. "You have a bit of a reputation for finding people. You could, of course, just be damn lucky."

"There's always that."

"Either way, we could use the help." He slid a manila file toward me. "Make a copy of this. Tell no one. Bosses don't like us giving away our real police work to private dicks."

"Sure thing."

"And King?"

"Yeah?"

"Anyone ever mention you sound like Elvis?"

I took the file and stood. "Once or twice."

Chapter Eighteen

It was after hours, and I was sitting in the Trader Joe's manager's office. By "office" I meant a raised platform at the front of the store. I think the openness of the manager's office was supposed to inspire a sense of trust and togetherness with the employees and customers. I thought it inspired a sense of opportunity for thieves. Then again, what did I know? I'm just a simple private dick.

The Trader Joe's store manager was a thin man with pale skin. Since there was absolutely nothing remarkable or distinguishing about him, I decided he needed a tattoo. Or a piercing. Something, anything to distinguish him. His name was Ernie.

"Look," Ernie was saying, "I'm sorry to sound rude, but I've been through this at least a dozen times now. I don't know what else to say that hasn't already been said before."

"I understand," I said. People like Ernie shut

doors. People like me opened them. That is, when I'm sober. "Does anyone from your staff remember seeing her?"

Behind me, the closed grocery store was a beehive of activity as employees swept and stocked and cleaned.

"Christ, have you ever been here during rush hour?" he asked.

"Like Pamplona," I said, "minus the bulls."

He didn't find me very funny. "I'm sorry, Mr. King, but no one remembers seeing her."

That wasn't entirely true. According to the police report, which I had committed to memory after many careful readings, a young employee working in the parking lot *had* reported seeing her. Ernie wasn't being entirely honest with me. I wondered why. Maybe he was just eager to tally up that day's receipts and go home. Maybe.

"Is Edward Rutherford here tonight?" I asked.

Ernie knew he was caught. "You know about Ed?" he asked.

"Yup," I said.

The store manager drummed his fingers on his desk. "Look, I just want this to go away. I've had

police investigators in and out of here for the past week, not to mention a handful of you private eye guys, or whatever it is you call yourselves.”

“I prefer investigative engineer.”

But he wasn't listening to me. “Anyway, it's been totally disruptive. I should be counting registers right now, but instead I'm dealing with this again.”

“It's very inconvenient,” I said, “when someone disappears.”

“Hell, yes, it's inconvenient.”

“It's probably less inconvenient than being kidnapped and murdered.”

“Nobody said anything about a murder.”

“No, not yet,” I said. “But it's looking more and more probable. And it happened on *your* store's property. Imagine how that's going to play out once word gets out. Talk about your PR problems, Ernie. You think investigators are harsh? Wait until *Access Hollywood* gets wind of this.”

The color drained from his face, and kept on draining until he was as white as snow. “We need to find her,” he finally said.

“I couldn't agree more,” I said.

“I’ll go get Edward.”

“Good idea.”

Chapter Nineteen

Edward was a lanky kid wearing badly faded jeans, a red Hawaiian shirt, and a dour expression. I introduced myself and told him why I was here. He shrugged; obviously, he was overjoyed. I asked if he could show me where he had seen Miranda on the evening of her disappearance. He shrugged again and nodded.

“Over here,” he said in a monotone. He led the way through the automatic front doors, which Ernie had left unlocked for us, and out across the mostly empty parking lot.

Trader Joe’s isn’t a big market, but it attracted big business. The small parking lot, which wrapped all the around to the rear of the store, was often packed to overflowing with vehicles, with many more squatting for a parking space to open up.

Edward led me past a long row of red plastic

shopping carts and hung a right, leading us to a section of parking lot located behind the store. Now behind the building, he pointed to the second to last parking spot, to an area that abutted a gently rising dirt hill.

“I saw her park here.”

I nodded. According to the police file, this was indeed where Miranda’s vehicle had been discovered. So far so good. Still, I wasn’t learning anything new.

I continued scanning the back lot. Three cars were presently parked back here, one of which was quite dusty and appeared abandoned. Opposite the parking lot was the store’s receiving docks. The docks were stacked with empty wooden pallets, with broken shopping carts parked haphazardly about. Two Dumpsters were packed to overflowing with straining trash bags and flattened cardboard boxes. A homeless woman was sleeping between the two Dumpsters. It looked kinda cozy, actually.

“What do you do here at Trader Joe’s?” I asked Edward.

He shrugged. “I’m a box boy.”

I detected a noticeable lack of pride in his voice.

"You bag groceries inside?" I asked.

"Yes."

"But you saw her park her car outside?"

"Yes. Sometimes we take turns collecting shopping carts."

"What time of day did she arrive?"

He thought about it. "I started work at four. This was sometime before my first break. Probably around six."

"Did you also see her leave?" I already knew the answer. According to the police report, Edward had stated he had not seen her leave.

But now he hesitated...and continued hesitating. He looked away and bit his lip. Ah. Something that *wasn't* in the police report, perhaps?

"Well, I was bagging groceries when she left. I might have seen her leave, but I'm not sure. You know, we're pretty busy at that time."

"So I've heard," I said. "But you did see her leave, didn't you, Edward?"

He didn't answer me. He was looking off somewhere in the near or far distance, hard to tell at night. He sucked in some air to speak, but remained silent.

"Look, you did nothing wrong," I said. "Most of the men in your store were probably checking her out. Nothing wrong with that. You're only human."

He nodded; we were silent some more, then he said, "Is this just between you and me?"

"I don't see anyone else around, except for that old lady sleeping between the Dumpsters, but I'm pretty sure she's high or drunk or waiting for her boyfriend Ernie to get off work."

Edward laughed, but he still wasn't talking.

"What do you know, Edward?" I pressed.

"It could be nothing," he finally said.

"*Could be* is more than what we have now."

"It's just a hunch," he said.

"I live and die by hunches."

"I didn't tell the police—" He paused.

"Because you didn't want them to know that you were secretly watching her."

He took another deep breath. Like pulling teeth, this one. Finally, he said, "There was a guy, a bum. He was watching her, too."

My pulse quickened. In the hills above, tree branches rustled in the breeze. Lights in the houses

twinkled, appearing and disappearing behind the shifting branches.

“How do you know he was a bum?”

“I’ve seen him outside before, begging for money.”

“Okay, so he was a bum. Lots of people were watching her, Edward, we established that.”

“I know.”

“Besides, you were busy and didn’t see her leave, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, “but when I looked up again, she was gone...and so was he. I’m pretty sure he followed her out.”

“Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath of my own. “Tell me about him.”

And so he did.

Chapter Twenty

“So why didn’t this Edward kid tell the police about the bum?” asked Kelly, my on-again/off-again girlfriend.

We were in my apartment cooking a late-night dinner together. I'm not much of a cook, granted, but I've developed a few specialties. One of them is spaghetti, which is what we were cooking now. At the moment, the spaghetti was boiling but the pasta was still hard and translucent and not very appetizing. Soon that would all change. Ah, the magic of spaghetti.

"And admit he was following her?" I asked. "Stalking her in his own way, however innocent it might have been? That could look bad."

"So why not make something up?" she asked.

"And lie to the police? Bad things happen when you lie to the police, especially if you're not very good at it."

"So why does he spill his guts to you?"

"I'm not the police. He felt comfortable around me. And, I believe, he was feeling guilty."

"Guilty?" she said.

"Guilty because the information he held back might have helped find her."

"So he tells you now after, what, almost a week?"

"Better late than never," I said.

"But the little shit might have waited too long."

Kelly was still dressed in a cream-colored power suit, having come straight from a meeting with some high-level executive types at Paramount Studios. She thought the suit made her look fat. I thought the suit made her look yummy. She didn't care what I thought. As she sipped from her wineglass, she left behind a very sexy lipstick smudge on the rim.

"So what will you do with this info?" she asked.

"Find the bum, talk to him."

"You think the bum did something to her?"

"I don't know," I said.

"And how will you find him? We are, after all, talking about a bum."

I grinned. "I'll figure something out. I am, after all, an ace detective."

"Or so you keep telling me."

I stirred the boiling spaghetti, which was softening and turning more opaque. Doing its own kind of magic.

Kendra the Wonder Kat was sitting on top of the refrigerator, watching the whole show below, her whiskers occasionally twitching, her glowing yellow eyes alert should I accidentally open a can of tuna and place it in front of her.

"Kendra worships you," said Kelly.

"She has to worship me," I said, adding a touch of salt. "I feed her."

Kelly was seated on a stool, elbows on the Formica breakfast counter, which, at the moment, was doubling as a bar counter. The bar counter sort of hovered over my kitchen sink, allowing her full view of my every move. Lucky girl. She was currently snacking on some leftover corn chips from Tito's Tacos and drinking from her third glass of white wine. Her eyes had that glazed look they get when she's nearly drunk.

"You're quite graceful, Aaron King, when you want to be. Are you sure you weren't a dancer in a past life?"

"I'm sure."

"How come we never go out dancing?"

"I'm too old to dance. I might break a hip or something."

She grinned and drank some more wine, then hummed a little song to herself. "Rubbernecking" by one Elvis Aaron Presley. One of my favorites. I stirred the spaghetti. It was looking more and more

whitish, and thus more and more appetizing.

"So what do you think happened to this girl?" asked Kelly.

"I think something very bad happened to this girl."

"Can you help her?"

"As best as I can."

"And your best...."

"Is pretty damn good," I finished.

"You're going to find her, aren't you?"

"Dead or alive," I said.

I poured the spaghetti into a colander, drained it, then dumped the steaming heap of noodles into a large plastic bowl. The spaghetti was white and plump and looked nothing like it had just a few minutes earlier.

"Like magic," I said. "Hard and turgid one minute, soft and supine the next."

"You do realize that we're talking about spaghetti here, right?"

"Yes."

"Seven-year-olds can make spaghetti."

"No," I said. "They can make *magic*."

Chapter Twenty-one

“Let’s talk about your deceased brother,” said Dr. Vivian.

“I never had a brother,” I said.

“But you did,” she said softly. “For nine months, in the womb, you had a twin brother.”

It was just past nine o’clock in the morning. The sunlight was shining through the partially open blinds. This time there was no cat and bird high drama. At least, not yet.

I said, “I see you’ve been doing your research.”

“As have you, Mr. King.”

“What do you mean?”

She sat back. “I specialize in twin research. You knew that, which is undoubtedly why you picked me to be your therapist.”

“I picked you because you’re cuter than sin.”

She ignored that. “Further, you probably know that I’m a twin myself. As were you.”

Indeed I was. For nine months, like she said. Suddenly I could barely speak. “But he was born dead,” I said.

“But he was alive with you in the womb. For nine months he was alive and you had yourself a twin brother.”

I found myself staring out the window, through the partially open blinds, at a gently swaying tree branch. I locked onto it, watching its every movement, absorbing its every detail. As I did so, I could hear my own heart beating, loudly and powerfully in my chest. And as I meditated on the branch and lost myself to its texture and movements, as I listened to my own heart beating steadily in my chest, I heard something else. Something not entirely unexpected.

After all, I had heard it before.

It was another heartbeat, a *tiny* heartbeat, and it rose up through the ages, up through the depths of my soul, up through my subconscious. Demanding to be heard.

And it wasn't my own.

It was the heartbeat of someone who had been very close to me. The heartbeat of someone who had been stolen away from me. The heartbeat of someone I had never had the pleasure to know.

Dr. Vivian was watching me. I could feel those big eyes of hers on me. But she said nothing, letting

me work through whatever issues her words had stirred within me. The branch outside the window waved gently, sometimes even scraping the exterior of the house, and even the window itself, creating a grating, high-pitched sound on par with fingernails on a chalkboard.

Dr. Vivian eased forward. "How do you feel about losing your twin brother, Mr. King?"

I sucked in some air and my eyes stung with a thin coat of salty tears. "I think it's a damn shame the little guy never met his ma," I said.

She was quiet, but the tree branch wasn't. For now, it continued grating, scraping, the sound of it filling the small office, momentarily blocking out the tiny heartbeats in my head.

I said, "I think it's a damn shame that while I was in the hospital with her, he was being buried on some hillside, left alone to rot in the cold and dirt and emptiness."

Dr. Vivian didn't move.

"I think it's a damn shame he never got to play with me, or laugh with me, or grow up with me, or...."

Words failed me. Tears blurred my vision.

“Or sing with you,” she finished, somehow reading my thoughts.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. “I think...I think I would have very much liked to sing with my older brother, Jessie. He was born first you know. He was my older brother, and I think he would have had a damn fine voice.”

“How much older was he?”

“Thirty minutes,” I said. “And they say he never took even a single breath.”

“Do you blame the doctors for not saving him?”

“The doctor was a good man. Knowing Jessie was probably lost, he was more concerned about saving me.”

“And what if you had been born first?” she asked quietly.

“Then it would have been me up there on that hill, ma’am,” I said. “And if my brother had a chance to live, he might have done things differently. He might have been a wonderful father and a wonderful husband, and he might not have ruined his life.”

“You feel guilty for living?”

“Hard not to,” I said.

“Because Jessie might have done things

differently?”

“No. Because Jessie might have done things *better*.”

Chapter Twenty-two

As a light rain pleasantly tapped my sliding glass door, with a cold beer in hand, I pressed the “Play” button on my DVD remote control and settled in to watch a movie called “Some *Don’t* Like it Hot”.

Catchy.

It was Miranda’s first movie, made back when she was eighteen-years-old, and fresh off the boat, so to speak. It was about a gang of bank robbers who disguise themselves as women, and end up kidnapping a female bank employee during their escape. The employee is, of course, Miranda, and those in the gang invariably vie for her affections, all while on the run from the law.

Two hours and a six-pack of beer later, I slipped in movie #2, called “The Shallows”. This one was a suspense thriller, and a little too violent for my tastes.

In it, Miranda plays a character kidnapped by a serial killer and forced to live in his basement, where she comes oh-so-close to escape, only to be killed after a botched police rescue.

Three shots of whiskey later and I was on to her third movie, and quickly losing my ability to grasp plots. This one seemed to be about a College frat party gone wrong. Or right, depending on how you looked at it. There were lots of breasts and farm animals and far too many hairy guys for my liking. Although she didn't have much to work with, Miranda played her part admirably, and in the end the nerd in the group somehow managed to win her affections by besting the jock in a game of poker. Been there, done that.

After six straight hours of mindless nonsense, I finally turned the TV off and staggered to the bathroom. Once done, I plopped down in front of my computer and spent the next two hours looking up everything I could find about Miranda Scott. In the end, after perusing hundreds of articles and dozens of unofficial websites, I was no closer to finding her than when I had started the evening.

But I was thorough, dammit.

Drunk, but thorough.

Chapter Twenty-three

It was noon and the day was warm and I was dressed in jeans and a Polo shirt and white sneakers. After a quick stop at the pet supply store for my shiny new crime-fighting tool, I parked my car in the Trader Joe's parking lot, next to the spot where Miranda's car had been found.

I sat in my old car, in the heat, and studied the scene. I knew Miranda's car was now in a police-impound yard, being thoroughly scoured for any forensic evidence. I wished them luck. She had come alone, and left by other means. I was confident her vehicle would turn up nothing, but you never knew. Then again her assailant, for all I knew, had leaned a hand on her hood or inadvertently lost a nose hair. We'll see.

According to the police file, it was unknown what she had purchased that day at Trader Joe's. Her

credit card showed no activity, so it was assumed she had paid with cash. Her cell phone records indicated nothing out of the ordinary, although she did place one call to a close female friend about an hour before her trip to the market. That friend, of course, had been thoroughly interviewed, and it turns out the conversation had only lasted three minutes. Just a quick hello call. Miranda's *last* hello call.

So where were the groceries? They hadn't been in or around her car. The car itself had been found locked and secured. Which means she took them with her, wherever she had gone.

Which means she never made it back to her car.

There was an exterior surveillance camera, which was only pointed at the front entrance, and which only Detective Colbert had been privy to. According to the detective, Miranda could be seen entering Trader Joe's through the automatic sliding doors. Nineteen minutes later she is seen leaving alone, exiting with a single bag of groceries. Ten seconds later, a man does indeed follow her out, a tall blond man who may or may not have been a bum. At any rate, the blond man had entered the store about five minutes *prior* to Miranda's arrival, and so the police

had dismissed him as a possible suspect, or even a person of interest.

But I knew otherwise. I knew the man was no doubt the same man, the bum, Ed had seen following her around the store, the same guy who had taken a keen interest in her *after* her arrival. He had followed her out, and what happened next I didn't know, except that she had apparently disappeared from the face of the earth.

True, I didn't know what happened to her, but I was figuring the bum probably did.

Trader Joe's, at the time of her disappearance, had been damn busy. At that hour cars would have been trawling the parking lot in search of a spot. Having shopped here often myself, I knew the feeling of desperation to find a spot. So, more than likely, she had not been hauled kicking and screaming into some unknown car. There would have been too many witnesses for such a brazen kidnapping.

So what does that mean?

"It means she knew the guy," I said to myself.

How do you know it's a guy?

"Call it a hunch."

No groceries in the car. No keys in the door. No

sign of a scuffle. No report of foul play, no report of a girl needing help, and no report of someone being abducted.

Which is why Detective Colbert figured she had split on her own accord, a twenty-two year old runaway.

It was a nice theory and it made his job easier.

But I had a different theory. Then again, my theory was a work in progress.

I stepped out of my car and shut the door behind me. Heat waves rose off the baking pavement. There was no reason to search the crime scene—if it was a crime scene—as it had been thoroughly scoured by the SID investigators; so far, no physical evidence of any type had turned up.

Trader Joe's was quiet at this early hour, an ideal time to shop. I strolled past the long line of grocery carts, crossed in front of the sliding doors, although I didn't go in, and kept going until I was standing on the sidewalk that ran in front of the store. In front of me was a street called Rowena Ave.

Now, if I were a bum, where would I go?

Across the street was another, bigger, grocery store. Although bigger, my impression of it was that

it wasn't as popular as the Trader Joe's. I continued scanning. There were three, yes *three*, video rentals stores all within a stone's throw of each other. Grocery stores and video stores, yes. Bums, no. The street, as far as I could tell, was presently bum-free, but that didn't mean they weren't here, somewhere. Hiding. Drinking. Bumming.

Silver Lake is comprised mostly of young Hollywood types. The assistant directors, the TV writers, the up-and-coming actors and film students. Young Hollywood aside, the area was not immune to its share of the housing impaired. Hey, if you're gonna go homeless somewhere, might as well do it in southern California, right? Sand, sunshine, and babes. And enough money floating around to keep you fat and happy forever.

The day was warming and the sun was hot on my face. Sweat was building up between my shoulder blades. Any movement at all would probably jiggle the sweat droplets free.

If I were a bum, where would I go?

My scanning eyes found a small, rundown convenience store about a half a block down the

street. The hand-painted sign out front read simply: "Liquor". Graffiti covered the wall facing me, and I had no doubt that graffiti covered the other walls, too. A thin black man was hunkered down near a payphone that I seriously doubted worked, and next to him was a full to overflowing shopping cart. Not surprisingly, the shopping cart *wasn't* full to overflowing with groceries.

If I was a bum, I suddenly knew where I would go. A bum-friendly liquor store.

Chapter Twenty-four

The liquor store was in shambles. Dirty floors, narrow aisles, messy shelves. If I owned the place I would be embarrassed. The man behind the counter, a very small, older Korean man, did not appear embarrassed. Instead, he appeared very interested in the newspaper he was reading. Sitting on a shelf behind him was a flickering, black and white, closed-circuit television. Framed within in it, I could see myself standing at the counter, sporting my striking

head of gray-brown hair, looking a little heavy. But you know what they say: the camera always adds ten pounds.

I continued standing at the counter and the little man continued reading his paper—and continued not bothering to look up. Probably because I hadn't set anything *on* the counter.

He calmly turned a page.

I cleared my throat. He turned another page. I grabbed a homemade peanut butter cookie wrapped in cellophane and pushed it across the counter. He looked at it. "Two dolla'," he said.

I noticed that the Aaron King standing in the closed-circuit TV screen was looking a bit exasperated. Handsome, granted, but exasperated. I didn't blame him one bit. Two dolla' for a peanut butter cookie was highway robbery. I opened my wallet.

"There's a bum who comes around here," I said.

The clerk turned back to his paper. "Bums always come 'round here."

"This one is tall and blond and sports a ponytail. He usually has a dog with him."

The dog, of course, was the gimmick. Probably

tripled the guy's handouts. The clerk looked up from his paper and looked at me for the first time. He grinned. "I think you need one more cookie. You a growing boy."

"Oh, brother," I said.

I slapped a twenty on the counter. He smiled widely and reached for it. "Sure," he said. "He come in here all the time. Buy single malt whiskey. The good stuff. That dog make him lots of money."

"He ever buy anything for the dog?"

"It look like I sell dog food?"

"Good point," I said. "When did you last see him?"

"One hour ago."

My pulse quickened. "Any idea where he went?"

"You think I know where every bum go?"

"Fine," I said. "Can you at least point me which direction he went?"

"One more cookie."

"Unbelievable."

I set a five dollar bill on the counter and he jerked his thumb left. I grabbed my three twenty-five dollar peanut-butter cookies, and left.

Chapter Twenty-five

I walked west along Rowena in the hot sun, squinting through my motorcycle cop sunglasses, eyes peeled for a bum and his dog.

If I were a bum with a freshly procured bottle of the good stuff, where would I take it? Well, I would want to drink it ASAP, of course, especially if I was an alcoholic. Also, I would want my privacy, especially if I was drinking the good stuff. No passing the bottle around a tent city.

So it would have to be close, and it would have to be cool, and it would have to be away from the cops. I paused, scanning the area. To the north was a high school. To the south were nicer two-story homes. Neither direction was bum friendly.

I continued west. I was close, I knew it. Somewhere nearby a bum was drinking. Safe from prying eyes. I turned left down an alley, between an auto body shop and a dry cleaners and came to a parking lot which was mostly empty of cars, and

definitely empty of bums. I retreated back to the sidewalk, stopped, scanned the street again, wiped sweat from my brow...and saw something promising.

At the far end of the street was a construction site, a half-finished shopping center, in fact. The place was empty and lifeless, surrounded by a pathetic-looking chain link fence that was doing more leaning than standing.

Very bum friendly.

An ounce or two of sweat later, I was there at the site, moving along the lean-to fence until I found a gap big enough for a guy my size to squeeze through. Once inside, I stepped over a loose smattering of two-by-fours, deftly avoided a jutting carpenter's nail, and headed over to the partially finished building.

Here, I pulled out my shiny new toy. Dog whistles are a bit of a mystery to man. Or, at least, a mystery to *this* man. You blow the damn thing, nothing comes out but a lot of hot air, and yet dogs perk right up. Makes you wonder what else they're hearing that we can't.

Anyway, with the sun high above and a small breeze working its way over the exposed dirt and

rock of the construction site, I lifted the narrow whistle to my lips and blew as hard as I could into it.

And heard nothing, of course, but before I was done blowing the reaction was immediate. Dogs from seemingly everywhere were barking at once. And furiously.

And through the cacophony of barks, which ranged from deep-throated woofs to high-pitched yipes, one particular bark stood out above the rest. It was deep and low and deliberate, and not nearly as energetic as some of the others. It was the bark of an old dog, and it was coming from directly inside the partially-finished shopping center next to me.

* * *

The building was framed, and some of the drywall was in place. I ducked under a low-hanging crossbeam and stepped into the cool shadows of the unfinished structure. The smell of sawdust was heavy in the air, along with something else. Urine.

It was also nearly pitch black. Damn. I had thought of the dog whistle, but I had missed the boat on a flashlight. Double damn. Still, who knew I would be crawling through a half-completed construction site?

Always come prepared, King.

As I made a mental note to buy a little flashlight to attach to my keyring, I waited for my eyes to adjust to the gloom, aided by the beams of sunlight slanting in through the many cracks and fissures in the incomplete structure. My own personal laser light show. Dust motes drifted in and out of the rays of light. In here, bustling L.A. seemed like a million miles away, or to have never existed. I was in a strange world of slanting light, crossbeams and unfinished cement slabs, with nothing to fill the heavy silence except my own labored breathing. Hell of a place to drink alone, if alone was your intent.

Finally my eyes adjusted—although *adjusted* might have been a bit too optimistic. *Less blind* was a little closer to the truth.

Anyway, I blew the whistle again, and again the nearby dogs barked excitedly, although not as many and not as vehemently. Except for one. Indeed, it barked deafeningly, and with a lot more energy than before, and would have raised the roof had there been a roof to raise. And it came from deeper within the structure.

Deeper was not necessarily better. Deeper

meant darker.

Great.

I moved cautiously through the increasingly deepening shadows, and the further I went, the more the dog barked. As I guided myself carefully over the debris-strewn floor by running my hand along the exposed wooden wall frames, I worried about splinters and nails and being mauled by a really big dog with really big teeth.

Lots of worrying going on here.

I turned a corner and there, sitting in a splash of sunlight on a patch of dirt-covered cement, was a man and his dog. The man sported a dirty blond ponytail, and the dog sported a lot of teeth and black gums and raised hackles. The man was currently turning his head this way and that, trying to get a look at me coming out of the shadows.

"You a friend?" he asked.

"Yes."

He nodded, patted his dog, who immediately calmed down, although it still growled intermittently. "Not sure what got into him. He never acts like this."

I decided not to mention the dog whistle. "Maybe

he doesn't like old men."

"Naw, Dusty likes everyone, unless you mean to do me harm."

"I'm just here to ask you some questions," I said.

"You with the police?"

"Nope."

He grinned and patted the cement slab next to him. "Then pull up a chair, my friend, and let's have a drink."

Chapter Twenty-six

There was, of course, no chair to pull up.

My eyes continued adjusting. We were in a corner space that I imagined would someday be the waiting room to a dentist's office, complete with outdated magazines, uncomfortable furnishings and broken toys for kids who ate way too much sugar.

"Hot out today," I said.

"But cool in here," he said.

"And dark."

He grinned. He seemed to like the dark part the

best, and I didn't blame him. A bum could disappear in here; at least, until construction started again. Milton looked bad, even for a bum. His sunken cheeks were dark hollows and his long blond hair was thinning badly. In fact, it appeared to be falling out in clumps. Yeah, maybe he was dying. He drank some more booze. The sound of it sloshing around inside the bottle was amplified inside this small, contained space.

"My name's Aaron," I said.

"Milton," he said, and took another long pull on his whiskey. "My name's Milton and I'm dying."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry that I'm dying, or sorry that my name's Milton?" He laughed and slapped his knee hard and a cloud dust exploded off it, drifting up in the slanting rays of sunlight.

"Milton's a fine name," I said, and stepped closer. As I did so, Dusty growled a little, but not very energetically. I took out a cookie and unwrapped it. Dusty quit growling and wagged his tail instead. Food talks.

"May I?" I asked Milton.

"Knock yourself out, man."

Dusty the Mutt had a lot of golden retriever in him. He also needed a bath, and no doubt all of his shots. I broke off a piece of the cookie and tossed it over to him, and Dusty promptly snatched it clean out of the air, even in the near darkness. He threw back his head like a whooping crane and swallowed the piece of cookie without so much as tasting it. For all he knew I could have tossed him my watch. Anyway, Dusty's alert, glowing eyes were back on me again, ready for some more cookie, or anything else I might throw at him. I decided to keep my watch.

"You need some money?" Milton asked suddenly, reaching into a pocket hidden within the many layers of his clothing. Amazingly, he pulled out a small wad of cash, counted out a few bills for me, and held them out. "We could all use a little extra money, friend. I had a good day today. Here, have some of it. Buy yourself something to eat."

I was oddly touched. "I'm okay, Milton, but thank you."

He held out the bills a few moments longer, then shrugged and absently shoved them back somewhere inside his voluminous clothing. I was fairly certain the wad never made it back into the

same pocket. Milton had already drank half his bottle. If he wasn't drunk now, he would be soon. If I wanted any answers, I'd better get them now.

"Have you ever shopped at Trader Joe's, Milton?" I asked.

He didn't answer at first. Instead, he took a long pull from the bottle, then held it out to me when he was finished. Tempted as I was, I declined. He shrugged and set it down on the concrete next to him. The sound of whiskey splashing back and forth echoed hollowly, sounding bigger than it really was in this small, unfinished room. Milton, I was certain, was getting drunker by the minute. I broke off another piece of cookie and tossed it over to Dusty. He missed it this time, but promptly plucked it off the ground.

"Milton, you ever shop at Trader's Joe's?" I asked again.

"Where?"

"Trader Joe's," I said patiently.

"I'm dying," he said.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I have cancer. I can feel it eating away right

here.” He touched underneath his left arm and my first thought was pancreatic cancer, but then again, what did I know?

“I’ll get you help,” I said.

“I don’t want help,” said Milton. “I want to die.”

Milton dropped his head forward and I saw clearly where his hair was falling out. I also saw scabs and various wounds. He had been beat up recently. Or had fallen. Or had contracted some disease or another. There was a time in my life when I could not do this, that I *would not* do this. Conversing with a bum in a forgotten construction site, exposed to germs and craziness and the unknown. But I was a different man back then. Different needs, different desires, different phobias. Now my desire was to do my job and to do it well—and to find Miranda and bring her back safely to her mother. Whatever it took, even if it meant being here now, in a forgotten construction site with a forgotten man, and a dog whose appetite would not be ignored.

I tossed him another chunk of cookie.

Milton and I were silent. He kept holding his side, wincing. The smell of urine was stronger in here. I

suspected the stench was coming from Milton himself.

"Milton," I said, then repeated his name louder before I got his attention. "Milton, when were you last in Trader Joe's?"

He started nodding. "When I saw the girl."

I sucked in some air that was also suffused with the smell of sawdust and dog breath. "Who was the girl?" I asked.

"Prettiest thing I ever did see. Made me want to live again."

"The girl's missing, Milton. Something bad happened to her. Something very bad."

Milton began shaking his head, and he kept on shaking it, and in the dim light of the unfinished room, I could see the urgency in his rheumy eyes. Dusty moved closer to him, nuzzling him.

"I didn't do anything to her," he said.

"Did you see what happened to her, Milton?"

He started clawing his neck. Maybe his cancer was there, too, eating away at his throat. "I didn't hurt her. She was too beautiful to hurt. I just wanted to look at her."

"So you followed her around the store?"

He nodded. "You woulda, too, my friend. So pretty. Long brown hair." He was getting drunker. Words slurring. I was losing him.

He started weeping, hard, and the moment he did, as if on cue, Dusty began howling with him, throwing back his head like a hound dog. I'm partial to hound dogs.

"I'm dying," he said again, blubbering, his words barely discernible.

"I'm sorry, Milton."

"I wanted to touch her so bad."

"Did you touch her?"

He shook his head once and cried even harder, and Dusty was howling and periodically licking his dirty tears. Jesus.

"Did you follow her outside, Milton?" He didn't hear me. I repeated the question.

"Yeah," he finally said.

My heart was hammering now. The empty room was suddenly stifling. I swallowed hard and wished I had brought a bottle of water. Hell, even his back-washed whiskey was looking pretty damn good about now.

"What happened outside?" I said, pushing,

keeping him focused.

He stopped crying on a dime and looked off to his side, eyes glazed and wet and distant. "He took her."

With his sudden silence, Dusty fell quiet as well, looking from me to him, as if for an explanation to what had just happened. I had none to give.

"Who took her, Milton?"

When he spoke again, he did so hollowly, his voice barely discernible. "A man. In a van." He laughed, or cried, at his own rhyme.

"What color was the van?"

"White."

"Who was driving the van, Milton?"

"A man," he said again. "Ugly as sin. Holes in his face."

"Holes?" I said. "Pock marks?"

"Yeah, those."

"Did she fight him?" I asked. "Did he force her into the van?"

"I don't know, man. When I came around the corner she was already in."

"Did she look scared, Milton?"

He shook his shaggy head. “I don’t know, man. I don’t know.”

I asked him more questions—all the questions I could think of—but Milton clearly had no clue where she was taken to, or why she had gotten in the van, or who the man was. And as he lapsed into an impenetrable, drunken stupor, I set the remaining cookies next to him, patted Dusty on the head, and left.

“I’m dying,” he said behind me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and kept walking.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The L.A. Philharmonic is in downtown Los Angeles, and is located in the now famous Walt Disney Concert Hall. The Disney Hall, itself a modern-day marvel of neo-expressionistic architecture, which basically means *weird*, has been featured in everything from *Iron Man* to the *Simpsons* and from commercials to popular podcasts. The structure, which looks a bit like an

ocean wave frozen in time and space, boasts laser-fitted stainless steel panels and sweeping, jutting walls that defy gravity and boggle the mind. Well, at least boggle *my* mind.

Anyway, I was heading over to it now for a concert, and I was running late, having lost all track of time while reading through Miranda's police file for the hundredth time, looking for anything that stood out, anything the police might have missed. So far, nothing stood out. At least not yet. Oh, and the freak summer rainstorm didn't help matters much. Five minutes of pouring rain that included two loud thunderclaps. Scared the shit out of my cat. Dogs in the neighborhood, spooked, had immediately started barking. As if on cue, the short downpour immediately bottled-necked Figueroa Avenue, proving once again that L.A. drivers have no clue how to drive in the rain.

Frustrated and ornery, I pulled into the adjoining parking lot, shelled out \$9 that I would never see again, and hurried up a steep side street. Steep, that is, to these old knees.

As you might imagine, the evening was cool and damp. I was dressed in jeans and a flannel, not the

attire of choice for the L.A. Philharmonic elite, but I happened to know its president, and I happened to know that the word was out that the L.A. Phil was actually encouraging casual attire to attract a wider audience.

Well, I was more than happy to oblige. I spent half my life in monkey suits. These days, flannel suited me just fine. Must be the country boy in me.

And there, standing near the glass entrance, dressed sharply in a wool coat with a fur collar, was my friend. A female friend. Her name was Grace, and she was also the aforementioned president of the L.A. Philharmonic, which means she courted the rich and famous for a living. Which means free tickets for me. She was young and in her early forties, blond and cute. She was also married to an ex-football player, and she thought of me, I think, as the grandfatherly type. I could handle that. I was indeed, after all, a grandpa. Anyway, I had helped her find her runaway son a few years back and ever since then I've been getting free tickets to the Phil. Admittedly, I usually *passed* on the free tickets, as the uppity scene just wasn't my style these days.

Also, chamber music blows hard. Granted, I'm a

fan of most music, and I do enjoy Bach and Mozart whenever I'm trapped in an elevator. But sitting through an entire concert of the stuff is truly a question of how fast will I hit the seat in front of me, snoring.

Spotting me, Grace stepped away from a small gathering of people, gave me a big hug, and a not-so-big peck on the cheek.

"You're late," she said, straightening the shoulders of my flannel and brushing lint off my shoulders. I was unaware of the lint. Grace was also neat freak. Me, not so much.

"And your point?" I asked.

"I suppose, if you had been early, that would have been the bigger news."

"Exactly."

She gave me my ticket and led the way inside. Grace seemed to know everyone. She stopped often, shook many hands, hugged those who were hug-worthy, and, in general, looked like she ran the joint, which she happened to do.

"So why tonight of all nights?" she asked as we boarded the escalator up. "You've turned down all

my other invitations.”

“I dig Indian folk music.”

“Bullshit,” she said.

“Well, someone has to.”

She laughed. “Well, Raffi is, in fact, world-famous.”

“With a name like that, how could he not be?”

She squeezed my arm, nearly snuggling against me. Flannel has that effect on women. She smelled of good perfume. Her skin was flawless. Her features were small and sharp, her eyes large and round and very blue.

“Not to mention, Raffi and I share the same birthday,” I added.

“So it was a sign,” she said. “You are big on signs.”

“Signs are important,” I said. “They mean something. It’s sort of like the universe speaking to you.”

“Or God,” she said.

I nodded. “Or God.”

We got off the escalator. She hurried me along a short tunnel where we joined a small throng of theater-goers. An usher was checking tickets, and

was about to check ours when he looked up at Grace, the boss of bosses. He swallowed hard, smiled, and stepped aside, letting us through.

“Hey, he didn’t check my stub,” I said.

Grace squeezed my hand and pulled me along through an archway and into grand concert hall. She led the way up a few rows and slid into what I knew were the management seats. Not quite in the middle, but close enough. People paid damned good money for the middle seats, after all.

Oh, and grand it was. Holy shit. The main hall was massive and elegant, and the dichotomy between the cold metallic exterior and the soft woods of the interior, with its curved balconies and railings, couldn’t have been more striking. And since the L.A. Phil was built with Disney money, that meant the place was also cursed to look cartoonish. Example: the suspended wooden ceiling was supposed to be a stylized ship’s hull, except that it looked more like something Jack Sparrow would have captained in *The Pirates of the Caribbean*. And the elegant organ behind the stage, although a magnificent piece of modern art with its soaring brass pipes, still looked like the world’s biggest bag

of French fries. Intentional or not, subliminal or not, I was now jonesing for some McDonald's.

"The real question," said Grace, once we were settled, "is how you *interpret* the signs."

"Are we still on this?" I asked.

"Yes. Now, you must have been troubled with something, Aaron, or perhaps you were faced with a decision. And, in the middle of all this indecision, here appears a rather famous Indian sitarist who shares your exact birthday. So here you are, hoping that God will continue to speak to you, continue to guide your way. And all you have to do is follow the signs."

"Are you quite done?" I asked.

"But am I right?"

"Maybe."

"What are you struggling with, Aaron King?" she asked me. She tightened her grip around my arm. She was always very touchy-feely.

I opened my mouth to speak but a small man sporting a long gray ponytail approached Grace, hugged her tightly, chatted a bit and then left again. She didn't bother to introduce me, nor did he seem particularly interested in me, anyway.

"Go on," she said. "What are you struggling with?"

I took a deep breath. Held it. Took another one. Held it. Plunged forward. "I'm thinking about getting back into music," I said.

"Ah," she said, smiling smugly. "Yes, of course, you were a singer back in the day. I think you mentioned that once or twice when you were shit-faced drunk. And when I asked you about it later, you were not pleased that I knew."

"Yeah, well, my singing was a long time ago."

"And, on the very day you were struggling with that decision, you get my email invitation from me about this concert."

"Everyone hates a know-it-all," I said.

"And, being the observant investigator that you are, you happened to see the similarities in birthdays, and considered it a sign from God," she said. "And now here you are."

"You talk a lot," I said. "Even for a broad."

She smiled some more at me. "So what did you mostly sing back in the day? Rock, country?"

"Indian folk," I said.

She looked at me some more. "You don't want to talk about it, do you?"

"No, not yet."

A true friend, she let it drop and gave me another forearm squeeze. I like squeezes.

As the house lights went down, the announcer politely asked in his pleasantly rich baritone to please refrain from taking any pictures and to please turn off all cell phones. And because he asked so nicely, I turned mine off and somehow refrained from taking any pictures, tempted as I was.

* * *

And by the end of the evening, after two hours of listening to traditional Indian folk music, I came to a decision about my own music.

Lord help me, I came to a decision.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The frames Dr. Vivian's glasses were wider than her head, making her narrow face even more narrow. I liked her narrow face. I liked her big

glasses. I liked her, in fact, a lot.

"I find you very attractive," I said. We were halfway through my latest session, and I was finding her particularly distracting today, especially her big blue eyes.

"Isn't that a little off-topic?" she said. As she spoke, she didn't move a muscle. If my compliment surprised her, made her feel good, creeped her out, etc., you wouldn't know it by looking at her.

"Your beauty is never off-topic."

"Charming, Mr. King. But my beauty, or alleged beauty, is not the issue here," she said. "Besides, you don't find me attractive, not really."

"I don't?"

"No, you don't."

I chewed on that. Light from her lamp, which sat at the far corner of her desk, was casting angular shadows across her angular face. Angular or not, I was certain I found her beautiful. I said as much.

"It's called *transference*," she said.

"Transference?"

"It's when the patient develops strong feelings for his therapist."

"This has happened to you before?" I asked.

“Often.”

“I see,” I said. “And it’s not because you’re pretty.”

She tilted her head. As she did so, her oversized glasses caught a lot of the lamplight and reflected it back at me tenfold, nearly blinding me. I exaggerate, of course, for emphasis.

She said, “On the streets, Mr. King—that is, in the real world—you wouldn’t look at me twice.”

“I wouldn’t?”

“No. Especially not you, one who has had his fair share of the most beautiful women in the world.”

“And you are not one of them?” I asked.

“Most certainly not,” she said.

“Am I permitted to disagree?”

She looked at me steadily, unmovingly. If she were breathing, I couldn’t tell. “Mr. King, you see a female sitting across from you, patiently listening to you, helping you, working with you, completely invested in you, viewing you without judgment or agenda. I represent all the people in your life who should love you but don’t.”

I took a deep breath. “You’re not helping.”

She sat back. “Mr. King, just know that I’m not

your type and will *never* be your type, and you are far too old for me, so just get it out of your head."

"Ouch."

"Tough love," she said.

"Ah," I said. "So you do love me, then?"

Despite herself, she grinned, and some of the lamplight caught her tiny front teeth. "Let's get back to the business at hand, Mr. King."

"So we're changing the subject."

"Yes, we are," she said.

"Fine," I said. "But don't you have some questions for me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You just discovered a few days ago that your patient really is Elvis Presley, and you haven't asked me a single thing."

"Because we're not here for me," she said.

"You have a lot of will power," I said.

"Mr. King, as remarkable as your story is, as interesting as you might be, as storied as your life was and is, I still have a job to do. You pay me to help you—not act like a star-struck teenager."

"Are you star struck?"

She looked me square in the eye, which was appropriate, since the frames of her glasses were mostly square. "Mr. King, I see you as a very troubled man. My job is to help you through your troubles."

"Good luck," I said.

"No," she said, "Good luck to you, sir."

"So I'm not in love with you?" I asked again.

"No, I'm sorry."

"Maybe a little?"

"I seriously doubt it."

"Ah, hell."

Chapter Twenty-nine

I was at a donut shop on Glendale Avenue with the good Detective Colbert. It was early in the morning and the sun was just out, and so were many of the bums, many of whom were actively panhandling the local intersections.

"Let me get this straight," said Colbert. "The bum sees her in a van?"

"Yes."

"The bum's a credible witness?"

"He's a drunk and he's dying. His words."

"But you believe him."

"I think so, yes."

"So the bum follows the girl around the store and then out into the parking lot, where some guy in a van picks her up."

"That about sums it up," I said.

"Being driven by a menacing-looking character," Colbert said.

"With pock marks."

"Pock marks are menacing," Colbert said.

"That's an unfortunate stereotype," I said.

The donut shop was surprisingly packed. Across the street, through the big glass window, on a sidewalk in front of the Vons grocery store, was a homeless tent city, comprised of a dozen or so shopping carts filled to the brim with Lord knows what, covered with cardboard and blankets. Actually, the structure seemed fairly solid. Hell, so solid it was almost incorrect to call those within *homeless*. One way or another, that was certainly a home, complete with rooms and hallways. The ultimate kid's fort.

"I assume our friend didn't take down the license

plate,” said Colbert.

“No.”

“Did he catch the color of the van?”

“White.”

“Make and model?”

I shook my head. “Only that it didn’t have any windows.”

“A cargo van?”

“Be my guess.”

“Great,” said Detective Colbert, “I’ll tell my men to be on the look-out for a white, windowless van driven by a sinister, pock-marked male, who may or may not have our damsel in distress held hostage in the back.”

“Don’t forget she appears to have gone willingly.”

He chewed on that. “So she knows the guy.”

“Be my guess.”

“So she agrees to go with him wherever he asks her to go, and gets in the van, groceries and all.”

“Must have been pretty important,” I said. “For her to get in the van and leave her car.”

He nodded.

I was working on a plain cake donut; Colbert was eating a ham and cheese croissant. I was of the

opinion that if you went into a donut shop, you ate donuts, not croissants. We were both drinking non-fat milk.

"How come you're eating a plain donut?" he asked me.

"Watching my weight."

"Why?" he asked.

"I'm auditioning today at the Pussycat."

"For what?"

"A singer."

"A singing detective?" He grinned at his own joke. "You any good?"

"We'll see," I said.

I finished my donut and sipped the non-fat milk from the carton. I had completely butchered the carton while opening it, and I was now drinking from a tattered hole. Colbert seemed to be enjoying his croissant. As he spoke to me, his eyes scanned the crowd inside the donut shop. That was a cop thing, aware of your surroundings at all times. I was aware, too, but I just didn't care as much.

"How do we know Milton the Bum didn't do her," said Colbert. "And bury her body at this construction

site?"

"We don't," I said.

"But you don't think so."

"I don't think so," I said.

"Your instincts as good as they say?" he asked.

"Sometimes better," I said.

"Okay," he said, "I'll tell my guys to keep looking for a mysterious white van, lot of good it'll do. You still working the case?"

"Yes."

"Good," he said, and stood. "I can use you. You're doing good work. What's your next step?"

"No idea," I said.

"Join the club."

Chapter Thirty

I was driving west along Hollywood Blvd. The gray skies from days past were long gone, to be replaced by something hot and mean and shining down from above. Since the Cadillac's air conditioner had broken sometime during the Carter

administration, I was driving with the windows down; hell, in this heat, I would have driven with the doors off, too, if I could.

The wind whipped my dyed hair, my shades were on, and I looked about as cool as cool gets. Maybe even cooler.

I knew Hollywood, and I knew it well, which is why I chose to finish out my days here. After all, I had made many movies here, with many fond memories. Bitter memories, as well, but fond nonetheless. Also, with all the whackos, I thought for sure I could disappear in Los Angeles, and for the most part I have.

I drove with the radio on and my elbow out the window. I preferred the golden oldies of the fifties and sixties. Go figure. At the moment my radio was tuned into K-Earth, and Chuck Berry was doing his groovy thing.

As I drove, I kept beat to the song by slapping the hot sheet metal of the door. I even sang a little, although I had long ago conditioned myself to *stop* singing, even when alone.

And as I sang, I discovered my upper lip curling at the corner. Okay, that had to *definitely* stop.

I passed Grauman's Chinese Theatre, and all the freaks were out. And so were the cartoon characters and impersonators. Spider-man was posing with an older Asian couple. The couple looked about as happy as could be. A Marilyn impersonator was blowing a passing car a kiss, and then she blew me a kiss, too. I winked at her. She winked back. It was a damn good impersonation.

And there, with his arms around an attractive young couple, mugging for the camera, was an Elvis impersonator. He was fat, and his thick sideburns were far too prominent. He was wearing aviator shades and my white rhinestone jumpsuit from the seventies.

Jesus, what the hell was I thinking back then?

I passed Grauman's and made a right and headed up the Sunset Strip. Now Johnny Cash was on the radio, and I had nothing but fond memories of the man and his wife, June.

Still early in the day, traffic on the strip was relatively light, although that would change with the onset of night. I passed the Whiskey A-Go-Go, the Comedy Club, the Rainbow Room, and there, situated between an adult bookshop and a Chinese

take-out place, was the Pussycat, owned by one of the original members of the Stray Cats.

The Pussycat Theater, which catered to a thirty-five and older crowd, was having auditions today for a new lounge singer. *Elvis Presley, lounge singer extraordinaire.*

I parked the Cadillac along a side street, turned the engine off, and sat in the driver's seat for a few minutes, sweating and thinking. I asked myself again if I wanted to do this. If I really, truly wanted to do this.

I was pretty sure I did. Actually, I was damn sure. In fact, sitting here in my hot car, surrounded by beautiful homes and the world-famous clubs of the Sunset Strip, I was having a hard time remembering why I wanted out in the first place.

A decision I had made a long, long time ago.

I drummed my fingers on the hot steering wheel, which was growing hotter by the minute. Sweat beaded my brow. I used to get so damn hot on stage, sweat pouring from my body. But I loved the stage. I worked hard to entertain. No one could ever take that from me.

Yes, I very much wanted to sing again, but wasn't

the risk of getting caught too great?

One problem was that my singing voice is fairly distinctive. Perhaps *too* distinctive. But wouldn't it have changed over time? My speaking voice had certainly changed over time into something far more rumbling and grittier.

Cars whipped past me, followed by a lot of hot billowing wind and spraying bits of sand and debris. Someone opened the door to the Pussycat across the street and live music thundered out, which made sense since they were in the middle of auditions.

Perhaps if I stayed away from my own songs, and sang something very *un*Elvis, and, for the love of all that which is holy, didn't curl my upper lip, well, I might just get away with this.

And if you don't?

I guess I'll just cross that bridge when I get there.

That's a helluva bridge.

I continued drumming my fingers. Sweat continued rolling from my brow. I closed my eyes and saw the crowd and tears and smiles. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and slid off the hot leather seat, and then headed across the street to the Pussycat.

I had an audition. *Elvis* had an audition.
Go figure.

Chapter Thirty-one

The nightclub was small and gloomy. A young man was currently on stage, singing loudly in front of a group of people. His voice, at least to my ears, was unpleasantly loud.

I headed straight to the bar and ordered a Newcastle on tap. The young bartender nodded, poured me one, set it in front of me. I immediately knocked most of it back. The bartender watched me, raising his eyebrows. I was damned thirsty; not to mention I needed to be liquored-up asap.

The bartender leaned a hip on the counter and went back to watching the auditions. So did I. The first singer, who had pitch problems, mercifully finished and was promptly thanked. He exited the stage as another singer walked on. I couldn't help but notice he was also in his forties.

You're going to be the oldest one.

I drank more. Standing in a pool of yellow light, this next singer sang something by Frank Sinatra. Or maybe Tony Bennett. Hell, I couldn't remember. I was finding it hard to concentrate. To breathe.

Huddled together on the dance floor, scribbling on clipboards, were a half dozen people. A tall man wearing blue shades wasn't scribbling. Instead, he was standing there with his arms crossed and looking formidable.

"Okay," he said, cutting off the singer in mid-croon. "Thank you, we've heard enough. We'll give you a call."

The man in the blue shades didn't sound like he would ever be giving him a call. It was a brush-off, a polite goodbye. And the singer wasn't that bad, either. Granted, he wasn't great, but he was certainly good enough to warrant finishing the song.

Suddenly, I was losing my nerve. I downed my beer, ordered another, drank it right there in front of the bartender, who was grinning at me.

"You must be here for the audition?" he said.

"How can you tell?"

He grinned some more. "Nervous?"

"As hell."

He laughed. "Bill can be a real asshole," he said, "but don't let him get to you. If you can sing, he'll be your best friend."

"Good to know. He the one with the cool blue shades?"

"Yeah, that's him, but I don't know about cool. You can sing, right?"

"We'll find out."

I sat through three more auditions, all male. Most had very pleasant voices. All were clearly professionals and all were about thirty years younger than yours truly.

"You don't think I'm too old, do you?" I asked the bartender.

He sized me up. The kid was handsome, and that grin of his probably had gotten him everything he wanted in life and more. I knew the feeling well.

"Naw, but to be safe, knock a few years off your age. No harm, no foul, right? Everyone does it. Remember that it's all about the singing. Oh, and the performing."

"Performing?"

"You know..." He jerked his hips a little. "Like

Elvis. Bill loves Elvis.”

Oh, shit.

I nearly ordered another beer, but refrained. I performed better sober. As it stood now, I was already a little buzzed.

When the last singer stepped off the stage, Bill the Manager flipped up his cool blue shades and looked around. His slicked-back hair reflected some of the overhead lights.

“That it?” he asked no one in particular. He didn’t sound happy.

I said nothing and stayed rooted to the stool, my heart somewhere in my throat. I tried to give myself some positive self-talk, but my thoughts were scrambled and incoherent and I only knew one thing: *fear*. I couldn’t get myself to move. My chance was slipping away....

“Okay, then—” Bill began, but never finished.

Why? Because the good-looking kid behind the bar suddenly leaned across said bar and shouted loudly: “Hey, Bill. We’ve got another one back here.”

I didn’t know whether to hug the kid or run.

“Then get the fuck out here,” said Bill the Manager, flipping his shades back down. “Haven’t

got all fucking day.”

Great, you've already pissed him off.

I downed the last of my beer, jumped off the stool, and promptly ran headlong into another stool. It went flying—and I nearly went flying, too. Luckily, I fell over onto a table. Yeah, luckily. Someone laughed. I heard Bill mumble “Jesus Christ”, and all I wanted to do was run for the door and get the hell out of Dodge. Or, in this case, the Pussycat.

But the bartender was there in an instant, taking my elbow, helping me to my feet, dusting me off. “It’s okay, man,” he said to me quietly. “Calm down. You’ll be okay. I’m rooting for you.”

I smiled at him weakly. He straightened my collar, winked, and guided me through the maze of chairs and stools. Buzzed, discombobulated, and now in pain, I found myself moving numbly forward toward the stage and lights.

The Pussycat, which was a fairly small nightclub, suddenly seemed expansive and endless, and the stage itself seemed to recede exponentially with each step I took.

Suddenly Bill materialized before me, looming, easily two inches taller than me. “Wait,” he said. His

eyes, though mostly hidden behind the aforementioned blue shades, appeared to be searching my face. "What's your name?"

"Aaron King," I said. My mouth felt dry, even though I had just pounded a few beers.

He continued standing directly in front of me. Those behind him ignored me completely, their heads huddled together, referring to a master list. Already they were scratching off names.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Fifty, um, five."

Surprisingly, he grinned. "Sure you are. Can you sing?"

"We'll see."

"Fine. What will you be singing?"

"Ring of Fire," I said.

"Johnny Cash."

"Yup," I said.

"I love 'Ring of Fire,'" he said.

"Then you're not so bad," I said, "after all."

He stared at me some more, then shook his head and chuckled and asked a young girl sitting at a piano if she knew the song, and she said, "Hell, yeah." She sounded offended.

His blue shades settled back on me. "You're on," he said. "Don't suck."

And with those encouraging words ringing in my ears, I stepped up onto the stage, the first real stage I had been on in nearly thirty years. The wood creaked with each footfall. Stages always creak; I love that about them. Soon I stood front and center, blinking hard into the lights.

There were six of them beneath me, huddled together on the dance floor, ready to pass judgment. Beyond the dance floor, in the murky depths of the bar area, the young bartender was leaning a hip against the counter, a towel slung over his shoulder, arms crossed, watching me. He caught my eye and nodded, smiling.

Calmness radiated from the kid, a sort of infectious tranquility. So I focused on him, focused on his grin. I needed support, I needed faith, and he was the only one presently giving it to me.

God bless him.

My heart pounded.

Too hard, too fast.

The stage was semicircular. It was rutted and

scraped and stained from years of amps and speakers and drums being hauled across it, from boots scraping it, from beer bottles slamming down on it.

In front of me was a single microphone stand, glowing in the single spotlight. I stepped slowly up to it. Bill checked his watch.

I clicked my fingers in front of the microphone, an old habit. The sound was good. I looked over to the young pianist. She was looking at me from over her shoulder, waiting for my cue, eager to get this show on the road. I nodded.

The music started. A simple song, really, but nearly impossible to sing right. So many have tried and so many have failed. Johnny Cash, my one-time friend, was a tough act to follow. And I should know. I followed him often enough.

And as the music started, and as I gripped the microphone in front me and looked out across the empty tables and booths and focused on that single, handsome face smilingly encouragingly at me from behind the bar, as the first words of the song rolled smoothly and easily off my tongue, and as my hips moved instinctively to the music, something amazing

happened.

I had come home, and it was as if I had never left.

Chapter Thirty-two

The music stopped and I let my voice trail off. My snapping fingers dropped to my side, and my tapping foot slowed, then stopped. There were tears in my eyes and joy in my heart. Whether or not I got the gig, I didn't care. I needed to do this. Bad.

Somebody was clapping. It was my friend from across the room, the bartender. He stopped long enough to give me a thumbs-up sign, then clapped some more.

Bill the manager was staring at me, his mouth slightly open. Well, at least I think he was staring at me. Hard to tell with those stupid shades. I was still coming down from my high and so I continued standing there on stage, in the spotlight, soaking it all in.

Now this is a high I can get used to.

Bill started nodding and he kept on nodding as

he made his way to the others. He joined the group and everyone seemed to be talking at once.

As they did so, I closed my eyes and relived the moment—and it had been a helluva moment. At least for me nowadays. And as I relived this moment, the other moments flood back, too. The bigger moments. The grander moments. The crowds. The churning sea of smiling faces. God, I used to put so many smiles on so many faces. I could bring joy to others with my voice. I had forgotten about that. There's value to bringing joy to others. Immense value.

Bill finally stepped away from the others and came over to me. He stood below me on the dance, pushed his sunglasses up onto his forehead. The upper bridge of his nose was pinched and red where the rubber stabilizers had sat for God knows how long.

"Fucking incredible," he said.

"Thank you," I said. *Thank you. Thank you ver' much....*

"You're a little older than what we're looking for."

"I understand." My voice sounded distant and not quite my own. Only then did I notice the sweat

pouring down my face.

"But we want to give you a shot. *I* want to give you a shot. Hell, I could listen to that—to *you*—all day and night. My God, King, you can sing."

"So I don't suck."

He smiled. "No, you don't. And you can move, too, for an old-timer."

"Go figure," I said.

"You'll have to show me that move sometime."

"Sure," I said. "After you pay me."

He laughed, and flicked down his shades again. Mr. Cool was back. "Can you be here Monday nights, starting next Monday at nine p.m.?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Good; see you then."

And as he turned away, I said, "And Bill?"

He looked back. "Yeah, King?"

"What's with the stupid blue sunglasses?"

He looked at me some more. I suspected he had once been a bouncer back in the day, before rising up to nightclub manager. "It's a good thing that you can sing lights out."

"Yeah, good thing."

He left and joined the others, and I walked slowly off the stage. Floating really. At the bar, the good-looking kid stepped around the counter, and slapped me heartily on the shoulder. I nearly fell over.

"You killed out there!" he said. I think he wanted to hug me but somehow refrained. Hell, I could have used a hug.

"Everyone gets lucky," I said.

"Then you must be the luckiest person on earth!"

"Yeah," I said. "I've been told that."

"Want a drink?"

"More than you know."

Chapter Thirty-three

It was late, and the street was dark. I was sitting in my Cadillac with the engine off. Two houses down was a small house that wasn't so dark. In fact, the lights were on in just about every room. With my windows rolled down, I could just make some music issuing from the house.

It was 1:22 a.m.

I was flying high on Vicodin. I should have felt euphoric. Instead, as I watched the cheerfully-lit house in front of me, I felt numb and melancholy. In the big curtained front window, two figures would appear sometimes, dancing slowly, arm in arm, sometimes cheek to cheek.

Between my legs was a warm Sam Adams. I took a sip of it now and felt my melancholy deepen and take on a life of its own. A living, dark thing that dwelled inside me, like a parasite of the soul.

I had been following her for the past two weeks. Yes, she would hate me if she knew I had been following her. Well, what did you expect? I followed people for a living? What made her different?

You're supposed to trust her.

They usually ended up here, at this small house, followed by a lot of talking. And laughter. Then the music and dancing, their silhouetted faces sometimes pressed against each other in an intimate embrace.

I drank more warm beer. I wished I had brought more Vicodin. The pain in my heart was intense. Almost too intense.

Vicodin doesn't help heartache.

After being separated for nearly six months, Kelly and I had only recently gotten back together. I knew she had been dating while we were off-again, and I suspected this guy was a holdover from that. Perhaps she didn't have the heart to let him go. Maybe she loved us both. Maybe she didn't give a fuck about my feelings. Or his feelings.

Fuck his feelings.

Kelly had said we had trust issues.

No kidding.

Now I watched as the man I both loathed and was curious about dipped Kelly romantically in front of the big window. I had, of course, looked into his background. I knew he lived modestly here in this small, suburban, three-bedroom home. No kids, never married. Twenty years my junior.

There was the rub.

Twenty years my junior.

You're an old man, King.

They stopped dancing and stood silhouetted in the window and kissed deeply. I took another swig from my warm beer.

Get a room.

Still kissing, still holding each other close, they

fumbled away from the window and the living room lights went out. A few seconds later, a muted half-glow flickered from somewhere near the back of the house. Candlelight. The music was still playing, drifting across the quiet street.

I started my car and left, tossing the empty beer bottle onto my girlfriend's boyfriend's front lawn.

Chapter Thirty-four

I was in Dr. Vivian's office on an overcast morning. The window behind her was gray. The office, despite being cheerfully lit, felt gray. Perhaps my mood was gray, too.

"Is your twin single?" I asked.

"That's not an appropriate question, Mr. King."

"I shouldn't even be alive, so what the hell do I care about appropriateness?"

"Because you're not a buffoon."

"Is that a clinical term?"

Dr. Vivian smiled and shook her head. "Fine.

She's happily married with four kids."

"And you?" I asked.

"That's a *very* inappropriate question, Mr. King."

"Just expressing my inner buffoonery."

She shook her head; she might have sighed, too.

"No, Mr. King, I'm not married."

"Are you dating anyone?"

I noticed Dr. Vivian's cheekbones caught some of the desk lamp light. Her hair glowed softly. All of it framed against the gray, curtained window behind her. She pursed her lips, looking at me somewhat sternly.

"I know, I know," I said, "*highly* inappropriate."

"Thank you."

"Well?"

She suddenly laughed, and the unexpected, high-pitched sound of it surprised the hell out of me. "Any other patient," she said, "and I would have put an end to this line of questioning long ago."

"But I'm not any other patient?"

"No," she said. "You're not."

"And why is that?"

"Because you're Elvis-fucking-Presley."

"I haven't been him for thirty years."

“Fine,” she said. “You *were* Elvis-fucking-Presley. That weighs heavily on my mind.”

“I’ve forgotten what it’s like to have his influence over other people.”

“It’s powerful,” she said.

“Too powerful for you to resist?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m doing things with you that I swore I would never do with patients. You’re affecting my judgment.”

“I don’t want your judgment affected,” I said, although I wasn’t sure I meant it.

She was silent for a long moment. “I’m not sure that’s possible now.”

“Then perhaps we should move on with today’s session,” I said, winking.

“Hey,” she said, “that’s my line.”

Chapter Thirty-five

“So, you’re stumped,” said Kelly.

We were walking along a semi-gravel trail through Griffith Park, which lies north of Los Feliz

and Hollywood. The park is home to the L.A. Zoo and the Griffith Observatory, itself made infamous by one James Dean. I miss that little rebel.

"You could say that," I said.

We were holding hands, our fingers loosely interlaced. Kelly was dressed in tight black fuzzy sweats, a tight sweater and sneakers with gold trim. I was in workout pants and a tee shirt. My sneakers, surprisingly, had no gold trim. The day was warm, but not inordinately so. We traveled mostly through shadows along the heavily vegetated trail, thick with oaks and spruces. Squirrels dashed madly across the trail, up trees and through the chainlink fence that led off to the Los Feliz Golf Course.

"So you have a white van driven by an ugly guy with acne scars, as witnessed by a bum who was stalking the very same girl, the bum being witnessed by a box boy who was stalking the very same girl."

"Lots of stalking going on," I said.

"This girl, somehow, elicits this kind of behavior in men."

"She's a beautiful young lady," I asked.

"And she may not understand, or comprehend, her full effect on men."

“Meaning?”

“A simple glance, an innocent smile, an innocuous flip of her hair in the wrong direction at the wrong time could have the wrong guy panting and thinking very unclean thoughts.”

“You make it seem like the males of our species have no control over themselves.”

Kelly looked at me, raised her eyebrows. “Is that really a road you want to go down?”

“Fine,” I said. “We have no control over ourselves.”

“Look, all I’m saying is that most girls, especially pretty girls, learn at a young age to avoid eye contact, keep their face passive and non-expressive.”

“Because to do otherwise—”

“Is to invite trouble,” said Kelly.

“I seem to recall you smiling rather brilliantly at me when we first made eye contact.”

“It’s different when you think the guy is a cutie,” said Kelly.

“You think I’m a cutie?”

“No,” she said. “I think you’re beautiful. In fact, I’m

hard pressed to find a more beautiful man anywhere.”

“Even for an old guy?”

“You’ve aged wonderfully, and you’ve always reminded me of someone, but I’ve never been able to put my finger on it.”

“Brad Pitt?”

She shook her head, squeezed my hand.

“I don’t know. Someone,” she said.

“So why are we having such a hard time getting along?”

“Because beauty is only skin deep.”

“We have other issues,” I said.

“Attraction isn’t one of them.”

We were quiet some more as our sneakers crunched over loose gravel. Before us the road widened and curved past the northern end of the golf course.

“I do want to keep seeing you, Aaron,” she said.

“Good.”

“But I want to see other people, too.”

I took in some air. A lot of air. We kept walking. Now the trees opened up and the sun beat down. I was dripping sweat.

"I know," I said.

"You know what?"

"You've been seeing someone for quite some time."

She released my hand. "How do you know that, Aaron?"

"I'm a private investigator. Put it together."

"You were following me?"

"It's what I do."

"How long have you known?"

"Since the first week we tried doing this again. You sent him an email from the computer at my house. You left your email up."

"And you read my email."

"It's what I do."

"Bullshit," she said. "Snooping on your girlfriend's private email is not what you do. You follow cheating husbands and wives, you find runaways and missing teens, but you don't have a right to read my email."

"No, I didn't."

"Well, aren't you going to apologize?"

"No."

"You don't think you did anything wrong?"

"I didn't say that. I'm just not going to apologize."

“Why not?”

I said nothing.

“Oh, no,” she said. “You’re not going to clam up on me now. Don’t pull that shit on me again.”

“Hey, this was supposed to be a peaceful walk,” I said.

“That’s out the window. Why won’t you apologize?”

“Because you were cheating, Kelly. Look at the bigger picture. You’re doing what you do best and diverting the attention away from the bigger issue. We both know that I’m a private eye, we both know that I make a living snooping into other people’s lives—yes, even the lives of my girlfriends. You made a deliberate act to continue seeing another man, even while we were trying to mend our relationship.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“I was waiting to see what would happen.”

We rounded the final curve of the golf course and were now headed toward the Greek Theater. In silence, we moved past the theater and adjacent housing track filled with opulent homes.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about him,” she said after a while.

"Thank you," I said.

"I was waiting to see where things were going with us."

"So where are things going with us?" I asked.

"I love you, you big lug, but you're so closed, so secretive. It's hard for me to get around that."

"I understand."

"But, dammit, I want to still see you," she said. "But I also want to see other people, too."

"You mean you want to *continue* seeing other people," I said.

"Yes. To continue."

We walked in silence some more, then I said, "So we'll have one of those fancy, high-tech, open relationships everyone talks about?"

She laughed. "Yeah, something like that."

"And I can date other people, too?"

"That's how it works," she said, although I could hear the hesitancy in her voice.

"And you're not afraid of losing me?" I asked.

"I'm terrified," she said.

Chapter Thirty-six

Euphoria. Pure, unadulterated euphoria.

An hour earlier I had taken my ninth Vicodin followed by a beer chaser, and now I was feeling high as a kite and pain free and at peace with the world around me.

Everyone should feel this good.

Maybe they do. Maybe I'm the one who's missing out.

I was in my living room. It was early afternoon and the sun was shining straight through my blinds and into my apartment. Earlier, the bright light had given me a headache.

But not anymore.

Vicodin gets rid of headaches. Vicodin gets rid of *all* aches. And on top of that, it makes you feel so damn good that even the bright sunlight is no longer a problem. Hell, *nothing* is a problem.

You're now well beyond the recommended daily dosage, Mr. King. I think it's official: you might just have a problem.

Sure I did, but I didn't care; at least not now.

Taking Vicodin with a beer chaser was a big no-no, as alcohol did something that increased something, but I didn't care. At least not now.

Don't try this at home, kids....

I felt so damn good and my head felt so damn clear, but I knew I had a serious fucking problem and I knew this problem was threatening to get out of control.

I'll deal with it later.

Always later, right King?

For now, my knees were no longer sore and my head was no longer hurting; my lower back felt damn good and even my jaw had quit throbbing, a jaw that had been hurting since my re-constructive plastic surgery thirty years ago.

Feeling good like I should.

I lay back on my sofa, rested my head on a throw pillow, and closed my eyes. My body felt wonderful. My body felt healthy. My body felt strong.

Everyone should feel this good....

It was later, and I was still feeling good as I read through Miranda's police file for the umpteenth time, focusing my attention this time around on Miranda's last boyfriends.

Jason Anderson, her most recent ex-boyfriend who now lived in New York, didn't have a clue what happened to Miranda. His story was fairly simple: Miranda had broken up with him a year or so ago after she had caught him cheating. He'd made several attempts to win her back but she wanted nothing more to do with him.

Good for her.

Police investigators had checked him out completely; he was clean. Besides, he had a rock-solid alibi at the time of her disappearance and the police had dropped him from the suspect list.

My instincts told me there was nothing there. I dropped him, too, the cheating bastard.

Generally, twenty-two-year-old girls didn't run away. Hell, at that age, it was called *moving*. But Miranda had lived a very easy and sheltered life with her mother. Miranda's mental and personal growth had no doubt been stunted by a few years.

Just a beautiful girl with no clue just how beautiful she really is.

The police had checked out all the hotels in Vegas but nothing had turned up under her name. They did the same for Reno and Laughlin and Tahoe. Nothing. They checked with current friends and old friends. Nothing. According to her friends, Miranda had had only one other significant boyfriend, a high school sweetheart named Flip Barowski, now six or seven years removed. The detectives, perhaps considering Flip was too far removed, never bothered contacting him.

I got up from my chair. Oops, too fast. Instantly lightheaded, I guided myself over to my corner desk and sat down. I opened Miranda's personal case file and flipped back a dozen or so pages until I found the letter I had removed from her bureau drawer. The love letter.

I read it again.

Flip apparently had it bad for Miranda. Very bad. And in his letter he was apologizing for something again and again, but, unfortunately, he didn't say *why* he was apologizing. He ended the letter very

succinctly: he threatened to end his own life if he could not have her.

Now that's love. Or infatuation.

Either way, I grabbed my car keys and headed out the door. I was really too buzzed to drive, but that never stopped me before.

Don't try this at home, kids.

Chapter Thirty-eight

I was on the road, buzzed and high, when Becky the pianist from the Pussycat called.

"Hey, good-looking," she said.

"Hey, pretty mama."

Oops. *Too Elvis.*

"Do you even know who this is?" she asked, giggling.

I pulled out onto Morton Ave and headed down through the hills of Echo Park. The reception here was fuzzy at best.

"No," I said, "unless it's Becky from the Pussycat."

"How did you know?"

"I'm good at voices."

"Well, I'm very impressed," she said.

I was driving by the shabbier homes of lower Echo Park. The day was sweltering. I turned right onto Glendale and picked up speed. My window was mostly up to hear better, my cell's earpiece shoved deep into my ear canal.

"So do you really think I'm good-looking?" I asked.

"I think you're beautiful," she said. "Especially your voice."

Becky sounded as if she were on something. Join the club. I think we were both feeling flirty and lonely and high.

"Even for an old geezer?" I asked.

She giggled. "You're only fifty-something, right?"

Close, but not quite.

"Old enough to be your father," I said.

"You can be my daddy anytime, sugar," she said, giggling again, and then she got to the point, which was probably for the best. "We need to rehearse sometime this week."

"Am I that bad?"

“No, you’re that good. I think one rehearsal ought to do it. Can you come by the Cat this afternoon? Say three-thirty?”

I told her I would and we clicked off. I was now on Sunset Blvd. and heading west into the setting sun. I flipped down my shades.

Cool as cool gets.

* * *

The euphoria from the prescription drugs was wearing off.

And with its passing came the all-pervasive pain in my knees and back, and it came back with a vengeance.

I hate when that happens.

I need more Vicodin. Bad.

Ignoring the pain as best as I could, I parked in front of Dana’s oversized house, ignored the faux dog, and knocked on her heavy front door.

A moment later, she appeared, and she didn’t look good. Eyes bloodshot and vacant. Hair awry and forgotten. Dried tears crusting in the corner of her eyes and down her cheeks. She looked at me blankly for a moment or two, then turned and retreated back into her home. She left the door open

and I followed her in, shutting it behind me. The house was dark and dead, shades drawn, lights off. Despite my lingering high, I felt miserable just being here.

As I followed her, I saw that my hands were shaking badly. I hadn't had the shakes in decades, not even with the drinking.

It's happening again.

King, you need help.

Ya think?

In the main living room, Dana fell into a wide, overstuffed chair, and reached immediately for a cut crystal tumbler that was filled with amber liquid. I was willing to bet the amber liquid wasn't lemonade.

She hadn't spoken, and I didn't bother asking her how she was doing. I knew how she was doing: *not good at all*.

"Your daughter didn't date much," I said simply.

She rolled her head my direction. "No."

"Why?"

"None of the guys were good enough, I guess."

"For you or her?" I asked.

"Both. I watched over her carefully, vigilantly. We

weren't going to settle for just anyone."

"Her last boyfriend was a guy named Jason."

"Yes."

"No one since?" I asked.

"No one that I know of."

"Did she date anyone before Jason?"

"No."

"Not even casually?"

"I wouldn't allow it."

Hell, maybe Miranda *had* run away. I chewed my lip, a bad habit, and looked at the woman sitting across from me. She was obviously on some type of sedative to help deal with her daughter's disappearance.

"Did she date in high school?"

"Yes, one boy."

"What happened to him?"

"They broke up."

"Why?"

"Because they were just kids; it wasn't meant to last."

"Did you facilitate the break-up?"

"No. Actually, the boy played a trick on her."

I sat up a little straighter.

“A trick?” I said.

She turned her head slowly toward me again and blinked long and dramatically, and for the first time today she seemed to really look at me.

“Excuse me,” she said, “but why the hell are you asking questions about my daughter’s boyfriend from fucking high school?”

I opened my mouth to answer but she didn’t let me answer, and suddenly, now given an outlet, all of her anger and frustration and fear was directed onto me.

“I demand to know what the fuck you’ve been up to, Mr. Aaron fucking King!”

Ah, yes. When a client asks for a full accounting—or, in this case, demands—by law I have to give them one. In this situation, I would have preferred to wait, but she was calling me out, so to speak, and so I caught her up to date on the investigation.

Dana did not know about the Trader Joe’s employee, or the bum, or the van driven by the man with pockmarks, and when I was done she lost it. Just lost it.

Tears sprung fully formed from her eyes, spilling down over sharp cheekbones. She dropped the

tumbler in her lap, spilling the booze everywhere. I was by her side instantly, plucking the glass up, and wrapping an arm around her shaking shoulders while she sobbed into my chest.

Aaron fucking King to the rescue.

When she was done, when she had gained some semblance of control over herself, I slipped off the chair's arm and sat on the ornate glass coffee table directly across from her. I took both her hands in mine. They were shaking nearly as bad as my own.

"I didn't think I had tears enough to cry," she said.

Tears enough to cry. Sounded like a sad, sad song.

Not everything is a song, King.

Oh, yeah?

"So she was kidnapped by some son-of-a-bitch in a van," she said.

I sucked in some air. "I think so, yes. The police are looking for the van now."

"But it could be anywhere, *she* could be anywhere, dead in the desert, tortured and raped and burned alive for all I know."

"We don't know that."

"But it's a very real possibility."

I didn't want to lie to her, and so I squeezed her hands and said nothing.

"Help me find her, King. Please. I'll give you anything you want. Please help me find my baby. Please, oh God, please...."

I patted her hand and made sympathetic noises, and after awhile I said, "Tell me about the boy in high school."

"But I don't understand—"

"Neither do I, but I have nothing else to go on, Dana. And since I don't have enough time or manpower to cruise the city streets looking for the white van, I'm going to do what I have been trained to do, which is to turn over every rock and stone until your daughter shows up."

"And one of those stones is her high school boyfriend?"

"Yes," I said. "Exactly. Now please tell me the trick he played on her, the reason she broke up with him."

"Her boyfriend was a twin."

I inhaled sharply. There it was again. *Twins*.

"Go on," I said.

“They were dating for nearly their entire senior year when the boy decided to do something stupid. Very, very stupid.”

“What?”

She looked away. “He let his twin brother rape Miranda.”

“I’m not sure I’m following—”

“The sons-of-bitches played a trick on her, King. One twin stepped out of the room—her boyfriend—and the other stepped in—his brother, dressed identically from head to foot, to fool her. Granted, it was late at night and everyone had been drinking, but Miranda knew something was wrong the moment he forced himself on her. She tried to stop him, but couldn’t. I told him that if I ever saw him or his fucking perverted brother again, I would kill them both.”

I didn’t doubt it.

“Do you have a picture of Flip?” I asked.

“He’s in her high school yearbook somewhere.”

“Would you mind?”

She didn’t, or at least not very much. She left the room and came back a few minutes later lugging a bright green high school yearbook. She sat next to me on the glass coffee table, flipped open the book.

A moment later, she found the right page. Her partially painted fingernail, which was worried down to a mere nub, pointed to a handsome young man with a thick neck and spiky blond hair. His identical twin brother was next to him. Flip and Bryan Barowski. Both had fairly clear complexions.

Which meant neither matched the description of our pock-marked driver.

Strike one *and* two.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Clarke and I were at the Hollywood YMCA. He was doing bench presses on a shining new machine, and I was doing shoulder raises on an older machine that wasn't so shiny.

"They say that you get more definition if you use free weights," I said when we both finished our respective sets. "So why are we not using free weights?"

Clarke's face was still slightly purple with the strain of his recent pressing. A pulsating, lightning

bolt-like vein slashed down across his forehead, Harry Potter-like. Clarke was tired of all my Harry Potter jokes. Unfortunately for him, I wasn't, since I was a closet Harry Potter fan.

"Because we're not thirty anymore," he said, "and we don't care about definition."

"We don't?"

Clarke leaned back and cranked out ten more reps. When finished, he sat forward again. Good thing, because the lightning bolt-like vein looked like it was about to burst.

"No," he said. "And if you say anything about the throbbing, lightning bolt-like vein on my forehead I'm going to go fucking ape-shit on you, King. Fucking ape-shit. I see you looking at it now."

I ignored him, or pretended to. "If we're not here for definition, Harry, then what the hell are we doing in the gym?"

"My name isn't fucking Harry, and we're here to prolong our lives."

"And why would we want to do that?"

"Because it's better than the alternative," he said. He looked over at me, sweat dripping from the tip of his nose. He shook his head and grinned. "You're a

real asshole sometimes, you know.”

“I know.”

And he kept on looking at me. “Sitting here, in this light, you look exactly like him.”

“That’s because I *am* him, Clarke.”

We were alone in the small weight room. Just around the corner next to us was the entrance to the women’s locker room. Woohoo! Sometimes, when the door opened wide enough, you could catch a glimpse inside. And each time it did, Clarke and I automatically leaned a little to the side to get a better view. Just two harmless, although slightly perverted, old men. But, alas, it was the middle of the day and the Y was quiet, with only a handful of women coming and going.

“I know that,” he said, “but with all the plastic surgery it’s easy to forget....” his voice trailed off as he studied me some more. I hate being studied. “Upon first glance, you look nothing like him. You added a dimple to your chin and did something with your eyes and lips. Your disguise is perfect. You sound perfect. But sometimes, when you smile—”

“Let’s drop it,” I said, cutting in.

“—you look exactly fucking like him,” he said, finishing anyway.

A young gal stepped out of the women’s locker room and crossed between us, hair wet and dressed in a business suit. She left behind a vapor trail of fine shampoo, soap and womanliness. We both casually watched her go.

“We’re pigs, you know,” said Clarke.

“No, we’re old men. We’re allowed to look at the ladies. It’s a privileged we’ve earned. They know we’re harmless. Hell, I think they even like it.”

“Like it or not, I saw her glance your way as she passed.”

“Maybe she likes old men with chin dimples,” I said.

“Except you don’t really look like an old man. I’m mean you’re older, but, but you still look like a movie star.”

“I *am* a movie star.”

“You *were* a movie star.”

“Same thing.”

“Either way, you still kind of look like one. People think they know you from somewhere and it drives them fucking crazy.”

"Not to mention I happen to be cute," I said.

"Let's change the subject," he said.

"Good."

Clarke cranked out another ten reps from the bench machine. I probably should have done another set from the shoulder press, but my shoulder was aching a little. For all the compliments, I was still seventy-four, and these old shoulders weren't getting any younger.

When Clarke was finished, with his lightning vein throbbing, he said, "So how's the case coming along?"

I caught him up to speed, ending with Flip and his twin brother tricking Miranda into sex in high school.

"You're reaching," said Clarke when I had finished.

"I have nothing else to reach for," I said.

"He was just a high school sweetheart."

"Not exactly a sweetheart," I said. "He was willing to give her to his brother for a night."

"So he's charitable," said Clarke. "Either way, I don't see how it relates to the case."

"It doesn't," I said, "except for one thing."

"She still kept the letters," said Clarke, nodding.

"That," I said, "and that he's dead."

Clarke raised his eyebrows. "Dead?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

I did. After leaving Dana's home, I went back to my crime fighting headquarters, or my apartment, and did some research. I ran Flip Barowski's name through one of my industry data bases, privy only to police and private eyes, and, surprise of all surprises, only one Flip Barowski came up. And the one who came up, came up dead. And not just dead, but murdered. A single gunshot wound to the back of the head. Execution style. Two weeks ago to this day. Four days before Miranda's disappearance.

"Could be a coincidence," Clarke said.

"Could be," I said.

"But you don't think so."

"No," I said. "I don't. But, then again, I've been wrong before."

Chapter Forty

I'd performed for presidents and royalty, in packed stadiums and concert venues around the world, and yet when I stepped into the Pussycat for rehearsal that afternoon there were butterflies in my stomach unlike any I had ever experienced. I wanted to puke, go home, and drink myself into oblivion. Exactly in that order.

It was only three-thirty in the afternoon, and the bar was mostly empty, although there was a young couple sitting discretely together, their knees touching, each drinking from their own bottles of beer. I figured them to be tourists, judging by their distinct lack of tans.

The handsome bartender smiled brightly at me when he saw me. "Hey, it's Mr. Johnny Cash," he said, and reached his hand over the counter and shook mine. "Welcome back."

If only he knew

"Wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you," I said. "Thanks again."

"Hey, man, all you needed was a nudge. Trust me, you did all the rest."

A female customer came in behind me and sat at

the bar. The young bartender nodded to her, winked at me, and went back to work. I continued on through the nightclub and headed toward the stage near the back, where Becky was sitting at her piano and flipping through a songbook.

"Hi there, pretty mama," I said, after stepping up onto stage.

She looked up and smiled and hopped to her feet. She moved quickly around the piano and gave me a world-class hugs. I love world-class hugs, especially from pretty young pianists. She kissed me lightly on the cheek, Hollywood style. Her lips felt nice, and her touch felt nicer. There's an inherent camaraderie among musicians, young or old, and it was something I had missed for far too long.

Well, not anymore, dammit.

"You look like hell, King," she said.

"I love you, too," I said.

She grinned easily. She was beautiful in a sort of asexual, sisterly sort of way. Sorry, guys. I mean she seemed to have all the goods, pretty face, long blond hair, and a petite frame. But she wasn't sexy. Perhaps she was too petite. Perhaps she dressed too conservatively. Perhaps I shouldn't give a damn

since I was fifty years her senior.

"Don't take it personally, King. I'm just f-ing with you."

She took my hand and led me to the piano bench and sat me down next to her. Our legs touched and, asexual or not, a shiver of pleasure coursed through me.

Focus, King. And quit acting like a schoolboy.

"I got your email," she said, "And I like your taste in music."

"Do you know the songs?"

"Like the back of my hand," she said. "And you're obviously quite fond of Tom Jones."

"One of the greatest performers I've ever seen."

She grinned. "Yeah, I like him, too," she said. "You also have a lot of Neil Diamond in there."

"Neil was an old friend." *Shit.* The moment the words came out, I realized my mistake. *Easy on the name-dropping, big guy.* "Well, *friends* might be too strong of a word. We chatted a few times back in the day. Now we're just Facebook friends, although he won't stop sending me all those damn Farmville requests."

I could feel her eyes on me, scanning every

square inch of my face, no doubt racking her brain for some memory of me. If my plastic surgery held up, there wouldn't be any memory to trigger. Finally, she said, "You're funny, King. You ready to work through the set today?"

My stomach did a double flip.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I said.

"Relax. I have a feeling you aren't going to need a lot of practice."

"We'll see."

And so I sat there by her side, our legs touching, and sang a set of fourteen songs, and when we were done, with my voice nearly hoarse and my spirit hovering somewhere near the ceiling, I looked around and saw that we had attracted a small crowd at the base of the stage.

"It's only rehearsal," she said, patting my hand, "and already they love you."

Chapter Forty-one

I pulled out of my gated apartment complex and

immediately picked up a tail. No, not that kind of tail. A green Intrepid pulled away from the street and followed me down the hill, and proceeded to follow me all the way to Larchmont Street, about six miles away. Coincidence? I think not.

I pulled into a spot in front of Chevalier's Bookstore, and the green Intrepid pulled into a spot about five rows down and across the street. The driver was male. He wore sunglasses and had short brown hair and that's all I knew.

I pulled out my cell phone and called a PI research service of mine. I punched my way through the phone system and soon got a live operator. I gave him my pin and password, then gave him the Intrepid's license plate number. Five minutes later, I had a name. Or, rather, a business name.

The vehicle was owned by the Keys Agency. I knew of the Keys Agency. They were a rival private investigation agency here in L.A. I thought about that a little and then stepped out of my car.

My non-exclusive and Jewish girlfriend calls this area Jew Town, and she was very nearly correct. On any given Friday, you will see conservative Orthodox

practitioners with their tassels and braided hair, casually strolling down the streets, forsaking their vehicles in the name of piety.

Perhaps I should forsake booze in the name of piety.

Or not.

I stepped out of my Cadillac and onto the crowded sidewalk that ran along in front of posh stores and upscale restaurants. Most of the shoppers tended to be lovely ladies with little dogs and big sunglasses. Most of the lovely ladies ignored me. Most, but not all. I still garnered one or two looks of curiosity, and maybe one or two of mild interest. Either way, I wasn't used to being ignored, even after thirty years. Hell, I was used to hordes of fans everywhere. I was used to fine food and famous friends and fancy cars.

Today, I was dressed in a polo shirt, cargo shorts with a hammer loop, no hammer; white Van tennis shoes, no socks. Cool, man. My longish brown/gray hair was slicked back. Some stray strands hung loose and dangled over my forehead and cheekbones. Yeah, the cheekbones are still there.

I found him sitting at an outdoor table on the

corner of Larchmont and Beverly, and recognized him immediately. The thick neck, the strong jaw, the short buzz cut. He could have stepped straight out of his high school year book. As I approached, weaving my way through a sea of yipping dogs and small saplings growing straight up from sidewalk planters, he didn't bother to look up. In fact, he didn't bother to do much of anything. He just sat there, shoulders slumped, head low, an air of deep melancholy surrounding him. Hell, just seeing him made me want to run to Dr. Vivian, who I may or may not be in love with. I'm leaning towards *maybe*.

I pulled out a metal chair, scraping it noisily over the gum-stained concrete, and sat across from him. He looked up finally.

"Bryan Barowski?" I said.

"You got him," he said.

"I'm sorry about your brother," I said.

"So am I."

"Can I get you something to drink or eat?"

"No, thanks."

"Would you like to move to a quieter spot?" We were on a fairly busy street corner, heavy with traffic and pedestrians.

"I'd rather not."

"Okay," I said.

His eyes dropped down, looking at nothing.

"Thank you for meeting me," I said.

He said nothing, although he might have nodded.

"I lost a twin brother, too," I said.

He inhaled deeply and made a small noise.

I continued. "It was long ago. He died at birth, but he was my brother for nine months and sometimes I can still feel him touching me."

And then Bryan started to cry. Right there in front of the bagel restaurant, his chin pressed into his chest, weeping silently, his body convulsing ever-so-lightly.

* * *

We were now in my car, both eating ice creams. Mine was chocolate malt crunch and his was straight-up vanilla. We both chose waffle cones, which, really, is the only way to go when you're eating ice cream. The investigator in the green Intrepid was watching us behind his big cop glasses. I think he even took a photograph or two. I hate having my picture taken.

"We fucked up," he was saying. "We shared

everything.”

“And you wanted to share her, too.”

“Weird, I know.” He slurped his rapidly melting vanilla. “Like I said, we fucked up, and then they broke up, and, I swear, Flip was never the same since.”

“He missed her that bad?”

“Yeah. There’s something about that girl.”

“She’s beautiful,” I said. My ice cream was dripping faster than I could lick it. I’ve had worse problems.

“Yeah, there’s that, but there’s something else.” He thought about what that something else was, working his tongue absently around his cone. “She honestly didn’t know how pretty she was, how appealing she was, how amazing she was.”

“We should all be so lucky.”

“No kidding. I begged him just to give me five minutes alone with her.”

“Were you going to have sex with her?”

“I think so, yes. I wanted her, and I was so excited. I thought my brother and I could pull it off.”

“But she knew the difference?”

“Yeah. Immediately. Right when we started kissing.”

“What did she do?”

“She screamed.”

“What did you do next?”

“I tried to get her to stop screaming.”

“How?”

“Any way I could. I grabbed her and held her down and put my hands over her mouth.” His voice trailed off.

“Did you rape her?”

He said nothing, but I could hear him breathing wetly through his nose.

“Did you rape her, Bryan?”

“I don’t remember.”

We were silent for a long time. My own breathing was nearly as loud as Bryan’s, amplified in the cab of my car. I decided to let it drop for now.

“What happened next, Bryan?”

“She grabbed her stuff and ran out.”

“What did your brother say?”

“He never forgave me. I mean, it had all been my idea...I had pestered the hell out of him.”

“He didn’t have to agree.”

"Yes, he did. I was relentless."

We both were racing time with our ice creams. My fingers were beyond sticky and now I was getting damn thirsty. Bryan's forehead was beaded with sweat, and I think I was melting into my seat cushions.

I said, "She never wanted anything to do with him again."

"Never again."

I was finishing the last of my cone. Chocolate was between my fingers, down my wrist. Sigh. My little napkin was in tatters.

"And your brother was never the same."

He looked at the rest of his ice cream, opened his door a crack and chucked it out onto the hot street.

"Yeah, never the same," he said.

"He blame you?"

"Of course."

"He loved her?"

"With all of his heart."

Tears were in his eyes. His twin brother of twenty-two years was dead just a few weeks removed. Bryan was holding up well, although I

suspected he could crash at any moment.

"And to your knowledge they never saw each other again?" I asked.

"Outside of random meetings at school, not that I know of."

"And you would know," I said.

"Yeah, he couldn't keep anything from me."

Bryan was breathing heavily through his nose. The green car was still there, although the driver was gone. Bryan needed a hug but I wasn't the guy to give it to him.

"You mentioned there was something about this girl," I said.

"Yes."

"Lots of boys at your school liked her?"

"And probably some girls, too."

I smiled. "What about you?"

"Yeah, I liked her."

"Were you jealous that your brother had her and you didn't?"

"Sometimes, yeah."

"Were you jealous that she took time away from you and your brother?"

"Sure. Yeah."

“And your brother still thought about her, even after all these years?”

“I’m sure he did. He didn’t talk about it much, but he still loved her.”

“Did you love her, too?” I asked.

“No, not like that.”

“But you were infatuated with her, like the other guys—and some girls—in school.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Is there a chance your brother might have been seeing her recently?”

He looked at me sharply.

“Why would you say that?” he asked.

“Your brother was murdered, and a few days later Miranda disappeared. That might not be a coincidence.”

“I—I don’t know. We don’t live with each other, so I dunno. But I think I would have known.”

“But is there a chance that he could have been seeing her without your knowledge?”

“Maybe, but I would have eventually known.”

“How would you have known?”

“I just would have. It’s a twin thing. He couldn’t

keep anything from me.”

“Earlier, you said he seemed happier recently.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe he was happier because he was seeing her,” I said.

He shrugged and said nothing. We were both silent and I knew I was upsetting the poor kid, but I also felt that I was onto something here. What it was, I didn't know.

“Why would someone kill your brother?” I asked gently. There was no easy way to do this. You just plunged in and hoped for the best. I knew the facts of the case by now. Detective Colbert, after being bribed with more donuts, had agreed to fax me the preliminary police report. Flip had been found in his car outside a nightclub, dead. Shot once behind the ear. The police had no suspects and very little clues. From all indications, it had been a professional hit.

“I have no idea.”

“Was he behaving any differently?”

“I don't know. If anything, he seemed happier. But like I said, we don't live together, so I don't know for sure. I moved out when I was nineteen and he stayed at home.”

“Was it hard living away from your brother?”

“Very hard, but you get used to it.”

I could not find it within myself to torture the kid a minute longer. His twin was dead, and he himself would never be the same again, and a part of my heart went out to him, even though I was convinced he had raped Miranda. I gave him my card and told him to call me if something came up. He nodded, opened the door, and left. As he did so, I saw that his ice cream had melted into oblivion.

I also saw that the green Intrepid was gone, too.

Chapter Forty-two

“They shared everything,” I said to Dr. Vivian.

“Twins tend to do that,” she said. “At least initially. Later in life, they will outgrow the need for shared experiences.”

“Do twins share girls, too?” I asked.

She thought about that. “Depends on the extent of the twins’ bond,” she said.

“I think the kid was horny and wanted to bop a hot

chick,” I said.

“It’s easy to assume that because that’s the obvious answer.”

“Then what’s the non-obvious answer?” I asked.

“As identical twins, they’ve had similar—if not identical—experiences. Because of that, they expect to *continue* having identical experiences. And if one of them has something that the other doesn’t—”

“The other expects to have it, too,” I said, cutting her off. “Except there was only one of Miranda.”

“Which is why twins, especially early on through high school and college, will often date other twins. Life is easier that way. Manageable. It makes sense to them. The world is complete, whole. Right. Symmetrical.”

It was mid-afternoon. The east-facing window was in shadows, the sun hidden somewhere west of the house. The soft glow from the desk lamp highlighted her sharp chin and equally sharp nose. I wanted to nuzzle that chin, sharp or not.

“I think that, if my own twin had lived,” I heard myself saying, “I think—maybe—I would have done anything for him, too. Anything to make him happy.”

“That is often the case. Twins will do anything for

each other.”

“Even share a girl?”

“If that’s what it takes to make the other happy, yes,” she said.

“The twin that is lacking feels entitled to what the other has.”

“Exactly.”

“And this has been your personal experience, as well?” I asked.

“Yes, but you outgrow some of it, although not entirely.”

“But a high school student...”

“A high school student would still be in the thick of it, and still be confused and prone to make poor decisions.”

“Like allowing his brother to have sex with his girlfriend.”

“Yes, that would be a poor decision.”

The clock above me ticked loudly in the darkened office. I knew that Dr. Vivian lived alone. I knew that she had never been married and I knew that her twin was indeed married. I wondered if Dr. Vivian felt entitled to have sex with her twin’s

husband. I decided that it was probably best not to ask.

"His twin was murdered," I said.

"So you've said."

"What will happen to him now, being the surviving twin?" I asked.

"He's in serious trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"We might lose him. Drugs, depression, suicide. Pick one. His brother's loss may be too much for him to bear, too much to deal with. In the least, he should probably be under careful supervision."

"What would you do if you lost your sister?" I asked.

"Mr. King...."

"Aaron," I said.

She closed her mouth and tilted her head a little. Her jawline looked sharp enough to cut paper. Sharp but delicate. Her thick glasses gleamed.

"Aaron, that is an awful thought to think, perhaps the worst I can imagine."

We were silent. We watched each other.

"Do twins kill each other?" I asked.

"It happens, but it's rare."

"What would provoke a twin to do that?"

"The usual reasons, but more often than not it stems from jealousy. One twin has amounted to something great, while the other has fallen off the map, so to speak. Even still, something must trigger the killing. A fight, an argument, something. Like I said, it's rare."

"But not out of the question."

"Nothing is out of the question."

"And the twin who does the murdering...?"

"Is screwed forever. The grief is off the charts. The guilt is unbearable." She looked at me for a second or two. "Do you think this boy killed his brother?"

"I don't know," I said. "But either way, he's in trouble."

She nodded. "The suicide rate for surviving twins is off the charts." She looked at me steadily. "And this should give you some indication as to the depth of your own loss, Aaron."

Ah, my own loss. Little Jessie....

"But I don't remember him," I said.

"Yes, you do," she said with surprising urgency. "The memory of your brother is within you, stored

away, and can be triggered by any number of techniques.”

I knew of a technique, although I sometimes wondered if it was just my imagination. Sometimes when I am alone—especially in bed and especially in the wee hours of morning—I can hear a tiny, frenetic heartbeat, a beautiful sound that surrounds me and fills me. And when this happens, I just lie there and close my eyes and recede deep into my subconscious and slip into a tiny and warm and inviting place. And sometimes...sometimes I have the ghostly sensation of little fingers exploring my little body, touching my head, my cheek, my arm, my leg...and if I am lucky, if I am really lucky, sometimes I can feel this loving little creature hold me close, wrapping his tiny arms and legs around me, and our hearts beat as one and I can feel all the love in the world radiate from this perfect little angel....

And then the sensation would pass and I would lie there in the morning, alone and in agony and weeping.

“I miss him,” I said to Dr. Vivian. “I miss him so damn much.”

She said nothing, but there were tears in her

eyes.

Chapter Forty-three

The package was once again delivered via UPS. It was left on my doorstep, propped against my apartment door. UPS and I have this agreement: they keep my signature on file and leave all packages at my door when I'm not home, and I don't throw a shit-fit. It's a nice agreement.

Once again, the package was addressed to E.P. I studied the writing. Small, neat writing. Could be anyone, but more than likely my gig was up, unless I found this person. Unless I convinced them to keep this secret of mine under wraps. The convincing part could turn ugly.

I unlocked the door, tossed my keys on my kitchen table, and immediately opened the small package. Inside was a compact disk. I pulled it out and turned it over.

Son-of-a-bitch.

It was my daughter's latest album. In fact, it wasn't even in the stores yet. A pirated copy, perhaps. A red disclaimer in the bottom corner read: *Advanced Copy—Resale Strictly Prohibited*, followed by penalties and fines, which included more money than I had in my savings and checking combined. Oh, and jail time, too.

So who had sent it? And why? Obviously someone who worked within the music industry, right? Or perhaps the CD had been stolen. In fact, more than likely it had been stolen.

My heart thumping loudly in my chest, I looked at my daughter's picture on the CD cover. God, she was beautiful. And she was certainly my baby. We had the same eyes and lips, only my eyes and lips looked far different now. She looked happy in this picture, real joy in her eyes and in her smile. Daddy was proud.

So was this CD sent as a direct threat against my daughter? A warning? Was something going to happen to her? What the fuck was going on?

I went to the fridge and popped a Miller Lite and drank it right there in front of the open refrigerator. I tossed the empty bottle, popped open another, and

brought it and the disk over to the CD player.
I inserted the disk and pressed *play*.

Chapter Forty-four

Hours later, long after I had listened to my daughter's newest CD more times than I could remember, my feet were up on the old artist drawing table that doubled as my desk, and I was deep in thought.

Kendra the Wonder Kat was up on the desk, too, next to the keyboard, sleeping on an afghan blanket that I had folded there for her. She was curled in a tight ball, her black tiger stripes prominent against her gray fur. She spasmed slightly in her sleep, perhaps dreaming of chasing mice or rubber superballs.

Through my open sliding glass door, a mishmash of trees and plants and everything in-between swayed and swished on the hillside that rose up just outside my balcony. Beyond the trees, mostly hidden from sight, were Echo Park's bigger homes. Beyond

them was Elysian Park, and still further was Dodger Stadium.

I was trying to make sense of the facts of the case, and nothing much was making sense. I had a dead twin, a missing girl, a white van, an unknown driver, a bum, a grocery store clerk, a distraught mother, and little else.

Actually there *was* something else. I went online and found a number in the Yahoo Yellow Pages. I dialed it and while I waited, I scratched my sleeping cat between her ears. She mewed and stretched and then sort of curled under herself in a position that didn't look entirely comfortable, but one she seemed fine with. The line picked up.

"Keys Agency."

"Rick Keys please."

"You got him."

"Help, I think my wife is cheating on me!"

"I'm sorry to hear that, what makes you—"

"You were following me the other day, dickhead," I said, breaking in. "I want to know why."

Rick was silent, chewing on this. "Is this King?"

"You think?"

"Just doing my job, King. No hard feelings."

"Who hired you?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

"I could threaten to kick your ass," I said.

"You're too old to kick my ass."

"True," I said, but I still thought I could take him.

Keys was smaller than I, and he wore a mustache. I

could kick anyone's ass who wore a mustache.

"Then what was the nature of the surveillance?"

I could almost hear him working through it on the other end of the line. I had, after all, tagged him. The gig was up.

"To follow you," he said. "And give a detailed report of your activity."

"And did you?"

"Emailed it this morning," he said. "And about an hour ago I was called off your case."

"Called off?"

"The assignment is over."

"You must have filed a hell of a report."

"Or that I inadvertently gave my client what they were looking for."

"And you won't tell me who this person is."

"Not even if you beat me with your cane."

Goodbye, King.”

He hung up, and I absently drummed my finger on my unsteady drawing desk, which promptly started wobbling. Someday I would get a new desk. Someday. But new desks cost money, and I'd become a miser in my dotage.

Wobbling or not, the cat slept soundly, although her ears moved independently of each other, no doubt honing in on police sirens, bird chirps and sounds unheard by human ears.

So who had hired Keys to follow me? I didn't know, but I took it as a sign that I was getting close to the truth, and if I had to, I'd beat the shit out of Keys to get his information.

Better go buy a cane.

Chapter Forty-five

“Flip what's-his-name's murder and Miranda's disappearance could still be a coincidence,” said Clarke.

“That's no way to speak of the dead.”

“Coming from someone who’s supposed to be dead.”

We were in my apartment. I was sitting at my desk drinking a beer and absently flipping through Miranda’s case file. Clarke was making his rounds around my apartment again; meaning, he was examining everything, touching everything and generally acting a bit creepy. He did this sometimes, and I wasn’t sure why. I knew that Clarke had been a big fan of mine, but he usually kept his fan-like tendencies in check. Except on these rare occasions when he seemed incapable of sitting still, when he seemed possessed by a need to peruse my home, my belongings, my everything. I was certain—and this was a slightly disturbing thought—that he would have probably gone through my drawers if I were not around. Not that he would take anything, just that he seemed incapable of controlling himself, of reigning himself in.

At the moment, he was standing in front of my entertainment center, looking at the assorted pictures of my daughter and caressing the frames carefully. I wondered if he was even aware of his actions.

“Do the police have any leads on his murder?”
Clarke asked.

“None yet.”

“Or none that they’re telling you.”

“Or that,” I said.

“So he gets murdered and four days later she goes missing. We still don’t even know if they were dating, let alone seeing each other. Might be good to know.”

I agreed.

Now Clarke was looking at my shot glass chess set carefully. Picking up each piece, turning the glasses over in his fingers, and putting them back exactly where he had found them. Disturbing as it was, I was used to this strange behavior, and just chalked it up as another bizarre oddity in the life and times of Aaron King and his attorney sidekick, Clarke.

Miranda’s case file was now quite thick and filled mostly with my own hand-written notes, all stamped, of course, with the date they were filed and placed in chronological order. A private detective’s notes can potentially be subpoenaed and used in a court of law, and so I did everything by the book, just in case I

was ever called in to testify, which I sometimes was. I generally made for a good witness, in part because of my meticulous notes.

And because you are a ham.

Now as I flipped through the file, skimming past notes and witness statements and tidbits of evidence collected no matter how small or trivial, I came across a tiny piece of paper that I had taped to a bigger piece of paper so that it wouldn't get lost in the shuffle. It was the receipt I had found in Miranda's jeans. I squinted at it now. A pub called Half Pint. It was in Hollywood, and I knew the place. The receipt was dated two days *before* Flip's murder and, consequently, six days before Miranda's disappearance.

Presently, Clarke was scanning the books on my bookshelf—the same books he had scanned a few weeks earlier, the last time he was here. He pulled one out, leafed through it, shoved it back in place. Now he was examining the DVD covers to Miranda's movies. The movies were days late, but I didn't care. I would add the fines to my final bill.

As I watched Clarke flip through the movies, an

idea occurred to me, and as it did a familiar sensation rippled through me. It was my Spidey-sense, so to speak. It told me that I was in the presence of a clue, or perhaps something big. Either that, or I had eaten some bad shrimp for lunch.

"Clarke, you've seen all of Miranda's movies, right?"

"Of course," he said. He had already moved on to examining my dented brass world globe. "I'm an entertainment attorney, remember? I represent Miranda and her family, and I get free shit all the time, especially movies and CDs, sometimes even before they come out."

"Fine," I said. "What were the themes of the first two movies?"

"Themes?"

"You know, the basic through-line?"

He tilted his head, thinking, then moved away from the globe and re-read the back of the movies. "A bank heist and a serial killer."

"Look deeper," I said.

He did, then snapped his head up.

"She was kidnapped in both," he said.

I nodded and stood. I ran my hand through my

hair, my mind racing, and paced the small area in front of my computer desk. There was something here. Something important.

“So what are you getting at, Aaron?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said.

“You think someone kidnapped her?”

“I don’t know.”

“Life imitating art?”

“Maybe. There’s something here. I can feel it.”

“You’re grasping at straws.”

“At least I’m grasping at *something*.”

“Millions of people have seen her movies, Aaron. That’s a lot of potential suspects.”

“So let’s narrow it,” I said. “What do we know about Miranda?”

“And that’s a rather broad ques—”

I cut him off. “We know that the men in her life tend to act oddly, irrationally.”

Clarke nodded, following me.

“She tends to attract stalkers,” he said.

“And those who appear to have a hard time letting her go,” I said.

“Like her ex-boyfriend,” said Clarke.

“Exactly.”

“So you’re saying some weirdo watched these two movies, developed an obsession with her, and decided to act out the movies and kidnap her?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“That’s a hell of a reach, my friend.”

I ignored him. “What if Miranda found herself in another situation where someone she knew or dated is having a hard time letting go,” said Clarke.

“By keeping her captive, like in the movies?”

“Maybe it’s a sick fantasy.”

“I’ll bite, but unless it’s someone she knows, that’s a lot of potential suspects out there.”

“Then let’s work with who she knows.”

“Hey, you’re the detective, Aaron. I’m just a humble entertainment attorney.” He finally sat on the leather sofa, which he examined as well, running his hands over it and basically molesting the thing. “We know all about her past boyfriends. One’s dead, and one’s in New York. So who’s left?”

I had stepped over to the DVD cases and was flipping through them, thinking hard. “Is there anything else that connects her with these two movies?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Did she work with the same actors or director?”

Clarke shook his head.

“No, I repped her for both deals. Different directors and actors.” He frowned and stopped examining my couch. “But she did sign a two-movie deal with Alpha-Beta Productions.”

“So she worked with the same producers on both movies?”

“Exactly.”

“But not on her third or fourth movie?”

Clarke nodded. “Right. She’d left Alpha-Beta by then and was working with a new production company.”

That familiar tingle was back, that wonderful crackle that whipped wildly through my body like an electric current. Now I was about 90% certain it wasn’t the shrimp I had eaten at lunch.

“So maybe someone from her old production studio didn’t want her to leave?” said Clarke.

“Maybe,” I said.

“Another obsession?”

“Only one way to know.”

Chapter Forty-six

Half Pint was a small place in Hollywood. It was also gloomy and consisted mostly of a lot of tall stools and one long scarred oak counter. A massive screen TV hung suspended from the ceiling. Presently showing on it was a taped Joe Cocker concert. Lord, I love that man.

I sat on a tall stool at the long bar. The bartender was a young guy with a lot of hair and even more tattoos. He wore his jeans low on his hips. There was something shiny sticking out of his chin. A spike, I think. I ordered a Heineken and showed him the picture of Miranda. As he poured my drink, he studied the picture closely, squinting.

“Beautiful girl,” he said.

“She ever drink here?”

He frowned, which for some reason caused the spike in his chin to turn up a little. “Looks a little familiar.”

“She was here two weeks ago,” I said.

“Why do you care?”

I told him why I cared, that she was missing and quite possibly dead, and showed him my PI license. He squinted at my picture. Frowned some more. The spike in his chin quivered.

“What day was she here again?” he asked.

I told him the date on the receipt. He went over to a dirty calendar hanging on a wall near a door behind the bar. He peeled back a page and scanned the dates with his finger. As he did so, he unconsciously pushed his lower teeth out against his bottom lip. The movement projected the spike forward, making it look like a mini warhead ready to launch from his face.

He came back and stood in front of me. More frowning. More quivering. I found the spike highly distracting.

“Yeah,” he said. “I worked that night. Mind if I see the picture again?”

I showed him it again and he studied it some more and began nodding. The spike nodded, too. Damn that spike.

“Yeah, I remember her. Hard to forget that face, come to think of it.”

“That’s what they all say.”

“Seriously. She had everyone here going.”

“Who’s everyone?”

“Another bartender, the bus boys, some of the local chaps.”

“Did she do anything to get you boys going?”

“Didn’t have to. Just sitting here was enough.”

“She that pretty?” I asked.

“Look for yourself.”

I did, again, for the millionth time.

“She’s a real looker,” I said.

“That’s an understatement.”

“So what did she do when she was here?”

“She ordered a glass of wine, paid for it with cash, and then a guy comes in and sits next to her. We all sort of groaned, you know. The lucky son of a bitch.”

Ah, the plot thickens.

“Could you describe the guy?”

“Sure, we all checked him out. You know, the old ‘what’s he got that we don’t?’ sort of thing.”

“So what did he have that you didn’t?”

“Muscles. Thick neck.”

I showed the bartender another picture. The bartender took one look at it and nodded. “Yup,

that's him."

It was Flip Barowski, of course.

"Can you tell me what they did together?" I asked.

"Talked—and lots of it. The guy seemed upset, or something. Not necessarily at her, you see. He was talking—" he searched for the right word, "—excitedly."

"Like perhaps he was trying to get her to forgive an egregious error."

The bartender grinned and the missile in his lip turned up. T-minus and counting....

"Sure, something like that," he said and grinned again.

"Did they kiss, hold hands, any public displays of affection?"

He was nodding. "Yeah, I noticed his hand in her lap, but that was it. And then they left together and I haven't seen them since."

And he wouldn't, either.

Chapter Forty-seven

A true multi-tasker, I went from the pub straight to my next appointment.

I was early for the appointment, but I didn't care. *I'm a rebel like that.* Besides, I was giddy with excitement. I hadn't been to the Paramount lot in nearly forty years. I doubted the old crew was still there, and if anyone was, they sure as hell wouldn't know who I was, not now. Besides, I had just been a kid back then, determined and full of ambition. Paramount had given me my first movie break, and so, no matter what had happened after, they would always have a special place in my heart.

I pulled up to the pearly gates. Or, in this case, the massive wrought-iron gates right off Melrose Avenue. The security guard was packing heat. Movies are serious business.

"Name?" he said.

Elvis Presley.

"Aaron King," I said.

He scanned his list, found my name, checked it off with a pen that had been tucked behind his ear. He gave me a parking permit that I placed between my dash and windshield. A moment later, the red-

striped arm barrier rose. Access granted.

I drove slowly down a center road, passing between buildings and offices and sound stages. An entire street straight out of the Bronx appeared to my left, a beautiful replication of downtown living. Pedestrians were strolling up and down the thing as if it were the real deal. Maybe they were replications, as well. Movie magic.

My appointment was with Alpha-Beta Productions, the same company that had produced Miranda's first two movies. The same movies which just so happened to feature her being kidnapped.

I eventually found Alpha-Beta's building in the back corner of the lot. It was a massive, ivy-covered brick structure that didn't look entirely structurally sound. It was also a building I was certain I had visited many years before, and under very different circumstances, of course.

I made movies here. My *own* first movies.

I turned off the car and stepped outside. There are few places on earth like a major Hollywood studio; truly worlds unto their own. I breathed in the surprisingly fresh air, air only marginally tainted with combustion and smog. This was Hollywood air.

Magic air. Movies were created here, real movie magic, magic I had once been a part of. Those movies, no matter how campy, had put a lot of smiles on a lot of faces—as they would continue to do so—and, really, what more could you ask?

I stood there, next to my car, turning slowly, taking in what I could, knowing there was much more hidden from view, secret chambers and rooms and stages where the magic further happened.

Maybe I'll make a movie again.

As Aaron King.

Lord, help me.

I stopped scanning and I think my jaw dropped a little. Actually, I was certain my jaw had dropped. There, just around the corner of Alpha-Beta's brick building, was a fleet of white vans. White cargo vans. Five of them to be exact, all no doubt used to transport props, supplies and people to various sets and stages.

Milton the bum had seen a white cargo van, driven by a man with pockmarks. There's a million white cargo vans in L.A., of course. Hell, there's probably a hundred or so white cargo vans here on this lot.

I think this was a clue.

Chapter Forty-eight

Heart thumping steadily in my old chest, I stepped into the Alpha-Beta offices and was greeted by a pretty young thing sitting behind a kidney-shaped desk. By greeted, I mean stared at blankly. The pretty young thing was wearing ultra-hip rectangular glasses that made her blank stare look even more blank. She asked if she could help me. I told her she could. She waited. I waited. She then asked *how* she could help me. I told her how, that I had an appointment to see Gregory Ladd, owner of the company. She asked for my name and I gave it to her. She tried to contain her enthusiasm. One of her techniques for containing her enthusiasm was to push her narrow glasses up the bridge of her nose and stare at me blankly some more.

Now, what if I had said Elvis Presley? I wondered. Well, she would have laughed or called

security. Elvis is dead, remember?

"He's in a meeting," she said dispassionately. I hate dispassionately. "I'll let him know you're here as soon as he's available."

"That would be swell."

And, to my surprise, the empty veneer showed some life. "Did you just say *swell*?" she asked.

"I think so, yes."

"Haven't heard that word in, like, forever."

"It means 'so well'."

"Does it?"

Okay, I made that up. I've been making a lot of things up these past 30 years. What's another white lie?

"Sure," I said, and took a seat near the front door.

She went back to her computer, grinning, and for all I know Googling the root of *swell*. Who knows, maybe I'm right and I'm a genius after all. At least she had smiled, and, dammit, smiles always made me feel good.

Of course, her smile had also made me think of my daughter's smile. And as I waited for Mr. Ladd, I wondered how my baby girl was doing, and I wondered for the millionth time why I wasn't with her

and her celebrating her life. *Our* life.

Jesus, what the hell am I doing?

I looked again at the pretty young receptionist, but she was no longer smiling, which was just as well, because now she no longer looked like my little girl. Lost in thoughts of my empty life, I nearly failed to notice the man striding purposefully toward me down a side hallway.

"Aaron King?" he said, appearing before me, sticking out his hand. "I'm Gregory Ladd. Why don't we go back to my office and talk."

I looked up...and nearly gasped. Luckily, I'm a professional. The man standing above me, the man still holding out his hand toward me, was just the man I was looking for. Then again, I've been wrong before.

Not this time, baby.

And so I put on a big fake smile and stood on jelly knees and took the proffered hand and pumped it energetically. Gregory Ladd grinned, which made his badly scarred, pock-marked face significantly less menacing. He led the way back down the hallway to his office.

I followed obediently, my heart pounding

somewhere near my throat.

Chapter Forty-nine

The office wasn't so much an office as a massive open space with a desk in one corner of the room. The rest of the room was comprised of a lot of sofas and overstuffed chairs, and I imagined that the staff of Alpha-Beta had a lot of production meetings in here, hammering out all things to do with the making of movies.

I could also imagine nervous young screenwriters, sweating and stuttering, pitching their movies here. I'd been to such pitch meetings before with young screenwriters, and it's not a pretty sight.

The room was covered with movie posters and bookcases and heavy curtains. The ancient wood floor was badly scarred and rutted, although it had probably been freshly laid and rut-free back when I was here making movies.

It was humbling to know I was older than wood

itself. What was next? Dirt? Small hills? Dan Rather?

I was breathing slowly and calmly, or trying to. I was also trying to look cool and collected, and so, again, I reverted back to my acting days—no, not the parts where I break out in song and dance—but the parts where I really gave acting a go. I decided that an inquisitive, professional mask was best, and so, as Ladd stepped around his desk and sat down, I eased into character. Or at least tried to.

He gestured toward one of the cushioned chairs in front of his desk. “Have a seat Mr. King,” he said.

As I sat, he rather hastily clicked off a few images from his screen. Unfortunately, I didn’t catch what they had been. And, yes, I’m nosy like that. I get paid to be nosy.

His desk was cluttered with tattered scripts, books with broken spines and unmarked DVDs. I hate seeing books with broken spines. Something sort of barbaric about that. Reckless and wasteful. Maybe I had been a writer in a past life. Anyway, he saw me looking at the paperback novels and picked one up.

“We had the author in here last week. A cute little old lady who writes some of the hottest sex scenes

you've ever read."

"You got her number?" I asked.

He laughed. "She's a lot older than even you, Mr. King. In her eighties, I think. What are you...fifty, fifty-five?"

"Seventy-one."

"No shit?"

"No shit," I said.

"You're in great shape."

"It's all the salsa dancing I do. Helps burn off the chocolate fudge Ensures."

He was still grinning. "Ensures...that's the old-people protein shake, right?" he said.

"Right."

"You're a funny guy, King, I like that." He sat back and steepled his fingers under his chin. He studied me for a moment or two. The light in this room failed to reach the deeper craters of his acne scars. He looked, in this moment, menacing as hell. "You're here about Miranda Scott."

"Yes," I said.

"Word around town is that she went missing. I assume that's why you're here."

"You assume correctly."

“We’re all worried sick here.”

I’m sure you are, I thought, but knew that wasn’t entirely fair. After all, I wasn’t certain Ladd was the guy. Surely there were tens of thousands of men with facial scars in L.A. who had access to white cargo vans, who just so happened to produce two movies that features Miranda being kidnapped. *Not to mention I’m taking the word of a career bum—hardly an iron-clad witness.*

Still, say that to my thumping heart and the rush of adrenaline flooding my blood stream.

Easy, old boy.

“Yes, a difficult time for everyone,” I said, proud of my performance. “May I ask what your relationship to Miranda was?”

“I produced her first and second feature. We basically gave her her first shot.”

And, perhaps, feel entitled to her? A sort of ownership?

“So you were, in essence, her boss?”

“In essence.”

Gregory Ladd was a big man, although not overweight. He looked dense and strong, and if he was pissed off enough he could probably rip the

arms off his swivel chair and pound you to death with them. Then again, that could be my overactive imagination at work. For the most part, he avoided direct eye contact with me, which I found odd, especially coming from a big Hollywood executive who made a living making the right connections with the right people. Maybe I was the *wrong* connection.

"Have the police interviewed you?" I asked.

"No," he said, looking at me squarely. "Why would they do that? Our company hasn't worked with Miranda for two years. We officially cut ties. She's already made two other movies with a different studio."

And how about unofficially? I wondered.

Ladd was trying to sound cool. He was trying to sound nonchalant, but I heard it in his voice. It was jealousy. And there was a touch of anger, too. To me it was obvious: he didn't appreciate her leaving his production company.

Ladd was clicking his mouse nervously with his index finger, over and over...the movement was compulsive and revealing and I nearly reached across the desk and grabbed the guy by the throat

and demanded that he tell me where the hell Miranda was, but I knew that would be a mistake. One, he outweighed me by thirty pounds; two, he was thirty years younger than myself; and three, I just might have choked the life out of him.

Deep breath, big guy.

"What was your personal relationship with Miranda?" I asked.

He shrugged, clicked the mouse. "Typical, I suppose. Saw her on the set. She mostly communicated with the directors."

"So you did not have a personal relationship?"

"We were friends, yes. Many of us would go out drinking after a day's shoot. She and I were friendly, certainly, but when the films wrapped...."

His voice trailed off and I knew the feeling. It was the cruel, unspoken reality of making films. Crash course best friends for three months, then...nothing. Sometimes the friendships lasted into other movies and sometimes into something deep and real, but more often than not the friendship was done along with the completion of the movie. At least, that had been my experience.

"Were you two lovers?" I asked.

He quit clicking and looked slowly up at me. His face, I saw, was unusually and deeply pock-marked. He looked like a hardened criminal. An unfair stereotype, certainly, but one that might be accurate in this case.

"No," he said simply.

"Did you want to be?" I asked.

"You ask a lot of questions."

"When I find Miranda, I'm sure she'll appreciate my thoroughness."

"Well I *don't*," he said. "You're being rude and intrusive."

I said nothing. I wasn't looking for an argument, and I wasn't looking to one-up him with my dazzling wit. I wanted Miranda. I said nothing, and let his emotions play out as I sat there quietly.

"She was a beautiful young woman certainly," he said finally. "Any man would have jumped at the opportunity to be with Miranda."

His words hung in the air and I listened to them again, and again. "You just referred to Miranda in the past tense," I said. "Do you know something that I don't?"

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"You tell me."

"It was just a goddamn slip of the tongue."

"Right," I said. "Could happen to anybody. Do you ever drive those white cargo vans out front?"

"Sure, we all do sometimes. Why?"

"Do you ever shop at Trader Joe's?"

"Rarely. I don't see how that has to do with anything."

"Miranda was kidnapped from a Trader Joe's in a white cargo van. Follow me now?"

He looked at me openly and threateningly. His broad forehead crinkled. He leaned forward a little in his desk. I think I was supposed to shrink back in fear. I didn't shrink.

"I don't like what you're insinuating," he said.

"Hardly anyone would."

"This meeting is over."

"Figured as much," I said.

Chapter Fifty

As I left the Alpha-Beta production offices, I

quickly scanned the nearly empty parking lot—and spotted what I had hoped to see: A black Mercedes SL500, with a license plate that read: LADSTER.

Sometimes you just get lucky.

I exited the Paramount lot and turned immediately into a rundown gas station just up the street a little. I parked facing the street, with a good view of the Paramount lot. I bought a couple of Frappuccinos and a small box of Oreos at the station's convenience store, then waited in my car and watched the main exit from Paramount Studios.

It was late afternoon and sweltering. No telling when Ladd might leave, and if he was in the middle of a project, he could potentially be there all night.

Sweat poured from my brow. I finished off the first Frappuccino and started on the second. I also started on the Oreos. I was soon buzzing on caffeine and sugar and wishing like hell the convenience store also sold Vicodins.

You got issues, man.

I also thought about Gregory Ladd. He was certainly big enough to abduct Miranda, but that didn't mean much since there didn't appear to be

any sort of struggle in the Trader Joe's parking lot. But that didn't mean there hadn't been a struggle, either. Milton the bum wasn't sure what he had seen. First she had been leaving Trader Joe's, and the next thing he knew she was in the van.

He's also a drunk.

Sure, I thought. But he was there; he had seen something.

Ladd had been her boss once. Maybe he had a secret crush on her. Maybe he loved her from afar and couldn't stand the fact that she was making movies with someone else. *Or dating her ex-boyfriend again.*

And now that ex-boyfriend was dead.

I tapped my fingers on my super-heated steering wheel. I drank some more of the Frappuccino. Sweat rolled down into my ear. I shivered.

I didn't like how Ladd referred to Miranda in the past tense. As if he knew something had happened to her. As if he *knew* something had happened to her. As if he might be *personally responsible* for something happening to her.

I tapped some more on the steering wheel.

He had been jealous or irritated or angry that she

had left his production company to make movies elsewhere, that much was obvious to me. But perhaps it went deeper. Perhaps he *missed* making movies with her. Perhaps he was secretly in love with her.

I didn't know, but I was beginning to think that Miranda was destined to attract the crazies. Perhaps Ladd, like every other male who had crossed paths with her, had fallen victim to her charm and beauty. But he, unlike the others, had taken things a step further.

Like kidnap?

Maybe.

My cell rang. I looked at the faceplate and saw that it was Miranda's mother, Dana Scott. I flipped it open.

"Miss Scott," I said.

"Mr. King, this is Dana Scott."

"I would never have guessed."

But she wasn't listening, or, more likely, she couldn't quite hear me.

"You there, King?" she asked.

"I'm here."

"...barely hear...."

Sigh. I sat up straighter and held the phone out at a different angle, hoping that this would somehow help the reception. Amazingly, it did.

"Can you hear me now?" I asked.

"Yes, there you are," she said, her voice coming in sharp and clear. "Mr. King, I'm calling you off the case."

"Excuse me?"

"Your services are no longer needed, Mr. King."

"Has Miranda been found?"

"No."

"Then how could my services no longer be needed?"

"Did I or did I not hire you?"

"You did."

"Then I can fire you as I see fit."

"That's certainly your prerogative, yes."

"Then consider yourself fired, Mr. King."

"How about no."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I don't consider myself fired."

"Are you misunderstanding me?"

"Probably not."

"You're fired, Mr. King."

“I disagree,” I said. “At least tell me why—”

“Just get off the fucking case,” she screamed, cutting me off, and had her phone been an old-fashioned phone she would have slammed it down. Instead, she merely clicked off vehemently.

I snapped shut my phone and wondered what the hell had just happened.

Chapter Fifty-one

Two hours and another box of Oreos later, the black Mercedes SL500 finally exited the studio gates and hung a right. I almost cheered. I knew my relieved stomach did. I fumbled for the keys, gunned the car, and whipped out of the gas station, hanging what could only be described as a suicidal left turn onto Melrose. Cars honked, tires squealed, and somehow I made it out of the gas station alive.

Way to stay inconspicuous, King.

Luckily, this was L.A. and honking horns were the norm. Once settled in traffic, and ignoring the glares

and fingers of the recently cut-off, I eased close enough to the Mercedes to verify that it was indeed the LADSTER. Once verified, I fell back a few car lengths, and soon discovered that Gregory Ladd was not your typical L.A. driver; meaning, he drove slowly and was generally a peach on the road.

My cell rang again. I snapped it open.

"King," I said.

"King its Keys."

"We sound like a bad mattress commercial," I said.

"Yeah, no shit. Anyway, remember that case we talked about?"

"No, remind me."

"Don't fuck with me, King. I've got something for you."

Ladd hung a right and I followed him north up Vine.

"Go on," I said.

"My client just called me again."

"The one who hired you to follow me."

"Yeah, that one."

"You on the case again?" I asked.

"No, but my client asked for a referral."

“What do you mean?”

“My client asked, rather discreetly I might add, that if I knew of someone who could convince you to stay off a case.”

“Convince as in dead?”

“That’s how I took it, but then again maybe my client just wants you roughed up a little.”

“Hard to rough me up when I’ve got my cane.”

“That’s how I figure it,” he said.

“So did you give this person what they wanted?”

“Hell, no. I know some shooters, but I don’t throw work their way.”

“Business and ethics, I’ll be damned.”

“Look, King. The next guy she calls may not be as morally upstanding as me. The next guy she calls may find someone to do you.”

“She?”

“Yeah,” he said, and he was silent, or perhaps this was what is called a *pregnant pause*. At any rate, when he was done thinking about it, he said. “Yeah...*she*.”

“What’s her name?”

“Dana Scott,” he said.

I was silent. He was silent. The Mercedes drove

steadily on. The early evening was bright and warm. Vine Street was surprisingly quiet, so I dropped far back a few more car lengths without fear of losing Ladd.

“I owe you one,” I said.

“Or two,” he said, and he hung up.

Chapter Fifty-two

Twenty minutes later, the LADSTER turned into Laurel Canyon. Unfortunately, due to the main road being partially washed away by a massive rainstorm last year, Ladd and I—and seemingly all of Los Angeles—were redirected along a narrow side street.

Presently, I was three car lengths behind Ladd, and so far the movie producer made no indication of spotting me. Admittedly, I seemed to have a natural knack for following people. Must be the stalker in me.

While we crawled up the canyon, I worked the phone. First I called Detective Colbert. He seemed

overjoyed to hear from me.

"Just the man I wanted to talk to," he said. "But I'm in the middle of something."

"I have a request."

"Can it wait?"

"It's a matter of life and death."

"Who's life?"

"Mine."

"It can wait," he said, and hung up.

Five minutes he called back.

"We've got a body here," he said.

"Whose body?"

"Kid named Bryan Barowski. We found your card in his wallet. You sure get around for an old guy."

But I wasn't really listening and I had no comeback to that. My lungs had stopped working and something inside me seemed to sink down, way down, and it continued sinking.

I heard myself saying: "He killed himself."

"How do you know that?"

"Call it a hunch. How did he do it?"

"Gun to the temple. Left a note. Misses his brother, doesn't want to live without him, made some

horrible mistakes, tell his mother goodbye for him, yada yada.”

The weight was still there on my heart, on my lungs, and I wanted to pull over and get out of the car and breathe and maybe throw up.

Keep moving forward, King.

“What I don’t understand,” Colbert was saying, “is why I have to tell his mother that he loves her. Why the fuck couldn’t he call her before blowing his brains out?”

But Colbert’s merciless voice was getting smaller and smaller, and it was being steadily replaced by a tiny heartbeat. A fast and tiny heartbeat.

“I think I know who killed his brother,” I said.

“Who?”

And so I told him.

Chapter Fifty-three

Colbert went silent. I thought maybe I had lost him. I checked the phone’s connection. I hadn’t.

Traffic was stopped. Just ahead, a small tractor was slowly reversing into traffic, its scoop full of dirt and debris, busy clearing off the road. A man with a hard hat held up a crossing guard stop sign.

"Miranda's mother?" he finally said. "Dana Scott?"

"Yes."

"You're high, King."

"Often, but not this time."

He didn't laugh, nor did I expect him too. I walked him through Dana's strange behavior, from when she caught me going through Miranda's drawer of letters, to her hiring Keys to follow me, to her relieving Keys of his duty once he had established I made contact with the surviving twin, and to her desire to keep me permanently off the case. I also told him about the stunt the twins had pulled in their teens, which resulted in a rape.

"That was five years ago," said Colbert. "Why does the mother kill Flip Barowski now?"

"He and Miranda were seeing each other again."

"And you know this?"

"Yes."

"You've been busy, King."

"I happen to be an ace detective."

"Whatever," said Colbert. "So he's dating her daughter again, big deal. That still doesn't explain why she kills him."

I heard Dana Scott's words again: *"I told him that if I ever saw him or his fucking perverted brother again, I would kill them both."*

And now they were both dead. As a parent, I knew I would have said the same thing. Hell, I probably would have followed up on it, too, especially after what the twins did to Miranda. Feeling like a rat, I told Colbert about the threat.

"You think she followed up on her threat?" he asked.

"I think so, yes," I said.

"And then she tried to hire someone to stop you?"

"Appears so."

"So the mother kills the new boyfriend, who is actually the old boyfriend, and then a few days later the daughter disappears."

"Yes," I said.

"I don't see the connection," he said.

"There might not be one, at least not directly

related.”

“What the hell does that mean, King?”

“I’ll tell you when I know more.”

“When will you know more?”

“Soon,” I said, looking at the LADSTER three cars ahead. “Very soon.”

I heard him thinking on the line. I could almost see him shaking his head. Finally, he said, “Fine. Call me as soon as you find out anything.”

“You’ll be my first call, unless I need an emergency pepperoni pizza from Dominos.”

“Make it sausage, and I’ll spring for half,” he said, and clicked off.

Chapter Fifty-four

The tractor finished clearing the debris from the roadway, and the man in the hard hat flipped his sign around so that it now read SLOW. The long line of cars was moving again and I was giddy with excitement. Sitting in traffic drove me crazy, which is

why I taught myself every side street in L.A. Now my motto is: *all roads lead to home*.

We wound slowly up through Laurel Canyon, picking up speed exponentially as vehicles veered off to the many residential side streets. Good for traffic; bad for me. Bad because I would soon be exposed, and that's never a good thing.

When the last of the three cars between Ladd and myself turned into a long driveway, I immediately flipped on my turn signal. A moment later, I hung a right onto a random residential street. Ladd and his SL500 continued up the winding road.

I parked in front of a house along this side street, knowing that Ladd was getting away, but that was okay. Back at the gas station, with some time on my hands and a belly full of Oreos, I had called in Ladd's license plate and fifty bucks later I had his current address. Well, current at least to the DMV.

Since I knew Laurel Canyon like the back of my hand, age spots and all, I knew he was heading home, or somewhere damn close to it. A decade or so ago I had dated a girl who lived up here. A trapeze artist who was just flexible but hyper-flexible, which means she could do the splits and then some.

Yawza! Her home was up here, along with her practice equipment, and so on any given day neighbors could see her flying high through the air. I came up here and watched her practice as often as I could, and often caught myself drooling like an imbecile.

Maybe I should look her up someday.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel and wondered what I hoped to find at Ladd's house. I didn't know. I hadn't done a thorough background check on the man. He could have been married with five kids. He could have been pleasantly gay with five adopted kids. He didn't look gay, and he hadn't been wearing a wedding ring, and there hadn't been any pictures of kids or wives or girlfriends or boyfriends on his desk. Of course, none of that meant anything, but sometimes it did.

Then again, I could have the wrong guy. After all, I was taking the word of a bum. A dying bum, no less. And was the word *bum* even politically correct these days? *Residentially challenged?*

After ten more minutes, I put my car back into gear and turned back onto the main road, which led deeper into the canyon. Traffic was lighter now, and

moving fast. Being an old duffer, I rarely did anything fast, and that included driving.

Tough shit, folks. Reflexes aren't what they used to be. Deal with it.

And they did, by riding my ass all the way to my next turn-off a few miles away, a turn-off that just so happened to be Ladd's street.

Chapter Fifty-five

I drove slowly up the street, which was narrow and curved and rose steadily up into the surrounding hills. My heart, admittedly, was hammering in my chest.

The expensive homes up here were few and far between, their owners paying handsomely for privacy and acreage. Again, good for them, bad for me. As an investigator, sitting in my parked car, I would stand out like an old, wrinkled sore thumb. Well, maybe not *that* wrinkled.

Most of the residences had long driveways, with the houses tucked far back from the road.

Sometimes I could just make out some of the houses at the far end of long, curved driveways. Big homes with great views. Big homes with lots of privacy. I understand wanting privacy. I get it.

If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? Or, in this case, if someone screams, and no one is close enough to hear it, how much of an asshole is Ladd? Perhaps not the most elegantly presented philosophical riddle, but you get my point. Privacy meant Ladd could be doing anything out here. Anything he wanted.

I continued up the hill, checking the addresses. Ladd's house was coming up, just around the bend. I think I was holding my breath.

The curve in the road came and went, and there, appearing at the far end of a sweeping driveway, was Ladd's sprawling home, a home that could have doubled as a compound for a Colombian drug lord.

I drove slowly past it, giving it only a casual glance, and immediately two things caught my eye. One, there appeared to be a guest house behind the main home. Two—and this was a big two—a white

cargo van was parked in the driveway. I didn't see Ladd's Benz, but it could have been parked inside the garage.

As I continued past, I noted the front yard of the property was not gated, and the house itself appeared oddly empty and devoid of life, but that was only my gut reaction to the place.

I continued passed it and parked in a sort of dirt cul-de-sac at the top of the street. A handful of other cars were already parked here, and the cul-de-sac, I recalled, was actually the launching point to a fairly popular hiking trail down into the canyon. A trail that led away from Ladd's home. The parked cars were a blessing. Now I could hunker down without drawing attention to myself.

Good for me.

I backed into an spot, and from this vantage point, I could look down onto many of the homes on the street below. But not Ladd's. It was still hidden behind a dense thicket of trees and bushes.

Damn.

Laurel Canyon is comprised of a lot of hills, valleys and glens. This past winter had been a particularly wet one, and everything was still brightly

green and verdant. That would all change once summer hit. Through my windshield, I watched a brown hawk slowly circle the sky. Somewhere out there something small and furry didn't stand a chance.

I continued sitting there in the driver's seat, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel, wondering what the hell to do next.

The hawk continued circling. The sun continued setting. I was parked directly above Ladd's spacious home, but I couldn't see into it, although I had a hell of a clear shot of the main house's roof and guest house's roof.

Must be nice.

Of course, this coming from a guy who once owned something called Graceland. Another life, another time.

Another *lifetime*.

The hawk suddenly swooped low and hard, and disappeared behind a copse of trees. A heartbeat or two later, it appeared again, this time with something small dangling from its talons. I think it was a cottontail. Poor Peter. The hawk and its dinner rose higher and higher, then banked to port and was

gone.

So what now?

Plan B.

And what was plan B?

I didn't know, but I sure as hell better figure it out quick. Now, if I couldn't watch the house from the front, or from above, there was always the *back*, right? And, from where I sat, I could see the back of his house consisted of nothing but wooded wilderness.

Good for me. I think.

With Plan B taking shape, I stepped out of my car and went around to the trunk. There, I found a pair of binoculars and Mace in my emergency kit. I slipped the Mace into my front pocket, strapped the high-powered binoculars around my neck, and wondered what exactly I was doing.

Plan B, of course.

Oh, yeah. That.

Off to the side of the dirt road was the popular hiking trail that led down into the canyon. I said a little prayer, and then started down the trail.

Chapter Fifty-six

The trail was actually wide enough to be called a small road. *Not exactly roughing it out here.* I was willing to bet a convenient doggie-poopie bag dispenser or two would be set up somewhere along the path, complete with convenient drinking fountains and bathrooms for the humans.

Maybe even an espresso stand.

I hadn't planned on a hike today. Admittedly, I also hadn't planned on coming across my number-one suspect. These things happen. You adapt, roll with it. Luckily, I had been dressed in my all-purpose crime-fighting gear. Superman has his blue tights. I had my blue jeans, sneakers and polo shirt.

Good 'nuff.

The sun was setting beyond the western foothills, and the sky was awash in pale yellows, oranges and reds. The air was filled with a heady mix of sage and juniper, and a dozen or so other scents that my uninitiated nose couldn't distinguish.

Scrubby trees crowded the trail. The occasional

beaver tail cacti was mixed with barrel cacti and other succulents that I couldn't name, either. Maybe I should invest in a *Peterson's Field Guide to Southern California Flora and Fauna*.

Or not.

Other than the little critters that scurried off into the brush—mostly lizards, no doubt—I was alone on the trail. The hikers were no doubt much further along, or busy in the many port-a-potties.

Five minutes or so into my hike, I was already dripping sweat and wishing I had brought a bottle of water. No doubt all those damned Frappuccinos had seriously dehydrated me. And just as I was wondering if these barrel cactus had any water in them, I came across a water fountain. Nice. Next to the fountain was a bowl for your dog, and next to the bowl was a blue plastic crate with a recycling sticker on it. The plastic crate was nearly full with empty water bottles and other plastic bottles filled with the latest, high-tech water. I wondered if they were going to recycle the plastic crate, too. Anyway, still grateful—and maybe a little cranky from the heat—I drank deeply from the water fountain.

When I finally pulled away from the life-giving,

stainless steel teat, water dribbling from my chin and down the front of my shirt, I took stock of my present location. To my right was some rather dense woodland, a rarity here in southern California. To my left, about a mile or so away, were the houses, including Ladd's spacious estate. Straight ahead, the path continued down into the canyon, curving gently away from civilization.

Time to rough it.

I stepped off the main dirt path, stepped over knee-high grass and weeds, pushed aside a pathetic young scrub tree, and blazed my own trail.

The setting sun still had some heat. Sweat was still on my brow and presently streaming down the center of my back. And, of course, the instant I had stepped off the main trail, a spur of some sort had worked its way deep into my shoe. As I paused to dig it free, dozens of pesky gnats appeared as if from nowhere, circling my head like so many satellites.

I wanted a beer. *Bad.*

I waved them away and set out on a course that would, ideally, lead me directly behind Ladd's home. The closer I got to the homes, the quieter I tried to

be, but I think I probably still sounded like a bear drunk on fermented elderberries.

Davy Crockett I'm not.

And soon, slightly out of breath and thinking that a cane about now would have been a hell of a good idea, I came up behind Ladd's sweeping home.

And directly in front of me was the guest house, where a light was on inside.

It appears Ladd had a guest.

Chapter Fifty-seven

Admittedly, I had never done surveillance *behind* a house before, and probably never would again. Hey, life is full of firsts. At least, back here in the woods, there weren't any nosy neighbors to contend with. Coyote poo, yes. Rattlesnakes, yes. Nosy Nellies, no.

So far, other than the swarming gnats, which, I think, thought of me as their mother ship, nature was keeping herself at bay. Which was a very, very good thing.

I positioned myself on a grassy knoll above the northwest section of the house. From here I had a fine view into the backyard. A six-foot, stone fence encircled the entire back lot.

I figured I might be here a while. Hell, I might here all night, which had me wondering what sort of man-eaters roamed these hills in the dark? Mountain lions? Coyotes? Sasquatches?

So I hunkered down and took stock of the surrounding bushes and trees, feeling confident that I couldn't be spotted by anyone inside Ladd's house. Granted, a hungry mountain lion with a hankering for hound dog could be a problem.

And, yeah, I'm all hound dog, baby.

From my perch on the knoll, I lifted my binoculars and slowly scanned Ladd's backyard. Ah, there was an inviting-looking pool and an equally inviting-looking Jacuzzi. A brick outdoor grill, two patio tables with blue umbrellas. The backyard was mostly paved, but there were small patches of grass here and there. An actual dog house was sitting on one of those grassy patches. A *big* dog house. Damn. Scattered throughout the grass like steaming land

mines were so many dog piles. *Big* dog piles.

So far there wasn't any sign of the dog, although I seriously doubted this dog would turn out to be fake. Maybe it was inside with Ladd, or snoozing inside it's spacious dog house.

The main house was a single-story ranch with clapboards and vertical siding, concrete chimney and wood shingled roof. There was even an iron weather vane rooster on one of the cupolas. For someone I seriously suspected of having abducted another human being, Ladd was surprisingly exhibitionistic, as most of the curtains and blinds were wide open. Perhaps he never suspected someone would approach from the rear of the house. Perhaps he liked living dangerously. Or perhaps I was barking up the wrong tree.

A coyote howled from somewhere.

Bad choice of words. I suddenly felt very alone and very exposed out in the woodland. Granted, this wasn't the deep, dark woods, but I was an old man with old knees, surrounded by hungry coyotes.

Don't be such a baby.

Something scurried in the brush next to me, and I jumped like a schoolgirl. I whipped around in time to

see a squirrel scurry up the twisted trunk of an ancient, dusty-looking tree.

Relax. Deep breaths.

I turned back to the gated home before me. I knew Ladd was my guy, and I knew this to the very core of my being. Call it a gut feeling. Call it instinct. Call it whatever you want. Either way, he was dirty.

The house was silent. The only indication that someone might be inside was an ambient, bluish glow coming from deep within the house. Then again, it could have been anything. Glow from a computer screen. Night Light. Portal into Hell. And with the dwindling daylight, the hint of light was turning into something more than a hint. My best guess was that Ladd was alone and watching TV.

I turned the field glasses over to the guest house.

It was a mini-ranch house, complete with pitched roof and clapboards and a brick veneer. It was quite a bit smaller than the main house, but still bigger than my apartment. Suddenly depressed, I slid the binoculars over to a pair of double windows facing me on the west side of the house.

And froze.

There was a face in the window, watching me.

And not just any face.
It was Miranda Scott.

Chapter Fifty-eight

I blinked and gasped and the face in the window was instantly gone, replaced now by swaying dark curtains. I lowered the field glasses.

What the hell had I just seen?

Surely I was hallucinating. I mean, c'mon, I'd been obsess-ing over Miranda's face for two weeks now. This was a classic case of wish-fulfillment. I *wanted* to find her, and so I did. At least in my mind. The face had probably belonged to someone else, and I had transposed it with Miranda's own. That is, if the face was even there to start with. Maybe I had made it up.

Great theory. Now convince your hammering heart.

I lifted the field glasses again, but now the curtains hung limply, inertly. They completely concealed the window.

It had been her. It had been her. And she had been watching me.

I took a deep, shuddering breath. I had just exhaled when the rear sliding glass door to the main house opened. I swung the binoculars to the left and watched as Gregory Ladd appeared, wearing a silk Oriental robe and holding a bottle of wine and a single wine glass. Almost immediately a rottweiler—and easily one of the biggest dogs I'd ever seen—appeared by his side. Ladd promptly kicked it away, cursing at it. The dog yelped and skittered away, although it was too big to skitter very far. It came back for more but kept its distance, its nub of a tail wagging, looking confused but in need of attention. It got none from Ladd, who instead headed straight for the guest house. He crossed the small area between the main house and the guest house, an area about the width of his pool, and then disappeared around the corner of the guest house. A few seconds later I heard a door open, then slam shut.

A light turned on in the guest house.

* * *

My chest hurt. The hike down the trail, although not particularly strenuous, had taken a lot out of me. I

forced myself to take deep breaths.

If that had indeed been Miranda, then what the hell was going on inside there? If she was indeed trapped, why not just bust out the window and get the hell out of there? Obviously, she wasn't being restrained. Was she in there on her own free will? I didn't know, but she could explain it to the cops.

Yes, the cops!

I pulled my cell phone, flipped it open. No reception. Should have known. Never once, ever, had I gotten reception out here in the past.

No problem, right? Just hike back out of here, find my car, drive around until I get cell reception, and then make the call to Detective Colbert.

Good enough.

And just as I turned to head back up the trail, I heard something that chilled me to my very core. An ear-splitting scream, and it came from the guest house.

Chapter Fifty-nine

I stopped in my tracks and turned back to the guest house, torn about what I should do. Stay or go for help? And if I stayed, what the hell could I possibly do? I was an old man with a can of Mace. Ladd was huge—and he had a rottweiler, to boot.

And as I stood there, debating what to do, another scream ripped through the dusk air.

And another.

And another.

Jesus! My blood ran cold. The rottweiler, which had been pacing out in front of the small house, paused, lifted its ears, and then resumed its pacing. Perhaps it was used to the screaming.

I wasn't.

Another scream. This one more blood curdling than the others. The screams, although loud to me due to my proximity, were still oddly muffled, as if the house had been sound proofed.

What the fuck is going on in there?

The scream came again, this time long and wavering and filled with hysteria and pain and fear, and no one heard it.

No one but me.

I removed the Mace from my pocket, gripped it firmly. There was no time for the police. I dashed toward the guest house, realizing that a gun about now would have been nice. *Too late now.*

I reached the outer stone fence. The rottweiler, perhaps agitated and distracted by the screaming coming from within the guest house, hadn't noticed me yet. I didn't blame it. Hell, I was agitated and distracted by the screaming.

I knew I had to act, and I knew I had to act *now*. I also knew that I was about to confront one hell of a big dog, and all I had for protection was an aerosol spray can.

Fuck me.

Just as I reached the outer stone fence, sucking wind, another scream, much louder and more prolonged than the others, pierced the cooling late afternoon air. Maybe it just seemed louder than the others because I was closer to the guest house now. Maybe. Either way, it raised the hair on my neck.

I'm Elvis fucking Presley. I used to sing in the Astrodome. I used to make movies. The world adores me to this day, and probably forever will. So what the hell am I doing out here?

Good question. Night was falling rapidly. A cool wind made its way around the house, lifting my dyed brown hair. Sweat stung my eyes.

Deep breaths, big guy. You can do this.

Another scream, followed now by a lot of whimpering. I checked my cell phone, still no signal.

It looks like it's just you and your can of Mace, big guy.

I'm a lover, not a fighter, although, as an actor, I had been trained to punch, or at least to *simulate* a punch. In real life, I rarely, if ever, got into brawls.

I'm too old for brawls. I'm too pretty for brawls.

The Mace did not feel reassuring. It felt small and inadequate and I could almost feel the dog's teeth sinking into my calf now.

Fuck.

Deep breaths.

Another, piercing scream. My blood ran cold. Hell, my blood felt as it had frozen in my veins.

Do it. Now!

I reached for the top of the stone fence and started climbing.

Chapter Sixty

Up I went, clambering awkwardly, banging my old knees, scratching my old forearms. I hadn't climbed an eight-foot fence in God knows how long, maybe since I was a kid, and the can of Mace in my hand made climbing especially cumbersome.

Grunting and nearly falling backwards, I finally swung a leg up and over the top of the fence. From that position, with one leg hanging over each side, gasping for breath, I looked into Ladd's backyard—and my heart stopped cold.

The rottweiler was no longer distracted by the screaming from the guest house. No, it was focused on something else entirely. *Me*. It stood about thirty feet away, frozen in mid-pace, staring at me, drool oozing from its hanging jowls.

We stared at each other for another second or two.

And then it charged, hitting top speed in two strides or less. The deepest, most horrific growl I had ever heard in my life erupted from its massive lungs.

I dropped down from the wall—and promptly landed on the edge of something, perhaps a rock or a brick. Either way, my ankle rolled, something snapped, and I cried out. Searing, white-hot pain lanced through me. I collapsed in the surrounding weeds, and lost the can of Mace in the process.

From my side, I had a ground's-eye view of the charging rottweiler, and it wasn't a pretty sight. All teeth and slobber and muscle and jawbone. The ground actually shook. My bowels instantly turned to water.

Gasping, I groped frantically for the Mace, searching the weeds and grass.

The dog continued to charge.

My fingertips touched something metal and round.

The dog lunged.

I threw myself back against the stone wall and swung my hand around and pressed the dispenser as hard as I could, praying to sweet Jesus that the nozzle was facing *away* from me—

A powerful jet of oleo-resin capsicum erupted from the canister and straight into the charging dog's

face. The rottweiler reacted instantly. It lost its footing, tumbled, and slammed sideways into me. Then it proceeded to claw at its face with both paws, backing away and yelping loudly and continuously. A hideous, pitiful sound.

It backed all the way onto the brick path that ran around the perimeter of the backyard. Once on the path, the dog, amazingly, began running. And it ran blind, banging its way around the side of the guest house and disappearing from view, where it crashed loudly into what I assumed was some sort of metal trash can. Probably put a hell of a dent in the can.

And loud enough to wake the dead.

I had to hurry. Ignoring the pain in my right ankle, I used the wall to help me find my feet, and then hopped on one foot over to the side of the guest house. My ankle was bad. Very bad. I leaned against the corner of the house, sucking air, sick to my stomach.

A door opened slowly from around the corner.

I fought to control my breathing. The dog was still making hideous noises from the rear of the guest house. I felt bad for it, even though it would have surely ripped my throat out. And I needed that throat.

I had my first gig on Monday, which I fully intended to make.

“Purgatory?” said a voice hesitantly. It was Ladd’s voice. It came again: “Purgie?”

Purgie?

The dog didn’t respond, although it did howl even louder.

“I’ve got a gun,” said Ladd loudly. I assumed he wasn’t talking to Purgie.

Now I heard footsteps. Ladd was trying to be quiet but I heard him crunching carefully over some loose rocks. Behind me, Purgie had settled down a little, although he/she/it was still whimpering pitifully.

Another crunch. Closer now.

I gripped the Mace, making sure it was faced away from me. I raised it up, and waited.

Chapter Sixty-one

I held my breath.

From within the guest house came the sounds of someone sobbing. A *woman* sobbing. And from

around the corner from where I was standing, I could hear someone breathing. Ragged breathing. Nervous breathing. Scared breathing.

I gripped the Mace. *Lord help me.*

I wasn't even entirely sure of the Mace's range. Something like that might have been a good thing to know.

Too late to worry about it now.

I took a deep breath, held it. More ragged breathing from around the corner. More scraping footsteps. And now I could smell faint traces of alcohol. And sweat. Lots of sweat, and it wasn't my own.

I remembered his words: *"I have a gun."*

I still had the element of surprise, which meant I had to move *now*. But I didn't want to move now. The guy around the corner had a fucking gun, and all I had was a fucking little can of Mace, which might as well have been a can of spray deodorant.

But I had the element of surprise. And the Mace wasn't deodorant. I had seen the effect it had had on the rottweiler.

Just get him straight in the face, King. The eyes. And don't expose your body.

When I saw the barefoot appear from around the corner, I dropped to a knee, swung my arm around the corner, and fired the Mace.

Ladd was there, completely naked, holding a hunting rifle. He had also been looking to his right, which was good for me. By the time his peripheral vision caught movement to his left, the Mace had already hit him straight in the face. Granted, my first shot hit him somewhere in his disgusting, jiggling torso, but I moved the powerful stream up and into his face.

He swung his weapon around, but it was too late. Screaming, he flung the rifle aside and clawed at his eyes like a wild animal, cursing and spitting. I stood and moved around the corner and kept on spraying him until he lay curled on the ground, whimpering and moaning.

And even then, I continued spraying until the canister was empty.

Chapter Sixty-two

Hopping on one foot and dragging the other, I retrieved Ladd's rifle. With the producer currently incapacitated and whimpering feebly—and the dog nowhere to be found—I headed over to the guest house. I actually used the rifle as a cane. Once at the door, I paused to gather what little wits I had remaining, and tried the handle. Locked, of course. The keys were with Ladd, perhaps still clutched in his hands, but he was currently writhing and thrashing and not being very accommodating.

Sobbing from within the guest house.

Lord, Jesus.

Maybe if I had two good legs I could have kicked the door in. *Or tried to.* Instead, I found a fist-sized rock in a nearby flower garden, and proceeded to bash the doorknob until the fucking thing fell off, making enough racket to wake the dead. I didn't care about the dead. I cared about the person crying within.

Blood pounding in my ears, adrenaline surging through my veins, I pushed the badly damaged door open, and stepped inside, holding the rifle out before me.

“Hello,” I said.

I was greeted by an overwhelming stench. No, nothing rotting. Just filthy human waste. Sweat and excrement and piss and anything else that could come from a human body. Bile rose sharply in the back of my throat, but I held it together. I stepped deeper into the room, holding the rifle out before me like a bayonet.

“Hello,” I called again. “I saw you earlier, looking at me through the window.”

No response, although I heard something close to whimpering now coming from down a small hallway. The guest house was probably one bedroom, one bathroom. I was currently standing in a small, dark living room. The room was decorated modestly with a couch, love seat and reading chair, but I had a sense that it wasn't used much.

I crossed through the room and headed slowly down the short hallway. The whimpering was growing louder. The stench was growing stronger, too. I fought to control the gorge rising up in my throat.

There was a light on in the room at the end of the hallway. Along the way, I took a peek inside a small

and disgusting-looking bathroom. Towels and clothing were every where. So was fecal matter, as if whoever had tried to use the bathroom had no clue what to do or how to do it.

My stomach heaved. I fought through it.

I came up to the bedroom. The door was cracked open. Yellow light issued out. Anything could be beyond that door. Anything at all. How do you prepare yourself for the unexpected.

You don't. You can't.

I pushed the door open with the tip of the rifle. The room was small, made smaller by a massive four-poster bed sitting squarely in the center of the room. Leather straps hung from the bed's crossbeams. Next to the bed, close to the door, was a low bookcase. Lining the top shelf were whips and chains, ball gags, dildos, anal plugs, and every other type of kinky toy known to man.

On the corner of the bookcase was a small pile of pills—roofies, no doubt. Ladd had probably kept her drugged and high for the past two weeks.

Speaking of *her*, in the center of the bed, partially hidden by what could only be described as a very disgusting comforter, was a human figure. A lithe

figure who was crying softly.

I stepped deeper into the room, confident that there was no one else in here. I moved over to the bed, reached down, and pulled up one corner of the comforter. There, shaking badly, naked and curled in the fetal position, covered in cuts and bruises and sweat and tears and stink, was Hollywood's newest starlet, Miranda Scott.

I covered her back up and used the phone in the guest house to call Detective Colbert.

Chapter Sixty-three

I stood with Detective Colbert in Ladd's spacious kitchen. We were alone, looking out through the sliding glass door. The sky beyond the distant rolling hills was purple and eternal. Less eternal, and a lot closer, the guest house was a beehive of activity as crime scene investigators did their thing. Earlier, with sirens blaring and lights flashing, Miranda had been rushed off to a nearby hospital. All indications

were that she was going to be fine, at least physically.

Colbert said, "The screaming you heard. We figure she was having a bad trip. There weren't any fresh wounds. At least, none that we could see initially. Probably gave her too much of something, or gave her something she couldn't handle. Either way, she isn't coherent right now, so we don't know the full extent of what he's done to her."

"But she's alive," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"You think he was going to kill her?"

"Hard to say. We'll go through the place thoroughly. But so far, looks like he kept her here for his own sick pleasure." Colbert still wouldn't look at me. Jaw rigid, he kept his gaze on the guest house outside. "I've got more news."

"Go on."

"Dana Scott confessed to killing Flip Barowski."

I nodded. We both looked out through the glass door. The early night sky was now mostly black now, with a smattering of stars. If not for the L.A. smog there would have been more than just a smattering of stars.

Colbert continued, "I approached Dana myself, asked her what she knew about the killing, and she broke down instantly. Told me everything. She has a pistol at home, owned by her deceased husband. She calls the kid up and tells him she hears that he's seeing her daughter again. He says yes, and she tells him to stay away from her daughter. He says no, that he loves her. She says fine, let's talk about it, and he agrees. They were supposed to meet in a parking lot, but she comes up behind him and puts a bullet in his head."

"Just like she promised she would do," I said.

"Okay, fine. I get that. The mother warned the kid to stay away, and he doesn't stay away. That doesn't explain how Miranda ends up here, in this sicko's house, being sexually abused for the last two weeks."

"I think he was following her," I said.

"Then kidnaps her? Not even your bum claims he heard her resisting."

"I say he approached her in the van as she came out of the store. Made it seem like a coincidence. Probably offered to buy her dinner. Maybe talk about a movie deal."

“Not to mention her boyfriend had just been murdered,” said Colbert. “Maybe she was looking for a friend to talk to.”

“So he entices her inside his van. She has no problem getting inside, thinking of him as a friend, an ex-boss, the person who gave her her first big break.”

“So she gets in the van....” added Colbert.

“And he takes her back to his place. Maybe offers her a drink—”

“And the sick fuck slips her a roofie,” said Colbert.

“That’s the way I see it,” I said.

“Well, we’ll know more when she comes down from her high. Luckily nothing appears to be permanent. Physically, she’ll come out of this fine. Emotionally....”

“Emotionally, she’s going to need a lifetime of therapy.”

We were silent, contemplative. I had taken some pain killers that I found in Ladd’s cupboards. The pain in my ankle was still there, but it had been reduced to a dull throbbing. I can handle a dull throbbing.

I'll take some Vicodins later. Knock it right out.

I said, "Some people obsessed over her, sometimes even for years. Some people just followed her around like lovestruck puppies."

"And this sick fucker takes it a step further."

"Yes," I said.

We were silent some more. The purple was gone from the sky, and more stars came out. The crime scene crew was still going in and out of the guest house. I wondered if Ladd had any buried bodies out here, or if this had been a one-time thing? Hard to say, but I suspected Ladd had been obsessing about her for years. Much like Flip Barowski. And perhaps many other males Miranda came into contact with.

"You found her, King," said Colbert.

"Not bad for an old man," I said.

"Not bad for anyone."

Chapter Sixty-four

The lights were bright, just the way I remembered them. The Pussycat was packed, just the way I remembered most of my concerts. The crowd was older, which was fine. So was I.

Seated in the back, behind the dance floor at a small round table, were four people. My personal guests for the night. Clarke was there, nearly drunk. I could just make him out. He hadn't taken his eyes off me all night long. Kelly my on again/off again was seated next to him. She looked elegant and sophisticated and damn beautiful. I also noticed she had accepted a drink or two from some other men, talking to them, laughing with them, touching them, flirting with them. Sigh. It's hell being in an open relationship, but there you have it. The gal sitting next to her often had my full and undivided attention. My therapist, Dr. Vivian. She kept her eyes on me and ignored the attention of the other men. I loved that about her. The last guest was, of course, Miranda. The young starlet looked beautiful and captivating, easily the most beautiful girl here tonight. Everyone knew it. But she seemed impervious to the attention, completely unaware. She also looked dead, lifeless, although once or twice I had caught her tapping her

fingers and bobbing her head to the music. She was coming around, slowly, but the healing process would take a lifetime, if ever.

I had spent the weekend alone, trying to sober up. Now I was down to just five Vicodins a day, but I wanted more. Many more. It was a start.

Becky and I worked well together. Smooth transitions from one song to the next. She was a talented pianist, versatile, and I am an old pro, although a little rusty.

As I sang, as I did my groovy thing, I noticed a crowd was gathering at the nightclub's main entrance. Someone was there. Someone important, obviously.

I used to be important. Maybe someday I would be again. Maybe. But then again, I had given all this up before. Did I really want it all back again?

Maybe. Maybe not.

Anyway, whoever was causing the commotion was now making their way towards the stage area, towards me. The crowd was following, forming and reforming, a sort of moving huddle. I kept singing, but I also kept my eye on whoever was approaching.

And when the crowd finally parted, when I saw for

the first time who was causing all the ruckus, I gasped.

It's nearly impossible for me to be star-struck, but I was this evening. It was the brightest star of them all.

My baby girl Lisa took a seat in a booth against the far wall, surrounded by a small entourage of men and women and bodyguards. She signed a dozen or so autographs before her bodyguards closed in around her. Most in the crowd got the hint and dispersed, although some still buzzed around her.

I stopped singing. Hell, I *couldn't* sing. Becky glanced over at me from the piano, eyebrows raised. I quickly gave her the thumbs up. She shrugged and went on playing.

And when I looked back at my daughter's table, I saw her looking at me. No, *staring* at me. My breath caught. I think her breath caught, too. And then, slowly, slowly she smiled. A big, beautiful smile.

Did she know who I was? I think so. Recognition seemed to have dawned across her face. Perhaps she had known who I was before coming, and so the shock to her wasn't so great.

I didn't know, but I did know one thing: someone

had set this all up. Someone who had known about her and me. Someone who had known where I lived. The anonymous watch. The CDs. The CDs that weren't even available on the market yet. CDs that were privy to only a select few, including entertainment attorneys.

I finally put it all together.

I looked at Clarke. He was grinning like a schoolboy, or a drunkard. He winked at me, looking pleased as hell. I would kill him later.

No, I'm going to kiss him later.

I found my voice again, which came stronger and clearer. Becky nodded at me and continued hitting the keys and doing her groovy thing, and when the song was over, I spoke into the microphone.

"Ladies and gentleman, we have a special guest here tonight." Most in the crowd stopped dancing or looked up from their tables. I continued, "She's a beautiful little thing who makes her daddy so proud." I sounded like Elvis. I knew it, but didn't give a damn. "Lisa Marie Presley, ladies and gentleman."

I pointed to her, and the crowd turned—especially those who were unaware of her entrance

—and a massive cheer erupted. From her seat, she blushed mightily and waved, but never once did she take her eyes off me.

“Come up here, little lady, and sing a song with me.”

She didn't budge. Not at first. The crowd cheered louder and urged her onward. She finally gave in, as I knew she would. She slipped out of the booth, smiling shyly.

With a bodyguard trailing behind, she made her way up to the stage. The big guy held out a hand and she used it to step up onto the stage. The crowd cheered harder.

She ignored them all and kept her eyes on me.

I ignored them, too, and held out my own hand. She crossed the stage and stepped into the light and she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life. She took my hand, and I pulled her into me, as if we were dancing. There were tears in her eyes and I think she was shaking.

“Daddy?” she asked me, although I could barely hear her words. Mostly I read her lips, and, I'm sure, others did as well.

“It's me, little darlin'.”

I looked over at Becky, whose mouth was hanging open. I motioned for her to play something, and she finally did, something by Elvis. "Love Me Tender."

Bill the manager with his blue shades came running out on stage. He placed an extra mic in front of my daughter, sneaking a peak at the two of us together, shock on his face. He quickly dashed off the stage. Those on the dance floor had quit dancing. Those drinking beer had quit drinking beer. A very surreal quiet descended over the Pussycat. I sensed all eyes on us, and I sensed many open mouths. And then I heard the whisperings of "Elvis." And then the whisperings grew louder and louder, until they were chanting my name.

"Are you ready, baby?" I asked her.

"I'm ready, daddy."

"Follow my lead," I said. "Like old times."

"Like old times," she said.

The End

(To be continued in *You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog*, available at your favorite ebookseller in early 2012.)

THE BODY DEPARTED

by

J.R. RAIN

THE BODY DEPARTED

Published by J.R. Rain

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# The Body Departed

“Was it doubted that those who corrupt their own  
bodies conceal themselves;  
And if those who defile the living are as bad as they  
who defile the dead?  
And if the body does not do as much as the Soul?  
And if the body were not the Soul, what is the Soul?”

—“I Sing the Body Electric”  
*Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman

1.

I stepped through the wall and into my daughter's



bedroom.

She was sleeping contentedly on her side. It was before dawn and the building was quiet. The curtains were open and the sky beyond was black. If there were any stars, they were lost to the L.A. smog. The curtains were covered with ponies, as was most of the room. A plastic pony light switch, a pony bed lamp, pony wallpaper and bedspread. Someday she would outgrow her obsession with ponies, although I secretly hoped not.

*A girl and her pony. It's a beautiful thing.*

I stepped closer to my sleeping daughter, and as I did so she shifted slightly towards me. She mewed like a newborn kitten. Crimson light from her alarm clock splashed over her delicate features, highlighting a slightly upturned nose and impossibly big eyes. Sometimes when she slept her closed eyelids fluttered and danced. But not tonight. Tonight she was sleeping deeply, no doubt dreaming of sugar and spice and everything nice.

Or of Barbies and boys and everything in-between.

I wondered if she ever dreamed of me. I'm sure she did at times. Were those dreams good or bad?



Did she ever wake up sad and missing her father?

*Do you want her to wake up sad?*

*No, I thought. I want her to wake up rested, restored and full of peace.*

I stepped away from the far wall and glided over to the small chair in the corner of her room. We had made the chair together one weekend, a father/daughter project for the Girl Scouts. To her credit, she did most of the work.

I sat in it now, lowering my weightless body into it, mimicking the act of sitting. Unsurprisingly, the chair didn't creak.

As I sat, my daughter rolled over in her sleep, facing me. Her aura, usually blue and streaked with red flames, often reacted to my presence, as it did now. The red flames crackled and gravitated toward me like a pulsating static ball, sensing me like I sensed it.

As I continued to sit, the lapping red flames grew in intensity, snapping and licking the air like solar flares on the surface of the sun. My daughter's aura always reacted this way to me. But only in sleep. Somehow her subconscious recognized me, or perhaps it was her soul. Or both. Either way, from



this subconscious state, she would sometimes speak to me, as she did now.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Hi, baby,” I said.

“Mommy said you got hurt real bad.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Mommy said that a bad man hurt you and you got killed.”

“Mommy’s right, but I don’t want you thinking about that right now, okay?”

“Okay,” she said sleepily. “Am I dreaming, Daddy?”

“Yes, baby.”

We were quiet and she shifted subtly, lifting her face toward me, her eyes still closed in sleep. There was a sound from outside her window, a light tapping. I ignored it, but it came again and again, and then with more consistency. I looked over my shoulder and saw that it was raining. I looked back at my daughter and thought of the rain, remembering how it felt on my skin, on my face. Or, rather, I was *trying* to remember. Lately, such memories of the flesh were getting harder and harder to recall.

“It’s raining, Daddy,” she said.



"Yes."

"Do you live in the rain?"

"No."

"Where do you live, Daddy?"

"I live here, with you."

"But you're dead."

I said nothing. I hated to be reminded of this, even by my daughter.

"Why don't you go to heaven, Daddy?"

I thought about that. I think about that a lot, actually. I said, "Daddy still has work to do."

"What kind of work?"

"Good work."

"I miss you," she said. "I miss you so much. I think about you every day. I'm always crying. People at school say I'm a crybaby."

"You're not a crybaby," I said. "You're just sad." My heart broke all over again. "It's time to go back to sleep, angel."

"Okay, Daddy."

"I love you, sweetie."

"I love you, too, Daddy."

I drifted up from the small wooden chair and



moved across the room the way I do—silently and easily—and at the far wall I looked back at her. Her aura had subsided, although some of it still flared here and there. For her to relax—to truly relax—I needed to leave her room entirely.

And so I did. Through the wall.

To hell with doors.

## 2.

I was standing behind him, reading the newspaper from over his shoulder, as I did every morning.

His name was Jerrold and he was close to sixty and close to retirement. He lived alone and seemed mostly happy. He was addicted to internet poker, but, as far as I could tell, that was his only vice.

*Thank God.*

He turned the paper casually, snapping it taught, then reached for his steaming mug of coffee, heavy



with sugar and cream, and took a long sip. I could smell the coffee. Or at least a *hint* of it, just like I could smell a hint of his aftershave and hair gel. My senses were weak at best.

As he set the mug down, some of the coffee sloshed over the rim and onto the back of his hand. He yelped and shook his hand. I could see that it had immediately reddened.

*Pain.*

I hadn't known pain in quite a long time. My last memory of it was when I had been working at a friend's house, cutting carpet, and nearly severed my arm off.

I looked down at my translucent arm now. Although nearly imperceptible, the scar was still there—or at least the ghostly hint of it.

Still cursing under his breath, Jerrold turned back to his paper. So did I. He scanned the major headlines, and I scanned them along with him. After all, he was my hands in this situation.

He read through some local Los Angeles news, mostly political stuff that would have bored me to tears had I tears to be bored with. I glanced over at his coffee while he read, trying to remember what it



tasted like. I think I remembered.

*I think.*

Hot, roasted, bitter and sweet. I knew the words, but I was having a hard time recalling the actual flavor. That scared me.

Jerrold turned the page. As he did so, something immediately caught my eye; luckily, it caught his eye, too.

A piano teacher had been murdered at St. Luke's, a converted monastery that was now being used as a Catholic church and school. Lucy Randolph was eighty-six years old and just three days shy from celebrating her sixtieth anniversary with her husband.

I had known Mrs. Randolph. In fact, she had been my own music teacher back when I was a student at St. Luke's. She had been kind to a fault, a source of inspiration and joy to her students, and especially to me.

And now, according to the report, someone had strangled her, leaving her for dead on the very piano she had taught from. Perhaps the very same piano I had been taught from.

*Damn.*



Jerrold clucked his tongue and shook his head and moved on to the next page, but I had seen enough. I stepped away,

“You’re still young, Jerrold,” I said to him. “Lose fifteen pounds and find someone special—and ditch the gambling.”

As I spoke, the small hairs on the back of his neck stood up and his aura shifted towards me. He shivered unconsciously and turned the page.

### 3.

We were in Pauline’s apartment.

She was drinking an apple martini and I wasn’t, which was a damn shame. At the moment, I was sitting in an old wing back chair and she was on the couch, one bare foot up on a hand-painted coffee



table which could have doubled for a modern piece of abstract art.

"If you ever need any extra money," I said, "you could always sell your coffee table on eBay."

"It's not for sale," she said. "Ever."

"What if you were homeless and living on the streets and needed money?"

"Then I would be homeless and living on the streets with the world's most bitchen hand-painted coffee table."

Her name was Pauline and she was my best—and only—friend. She was also a world-famous medium. She could hear me, see me and sometimes even touch me. Hell, she could even read my thoughts, which was a bit disconcerting for me. She was a full-figured woman, with perhaps the most beautiful face I had ever seen. She often wore her long brown hair haphazardly, a look that would surely have your average California girl running back to the bathroom mirror. Pauline was not your average California girl. She wasn't your average girl by any definition, spending as much of her time in the world of the dead as in the world of the living. Luckily, she just so happened to live in the very building I was



presently haunting.

"Yeah, lucky me," said Pauline, picking up on my thoughts.

She did her readings out of a small office near downtown Los Angeles, usually working with just one or two clients a day. Some of her sessions lasted longer than others and tonight she was home later than usual, hitting the booze hard, as she often did. I wouldn't call her a drunk, but she was damn close to being one.

"I'm not a drunk," Pauline said absently, reading my thoughts again. "I can stop any time I want. The booze just helps me...release."

"Release?" I asked.

"Yeah, to forget. To unwind. To *uneverything*."

"You should probably not drink so much," I said.

She regarded me over her martini glass. Her eyes were bloodshot. Her face gleamed with a fine film of sweat. She wasn't as attractive when she was drunk.

"Thanks," she said sarcastically. "And do you even remember what it's like being drunk?"

I thought about that. "A little. And that was below the belt."



“Do you even have a belt?”

I looked down at my slightly glowing ethereal body. Hell, even my clothing glowed, which was the same clothing I had been wearing on the night I was murdered two years ago: a white tee shirt and long red basketball shorts, my usual sleeping garb. I was barefoot and I suspected my hair was a mess, since I had been shot to death in my sleep. Dotting my body were the various bloody holes where the bullets had long ago entered my living flesh.

“No belt,” I said. “Then again, no shoes, either.”

She laughed, which caused some of her martini to slosh over the rim. She cursed and licked her fingers like a true alcoholic.

“Oh, shut up,” she said.

“Waste not, want not,” I said.

She glared at me some more as she took a long pull on her drink. When she set it down, she missed the center of the cork coaster by about three inches. Now part of the glass sat askew on the edge of the coaster, and the whole thing looked like it might tip over. She didn't notice or care.

Pauline worked with spirits all day. Early on, she had tried her best to ignore my presence. But I knew



she could see me, and so I pursued her relentlessly until she finally acknowledged my existence.

"And now I can't get rid of you," she said.

"You love me," I said. "Admit it."

"Yeah," she said. "I do. Call me an idiot, but I do."

"Idiot," I said. "Besides, I'm different than those other ghosts."

"Yeah? How so?"

"I'm a ghost on a mission."

"Could that sound more corny?" she said.

"Maybe after a few more drinks," I said.

"So how's the mission coming along?" she asked. We had been over this before, perhaps dozens of times.

"I don't know," I said. "It's not like I'm getting a lot of feedback from anyone—or anything."

"And when will you be done with your mission?" she asked.

"I don't know that either."

"And what, exactly, is your mission?" As she spoke, she peered into the empty glass with one eye.

"To save my soul."



"Oh, yeah, that. And you're sure it's not too late to save your soul? I mean, you are dead after all."

"It's never too late," I said.

"And you know that how?" she asked.

"Because I'm not in hell yet."

"You're haunting an old apartment building in Los Angeles," she said. "Sounds a bit like hell to me."

"But I can see my wife and daughter whenever I want," I countered. "Can't be that bad."

"Your wife has already re-married," said Pauline. "And weren't you two separated at the time of your death?"

We had been, but the details of our separation were lost to me. We had financial problems I seemed to recall, which had led to many arguments. What we had argued about was anyone's guess. But the arguments had been heated and impassioned and in the end I had moved out—but not very far. To stay close to my daughter, I had rented an apartment in the same building.

"Yes, we had been separated," I said. "And thank you for reminding me of that."

"Just keeping it real," said Pauline indifferently. "Besides, there is no hell."



“How do you know?”

“I talk to the dead, remember? And not just ghosts,” she added. “But those who have passed on.”

“Passed on to heaven?” I asked.

“Passed on to *something*,” she said. “Neither heaven nor hell. A spirit world—and it’s waiting for you.”

I didn’t believe that. I believed in heaven and hell, and I was certain, as of this moment, that I was going to hell. “Well, it can keep on waiting. I’m not ready to pass on.”

“Obviously.”

“I need to work some things out,” I said.

“And then what?” she asked.

“And then I will accept my fate.”

She nodded. “But for now you hope to change your fate.”

“Yes.”

She looked at me with bloodshot eyes. Sitting on the couch, she had tucked her bare feet under her. Now her painted red toes peeked out like frightened little mice.

“Nice imagery,” she said, wiggling her toes. “So



you still can't remember why you are going to hell?"

"No," I said.

"But it was something bad."

"Very bad," I said.

"Bad enough to burn forever?" she asked.

"Somebody died, I think."

"So you've said, but you still don't remember who or why."

I shook my head. "No, but it happened a long, long time ago."

"And with your death," she added, "it was the first of your memories to disappear."

She was right. My memories were disappearing at an alarming rate. The earlier memories of my life were mostly long gone. "Yeah, something like that," I said.

"And now you're afraid to pass on because you think you are going to hell, even though you can't remember *why* you are going to hell."

"It's a hell of a conundrum," I said.

She nodded, then got up, padded into the adjoining kitchen, and poured herself another drink. When she came back and sat, some of her drink splashed over the rim of her glass.



“Don’t say a word,” she cautioned me.

I laughed and drifted over to the big bay window and looked out over Los Angeles, which glittered and pulsed five stories below. At this hour, Los Feliz Boulevard was a parking lot dotted with red brake lights as far as the eye could see. I had heard once that it was one of the busiest streets in the world. Standing here now, I believed it.

After a while, Pauline came over and stood next to me. Actually, some of her was standing *inside* me. She shivered with the sensation, apologized, and stepped back. Ghostly etiquette.

I thought of my sweet music teacher. According to the paper, she had been murdered just days away from her sixtieth wedding anniversary. *Sixtieth*.

Anger welled up within me. As it did so, a rare warmth spread through me. Mostly my days were filled with bone-chilling cold, minus the bones. But whenever strong emotion was involved, such as anger, I became flush with energy. And when that happened—

“Hey,” said Pauline. “Someone’s making a rare appearance.”



And so I was. So much so that I could actually see myself reflecting in the big, sliding glass door. Next to me was Pauline, looking beautiful, but drunk. Bloody wounds covered my body; in particular, my forehead, neck and chest.

I didn't get to see myself often, and, despite my anger, I took advantage of this rare opportunity. Pale and ethereal, I was just a vague suggestion of what I had once been—and I was growing vaguer as the years pressed on. There was stubble on my jaw, and my dark hair was indeed askew. Eternal bed head.

*Great.*

"But you're still a cutie," said Pauline, giggling, now almost entirely drunk.

And with those words and that infectious giggle, my anger abated and I started fading away again.

"Tell me about your murdered friend," said Pauline.

"She wasn't necessarily a friend."

She explored my mind a bit more. "My apologies. Your piano teacher from grade school."

"Yes."

"Why would someone kill her?" she asked.

"I don't know."



She paused, then nodded knowingly. "I see you intend to find out."

"Yes."

"And perhaps save your soul in the process?"

"That's the plan," I said. "For now."

"You do realize you have limits to where you can go and what you can do, right?"

I shrugged. "Minor technicalities."

#### 4.

The girl could see me, and, amazingly, she wasn't afraid.

Since she and her mother were new tenants in the apartment building I haunted, I swung by to say hello like any good neighbor. And by swinging by, I meant I walked straight through their front door and into their living room.



To my surprise, the little girl immediately looked up from where she was sitting at a desk in the far corner of the room. Her eyes impossibly huge and innocent. She was young, perhaps seven or eight, about the age of my own daughter.

*Hey, maybe they'll be friends.*

I was in a low energy state, which meant I was just a murky drift of ectoplasm that was vaguely humanoid and barely visible even to myself. It would take a keenly aware medium to see me now.

*But she sees you now,* I thought.

Indeed. And a thrill coursed through me.

She stood slowly from her swivel chair. I could hear her mother was in the other room, unpacking and singing contentedly to herself, unaware that her daughter had just made contact with the Great Beyond.

The girl approached me carefully, as if walking a tight rope. As if, remarkably, she was afraid of scaring *me* off. Tough girl. She stopped ten feet away. There was a smudge of chocolate in the corner of her mouth. I could see her brain working behind those impossibly huge eyes.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said. "I see ghosts all



the time.”

I smiled, and impressed into her mind the image of a friend.

“You’re a good ghost,” she said, nodding. “Some ghosts are not good; some are bad.”

I next tried impressing the images of my daughter and wife and my apartment down the hall, but none of this got a response from her. She was attuned, but not highly attuned. Like a deaf musician.

“You don’t have to talk if you don’t want to,” she said. “Mommy thinks I make up the ghosts, anyway. Maybe I do. Maybe ghosts are just *figmentals* of my imagination, like she says.”

Despite her bravado, there was still a touch of fear in her eyes. I smiled reassuringly, but I wasn’t sure if she could see the fine details of my smile. She studied me a moment longer, shrugged, then plodded back to her chair. Once seated, she swiveled around and faced me, her bare feet dangling just inches from the faux hardwood floor.

I drifted closer and raised my finger, pointing at her computer.

She followed my finger. “The computer?”



I nodded exaggeratedly so that she could not mistake the gesture.

“What about the computer?” she asked.

I focused on the image of a writing program.

She studied me. “Do you want me to open Word?”

I nodded vigorously.

She turned back to her computer and clicked open Word for Windows. When a blank screen appeared on the monitor, I leaned across her body and drew energy from both her and the computer, and struck a key on the keyboard. Granted, my finger disappeared down *through* the key, but luckily the sensitive keyboard recognized my touch. Ghosts and machines sort of go hand in hand.

A letter appeared on the monitor before her, a ‘Y’. I continued typing until I had formed a complete sentence.

*Yes, I’m a ghost,* was my reply.

The little girl, who had scooted back in her chair to allow me room, squealed with delight, clapping. “You can type!”

Yes, I responded, the words appearing on the white screen.



"Do I need to type back?" she asked me.

No, I wrote. *I can hear you just fine. What's your name?*

She scooted back in her chair, giving me enough room to type. "Kaira," she said. "So how long have you been dead?"

*Two years. I think.*

"You think?" she asked.

*It's getting harder and harder to remember dates.*

She screwed up her little face. "I can see that, I think."

*You are a smart girl, Kaira.*

"So are you really a good ghost?"

Yes.

"Then why didn't you go to heaven?"

I thought about that, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. She was just a little girl, no need to burden her with too much information.

*It's not time,* I wrote.

"You're not going to heaven, are you?" she said. She was more sensitive than I thought.

I hesitated, then typed my reply.

*No, I don't think so.*



"You're going to hell," she said.

*I think so, yes. But I'm working on that.*

She pushed her chair back and stood suddenly. She looked at me warily. "Were you a bad man?"

Yes, I wrote. *I'm sure I was. But I don't remember what I did.*

"But you said you are a good ghost."

*I'm a good ghost, but I was a bad man.*

She continued watching me cautiously. I didn't blame her. "What did you mean when you said you were 'working on that'?"

I typed: *Means, I'm trying to be a better person.*

"But it's too late," she said. "You're already dead."

*A minor technicality.*

"What's a 'technicality'?"

*Means I'm working on it,* I typed, then added a winkie face, complete with semi-colon and parentheses.

"Kaira, honey," called her mother from the next room. "Who are you talking to out there?"

"No one, Mommy," said the little girl.

"Come and help me, sweetie."

"Okay, Mommy." She quickly closed the Word



document and turned to me. "I got to go," she whispered. "You seem like a good ghost. I hope you don't go to hell."

"That makes two of us," I said, but she showed no indication of hearing me. I smiled at her again and exited the same way I had come, through the closed front door.

*Welcome to the neighborhood.*

5.

It was early morning.

My daughter was asleep. Most of the building was asleep, except for the security guard who worked the graveyard shift; he would be coming home in a few hours. Maybe I would haunt him later, kill some time until morning.

I felt restless, detached, ungrounded. Nothing



new for a ghost. But tonight the feelings were especially strong, especially poignant. Something was happening, but I wasn't sure what. Being dead, after all, was still fairly new to me.

I was in a favorite part of the building: a long interior hallway that morphed into an exterior walkway. The hallway was, in effect, part interior and part exterior, and thus not subject to the regular rules and regulations that govern my haunting. Who made these rules, I didn't know, but they were there, and one such rule stated that I could not leave the confines of the building.

Anyway, I followed the interior hallway to the point where it turned into the exterior—or outer—walkway. At this juncture, I could nearly stand outside.

Nearly, but not quite.

Still, as I pretended to lean a shoulder against the hallway wall, I could almost feel the cool wind that rustled the leaves of the rustic hillside that jutted up behind the apartment complex.

As the wind picked up, a part of me wished it would take hold of me and carry me away.

*And where would you go?*

*Good question.*



The moon, hanging above the highest trees, looked cold and eternal. I felt cold and eternal. I also felt unhinged and adrift, as if the smallest breeze might blow me away.

As I continued staring up into the night sky, and as the wind continued passing straight through me, a pinprick of light appeared in the heavens above. It could have been a star, but it wasn't, and suddenly I knew why I was feeling so unsettled.

The pinprick of light grew rapidly into something much more than a pinprick. Much, much more. And it kept growing and expanding until it had burned a hole into the sky. Golden light poured out.

It was the tunnel to heaven.

## 6.

I had first seen the tunnel two years ago.

I had been asleep. I had been dreaming of work, my baby girl, my failed marriage, and everything in-



between, when a half-dozen loud explosions forcibly yanked me out of my sleep and, apparently, right out of my body.

To say I was confused was an understatement.

In utter bewilderment, I found myself floating in my bedroom, floating above my body as a man, standing in the middle of my room and holding a gun, pulled the trigger again and shot me point blank in my chest. The explosion was loud, deafening in the confined space. But my body didn't move with the impact. I was already dead.

*Hell of a bad dream.*

The shooter fell to his knees and dropped his gun and buried his face in his hands. I saw that he was wearing latex gloves. His body shook as he sobbed. Eventually he got hold of himself, picked up his gun and stood. He looked down at my dead body. So did I. The sheet was now completely covered in blood and gleaming wetly.

He quickly left my bedroom, and a moment later I heard my front door open and then click shut. He was gone, and I was dead.

Why he killed me, I didn't know. Why he wept, I didn't know. Who he was is still a mystery.



As I hovered above my body, I could smell my fresh blood and I could smell the gunpowder. In the distance I could hear an ambulance coming, or perhaps the police. Someone had reported the gunshots.

*I'm dreaming; this really isn't happening. I'm going to wake up any moment now.*

It was then that a bright light appeared above me. I turned away from my body and looked up, and there, replacing my ceiling, was a golden tunnel. Light poured out of it and washed over me and something close to singing reached my ears. Heartbreakingly beautiful singing. The voice of angels.

I could see people inside the the tunnel. Not people really, but spirits, souls. They were all glowing.

The light in the tunnel was inviting. I felt its pull. I *wanted* to drift up to it. I *needed* to drift up to it.

But I also felt fear. No, *terror*. If I was dead—and I was seriously suspecting that I was *not* dreaming—then God awaited beyond that golden tunnel. God and judgment and hell.



So I resisted the pull. I resisted with all my might.

And that's when I saw the beautiful, dark-haired woman standing in the far corner of my bedroom.

7.

She approached me slowly, smiling warmly, her hands folded together at her waist. She was wearing a white, translucent gown. No, the gown wasn't translucent.

*She was translucent.*

*Good God, I can see through her! This can't be happening.*

Now she was standing before me as I hovered over my dead body. I tried standing, but I was unable to control my movements. I felt helpless and trapped.

*I'm dreaming.*

"No, James. You have passed on." Her voice was soothing and full of love. So much love.

"Do I know you?" I asked.



"Yes," she answered, and I saw the tears in her eyes. I *think* they were tears of joy, but I could have been wrong. I also realized that her lips weren't moving.

*Yeah, this is a dream.*

"I don't know what's happening to me," I said. I could hear the panic in my voice.

The woman held out her hand to me. "It's okay, James. Take my hand."

Never had I felt such love. So real and palpable. It came in wave after wave from this strange woman, washing over me, around me, *through* me.

"Take my hand, James. It's okay. Come with me. I will explain everything to you, but for now it's time to go."

Her hand was small and elegant and seemed suffused with an inner light that seemed to reach out beyond the hand itself.

"We need to go," she calmly said again.

And with those words, the glowing tunnel above flared in intensity. But instead of taking her hand, I said, "I know you from somewhere."

She only smiled as another wave of love washed over me, engulfing me completely.



"Who are you?" I asked.

"You will remember," she said, "in time."

"You are so beautiful."

She stepped forward and held out her glowing hand. Like a Michelangelo painting, I reached down for it, and when our fingers touched a fleeting, haunting image of the two of us flashed through my mind: she and I were in a golden field with the sun high above. We were desperately, madly in love.

"I miss you, James," she said. "We all do. It's time for you to come home."

Something deep inside me was overjoyed by her presence, but it was buried deep beneath the confusion, the horror, and the fear.

"Don't be afraid, James," she said. "You are deeply loved."

"I've done some bad things," I said.

"I know," she said.

"I don't want to go to hell," I said.

She looked away and now there were tears on her high cheekbones, burning like golden drops of liquid sun. She said nothing.

"Am I going to hell?" I asked. I heard the desperation in my voice.



At that moment, something started happening: she started *fading* before my eyes. "Please, James," she said, gripping me tighter. "We can be together again. Everything will be okay."

"Will it?" I asked, pulling back. "How do you know?"

"Please, James."

Frozen with fear, afraid to face what lay beyond, I didn't move. And when she disappeared altogether, the golden tunnel in the ceiling disappeared with her, and I was left alone with my own dead body.

And that's when the eternal cold set in.

\* \* \*

The tunnel in the sky shone brightly now.

Like a siren's song, I could feel its pull. Every instinct in my non-body told me to *go to the light*. That going to the light was the natural thing to do, that it was the *right* thing to do, that it was the logical thing to do.

*No*, I thought. *Not yet*.

Lately, the tunnel had been appearing less frequently and its pull seemed to be diminishing. As if it were giving up on me.



*Don't give up on me yet, I thought. I need more time. Just give me a little more time.*

The light in the sky wavered. It always wavered just before it disappeared. I continued gazing up at it, continued fighting its gentle pull. Why the tunnel existed, I didn't know, but it was a part of my life now. Or, more accurately, a part of my *death*. Where and to whom it led, I did not know. But I suspected it led to heaven.

Or to hell.

The wind, like something curious and blind, moved over the ceramic tiles of the outdoor hallway, feeling everything, touching everything. But not me. Never me. Instead, it went *through* me. On the hillside beyond the balcony, something crashed through the trees, and then scurried up the hillside. A raccoon, perhaps.

*Maybe it's scared of ghosts.*

When I looked up again, the tunnel was gone.

*Don't give up on me, I thought. Please.*



It was late afternoon, and I was standing near Pauline's sliding glass door as the setting sun angled down into her living room, splashing across the polished Pergo floors and straight through me.

I was drawing energy from the sun, which meant I was in a high-energy state. Pauline, however, wasn't in a high-energy state. She lounged languidly on her couch, and I suspected there was a strong drink in her very near future.

"You suspect right," she said, standing with considerable effort. "Hey, you're shadowing," she said as she passed by me.

Indeed I was. I looked down and there I was on the floor, a vague shape of a man. Gleefully, I moved my arms, and the shadow's arms moved as well.

A thrill coursed through me.

Pauline appeared a moment later with an apple martini in her hand. "I'd offer you one, love, but it's going to take more than a shadow to put it away."



"Thanks," I said. "I think."

"So why are you haunting me tonight?" she asked.

"Why, do you have something better to do?"

"Than to hang out with a ghost? Sadly, no." She took a sip from her drink and studied me. "So tell me, honey, why are you here tonight? I sense you want to ask me something."

There were no secrets with Pauline. "I want your help to bust me out of here."

"Bust you out of where?"

"Here," I said. "The apartment building."

She set her drink down directly on her hand-painted coffee table. So much for the coaster. "And where would you like to go, Mr. Blakely?" she asked.

An image of the monastery must have been sitting heavily on my mind, because she nodded almost instantly.

"I see," she said. "So you are serious about looking into your music teacher's murder?"

"Deadly serious."

"And you think this will help save your soul?" she asked.



"It couldn't hurt," I said.

"Did it ever occur to you that it might be too late for you, James?"

"Yes."

"But you're going to go through with this anyway?"

"Yes."

She sat forward in the love seat, the springs creaking beneath her weight. She reached out and held the stem of the martini glass without actually lifting it.

"You've been dead nearly two years?" she asked.

Dates were getting fuzzy with me, but that number seemed right. "Yes," I said. "I think."

"And what, exactly, have you done during these past two years to help save your soul? And finding Mrs. Carney's lost cat doesn't count since you were the one who spooked it in the first place."

"I found Mrs. Carney's lost cat."

"Doesn't count."

"I've been waiting for the right situation," I said.

"And you think finding your music teacher's murderer is that situation?"



I thought about that. "It feels right. I can't explain it other than that."

"It *feels* right?"

I sensed her trying to talk me out of this. I didn't want to be talked out of this. I wanted this. "I adored that woman," I said. "I want to help."

"There's one problem, James," she said. "You're earthbound to this apartment building."

"Which is why I need your help."

She sighed heavily and took a sip from her drink. "Fine. Let me ask around."

"Who will you ask?"

"I know people," she said.

"Dead people?" I asked.

"*Very* dead people."

## 9.

A few days later, Pauline stepped through her



front door and found me hovering in her kitchen. I had, admittedly, been waiting for her.

"How was your day, dear?" I asked pleasantly.

She ignored me and tossed her purse and keys on her kitchen table and headed straight for the fridge. A moment later she emerged with a bottle of Miller Lite.

"You know," she said, "there are some people who are greeted by their mates when they first come home. Or by their kids. Or even their dogs. Me? I get a ghost."

"I could take offense to that," I said. "At least you have someone."

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was a shitty thing to say."

"I could piss on your leg if that makes you feel any better."

"I said I'm sorry. Besides, I have good news. I might have found a way to break you out of here." She twisted off the cap to her beer and drank deeply from it. When she pulled away to breathe, she said, "I'd offer you one but you don't have any lips."

"Very funny," I said.

"Wait till I have a few beers in me, I'll be a regular



comedian.”

We moved over to the couch. She curled her feet under her and looked steadily at me. “I’m going to miss you, James.”

That surprised me. “That’s if we can figure a way to get me to the church. Besides, I always got the impression that I bothered you, Pauline. That since you spent the bulk of your day dealing with the dead, the last thing you wanted was to have a ghost haunting you at home.”

Outside, in the parking lot below, a car alarm suddenly went off, followed immediately by the sound of running feet. Had a car alarm actually served its purpose? Pauline ignored the sound. Silent and meditative, her thoughts were closed even to me.

Finally, she said, “Yes, James, there are times when I desperately need a break from the dead, even from you. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“But you seem to be pretty good at discerning those times, and so it’s mostly not a problem.”

She was staring intently at me. I wondered just how much of me she could actually see.



"I see the outline of you," she said, reading my thoughts. "I see your jawline, your cheekbones, your mouth. You have very full lips."

"*Had* very full lips," I corrected.

She ignored me. "You were a very handsome man, James. I could have loved a man like you."

"Well, I think you do a little," I said. It was meant as a joke, but my ability to joke seems to have gone the way of my body. After all, humor is as much body language and inflection as it is content, and I didn't have much of either these days.

She studied me from over her bottle of beer, then swirled the contents, which caused frothing whitecaps to appear over the lip.

"Frothing whitecaps? You have a vivid imagination."

"It's what makes me special."

"Yes, you are special," she said. "And, yes, I do think I love you a little. You have proven to be a good friend and a wonderful confidant."

She stared at me some more, then drank from her beer. As she did so, I found myself trying to remember how beer tasted. *Hoppy* and *bitter* were two words that came to mind—two words that had



mostly lost their meaning to me.

“Don’t forget filling, complete and quenching,” said Pauline, easily following my train of thought. She finished her beer, got up from the couch and headed over to the kitchen. She tossed the empty bottle and got herself another one. “Here, let me give you a taste.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. I could just imagine her dumping the beer all over her kitchen floor as she tried to find my ghostly gullet.

“No,” she said, “I have another idea. Come here.”

I approached her nervously. What did she have in mind? I paused about halfway through the kitchen as she took a long drink from the bottle, then wet her lips slowly with her narrow tongue. She moved over to me. Or perhaps *sidled* would have been a better word. Either way, she had a fairly hungry look in her eye, one that would have caused my physical body to react a certain way, no doubt.

“Just shut up for a few seconds,” she said.

“But I didn’t say anything.”

“Then turn off your damn brain and relax.”

“I’m a ghost. How much more relaxed could I be? Besides I don’t have a brain—”



“Shh!”

Now she was standing before me. Her eyes roamed my face with interest. She reached up and touched my hair, or tried to.

“Your hair is slightly mussed,” she said.

“Yeah, well, I was asleep when I died.”

“I want you to do something for me,” she said.

I didn't say anything. I just stood there in the kitchen, looking down at this woman I had gotten to know so well over the past two years. A woman who was my only connection to the real world.

“Shh,” she hissed again. “I want you to draw energy from me. You know how to do it, and I give you my full permission. I want to see you, James. All of you.”

She had never given me such permission, and rarely did I draw upon the energy of others. Not sure why I don't; again, call it ghostly etiquette.

“Do it,” she said, “And just shut up. But first—” She drank deeply from the bottle and licked her lips again. “Okay, now do it.”

And so I did. I reached out and held her head in my hands. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back. Energy—her energy—crackled up my arms,



through my body, spread to all my extremities. Her eyelids fluttered wildly.

A moment later, I made a full appearance.

\* \* \*

She opened her eyes and smiled at me—and nearly fainted. In fact, she would have fallen to the floor had I not held her up.

“Don’t let go,” she said.

So I continued holding her head in my milky white hands, continued drawing energy from her.

“Kiss me,” she said throatily. She opened her eyes and tried to smile—and nearly fainted again.

“Do it now, you dope.”

And so I did.

Holding her face in my hands, I leaned down and pressed my semi-substantial lips down onto hers. Her lips, soft and wet, were coated with a thin film of beer. As I kissed her, more energy passed from her to me. A lot more energy.

*Too much.*

Finally I pulled away from her. As I did so, a thin, elastic thread of ectoplasm stretched from my lips to hers, and snapped off in a puff of cotton candy as I



carefully lowered her to the kitchen floor.

I stepped back and two things happened simultaneously: she slowly regained her strength—and I slowly disappeared.

But before I faded altogether, I fetched her a pillow from the couch, slipped it under her head. When she opened her eyes again, she looked up at me weakly and smiled.

“So how did the beer taste?” she asked.

I grinned down at her, licking my lips.

“Wonderful.”

## 10.

Pauline came back slowly.

Making a full appearance was rare for me. To do so, I needed the full compliance of the living. Most of the living rarely complied.



I was still reeling from the kiss. Her lips had been so soft against mine. I could still taste the alcohol on her lips. I could taste something else, too—her lipstick. And her perfume was more than just a phantasmal hint.

It was the real thing. And she had smelled so damn good.

“Thank you,” she said, sitting up, blinking hard. “You were bad. I told you to kiss me, not suck the life out of me.”

“My bad,” I said.

She sat up on the Pergo floor and wrapped her arms around her knees. Dust bunnies, stirred up from the recent commotion, flitted across the floor like mini gray ghosts. I said nothing, although my thoughts turned to my wife, who was living two floors above us and a hallway or two down.

“You didn’t cheat, silly,” she said.

“Feels like cheating.”

“We’re just friends experimenting. Like I did back in college, only you’re not a sophomore cheerleader with sexuality issues.”

“Still, I should be kissing *her*,” I said.

“She doesn’t know you exist,” said Pauline



gently. “Besides, James, she re-married, remember?”

No, I hadn’t remembered. These days I was forgetting more and more. Then again, perhaps that was a memory I *wanted* to forget. Good God, my wife had re-married?

I felt as if someone had sucker-punched me in the gut.

Pauline stood on shaky legs. “You’re going to be okay, kiddo. I promise.” She headed straight to the fridge and pulled out another bottle of beer. “Now, I actually had some news to tell you.”

“That is, before we got distracted,” I said, and suddenly wondered why I was feeling so awful. But I couldn’t remember. Something to do with my wife, I think. I shrugged off the feeling.

“That was a hell of a distraction,” said Pauline.

“Did your news have something to do with me finding a way out of here?”

“Yes,” she said.

“So how do we do it?” I asked.

She grinned at me. “I’m going to need a pair of your socks.”



It was past midnight and my daughter was sleeping soundly.

I stepped into her bedroom through her closet door, noting that she appeared to have a new winter coat inside, although I couldn't quite remember if it was new or not. At any rate, it certainly seemed new.

Damned memory.

She was sleeping on her back, with her head turned slightly toward me. Thanks to a nearly full moon, the light inside her room was especially bright.

I noted that she had recently added a life-size poster of Kobe Bryant slam dunking a basketball, feet hovering unnaturally above the court, tongue sticking out, face contorted in the sweaty throes of competition. I was uncomfortable with my nine-year-



old daughter having a poster of anyone in the sweaty throes of *anything*.

She was growing up.

I hated that.

And she was doing so with a new daddy now. The man himself was kind enough, yes, although he really didn't give her enough time or attention. She was always an afterthought, always an obligation, and she deserved much better. So much better.

She deserved *me*.

"I'm doing my best, baby doll," I said to her sleeping figure.

As I spoke, her aura shifted toward me, as it always did. It had been undulating softly in sleep, and now suddenly crackled with energy. The red, lapping flames flared up toward me before dissipating into puffs of fuchsia-tinted smoke.

I sat next to her. "Hi, baby," I said. "You know I'm here, don't you?"

Her aura shifted colors. The red was now interlaced with wisps of blue steel.

"What are you dreaming about?" I asked softly.

More blue wisps penetrated the red. She was awakening. The colors together were beautiful. A



phantasmagoric rainbow, perhaps made more beautiful because they were emitting from my daughter. Either way, I could watch them all night, and sometimes I did.

"I don't remember what I was dreaming about, Daddy," she said sleepily.

The blue bands continued to weave through the red and now there seemed to be some orange and yellow in there, too. The colors of her mood. She was excited. Her aura also retracted a little, much the same way an excited puppy would eventually calm down. As she lay there on her side, eyes closed, she appeared to be asleep, but the blue in her aura gave her away. The blue meant she was semi-conscious; or, rather, *a part* of her was semi-conscious and very much aware of me.

"You like Kobe, eh?" I said.

She giggled. "Yes! Everyone does!"

"Because he's such a great basketball player?"

"No!" she said, laughing. "Because he's so cute!"

"Oh, brother," I said.

She giggled some more.

I said, "You're too young to think boys are cute."

"He's not a boy. He's a man."



“Okay, you are *definitely* too young to think men are cute.”

“Oh, *Dad*. I know!”

We were quiet some more. The silver moonlight and reddish alarm clock light fused together to give her face a sort of pinkish glow, a face that was indeed losing some of its chubbiness. Her cheekbones were making an appearance. And thanks to her mother, she was going to be beautiful.

“Daddy needs your help,” I said.

Her aura flared immediately, snapping and crackling like a fire-breathing dragon. She shifted in her sleep and her eyelids fluttered briefly, as if she might fully awaken. She spoke excitedly, “Anything for you, Daddy! What do you need?”

I paused. This was going to be hard. “Daddy needs his scarf back.”

“Your scarf?” she asked, confused.

“Yes.”

Her aura receded like a blue and red tide. Some of the crimson in it flared to green and I knew this was the color of her sadness. She loved that scarf, and wore it all the time, even when the weather didn’t permit.



"Of course, Daddy," she said. "I would give you anything. Are you cold?"

*Daddy is always cold*, I wanted to say. Instead, I said, "Yes, baby, a little."

"You can have it, Daddy."

"Thank you, angel."

We were silent some more and the dull green in her aura flashed brilliantly emerald and then was gone, replaced with something brown. I knew this to be the color of her resolve. Her strength.

"I don't want you to be cold, Daddy."

"You are a good girl."

I told her exactly what I needed for her to do next, and she did what I asked, operating in a semi-hypnotic state. She pushed aside her covers, got up from the bed, and went over to her dresser. She pulled open the top drawer, rummaged through it briefly, and pulled out the red scarf, now well worn. It wasn't socks, as requested by Pauline, but it would do. Next, she walked to her bedroom door, opened it and stepped out into the hallway. I drifted through her room and followed her. She moved surprisingly quickly for someone walking with her eyes shut. Then



again, the muscle memory was there, and her aura reached out before her, guiding the way.

*The spirit always knows the way.*

She opened the front door to the apartment and wrapped the scarf around the doorknob, where it would be collected early the next morning by Pauline.

She shut the door again, locked it, and headed back to her bedroom, deftly avoiding the corner of the kitchen table. She shut the bedroom door, crawled into bed and I could see the tears on her cheeks. She loved that scarf.

"You are a good girl," I said.

"I don't want you to be cold, Daddy."

"I love you, baby. Now get some sleep."

## 12.

I have good days in death, and I have bad days in death.



This was a bad day.

"Excuse me, sir," I said. "Can you help me? I think I'm lost."

But the man wearing the shabby seersucker coat ignored me. His head and shoulders were wet, and the umbrella he was carrying was dripping rainwater all over the polished marble floor. He was leaving a slippery—and dangerous—trail down the center of the hallway. Not only did he care little for others' welfare, the bastard was also ignoring me.

I picked up my pace and tapped him on the shoulder. At least, I *think* I tapped him on the shoulder.

*Sweet Jesus, did my finger just pass through his shoulder? Of course not. I'm seeing things.*

"Excuse me, sir?" I said again.

But he kept moving briskly through the hallway. I moved briskly, too, directly behind him. His leather hiking boots squeaked along the floor. I didn't squeak at all.

"Hey," I said, "why won't you—"

And then he stopped suddenly and I nearly ran into him. Actually, I *did* run into him. Or rather, I *should have* run into him. Instead, I went *through*



him.

Stunned, I stepped back. The man was shivering now, nearly uncontrollably. The hair on the back of his neck was standing on end.

“Excuse me,” I said again, completely shaken. “I think I’m lost.”

His back was still to me. He cocked his head to one side and appeared to be listening. Then slowly—very slowly—he turned around and looked straight at me.

Well, sort of.

Actually, his eyes had that sort of glazed, unfocused look that people get when they’re staring off into space.

*Or looking through you.*

“Sir?” I said again.

He continued staring through me for another beat or two, then frowned and turned and started squeaking down the hallway again.

I watched him go. He paused outside a door, fished for a bundle of keys in his pocket, sought one out, and inserted it into the lock. He opened the door and was gone in an instant, and I was left standing in the hallway alone.



*What the hell?*

I turned slowly. I realized, with some alarm, that nothing looked familiar. The hallway was covered in mirrors. I stopped turning and faced one such mirror.

There was nothing *in* the mirror.

*I wasn't in the mirror!*

Maybe they weren't mirrors. I walked over to it, reached out a finger to touch it and...my finger passed straight through the mirror as if it weren't there.

No, a voice in my head said. *It's you who isn't here.*

I next looked at my hand. It was there, true, but I could actually see through it. *Through my own hand.*

*Jesus!*

I turned in circles, panicking. Where was I? The mirrored hallway...the smooth granite floor...the polished wooden ceiling fans....

I knew this place. I had been here before.

*Think!*

I tried to think, but there was no memory at all of who I was or why I was here. Fear gripped me. Pure, unadulterated fear, and now I found myself backing



away—and into the mirrored wall behind me.

And backing *through* it.

In a blind panic, I found myself running down the hallway of mirrors. I turned wildly around a corner and was about to head outside along what appeared to be a connecting outdoor walkway—and slammed headlong into something invisible, and hard.

I stumbled backward, disoriented, thoroughly confused. I reached for a staccato column to support myself, but my hand passed straight through it, too.

*Please, God, let this be a bad dream.*

I staggered, found my balance. What the hell had I hit? I didn't know, but now I inched forward slowly, reaching my hand out cautiously before me. Beyond the railing of the hallway was a steep hill covered in dense shrubs. A small wind touched me—and then promptly passed straight through me.

*I'm dreaming, I thought. I have to be dreaming.*

I took another step, then another, and my outstretched hand touched *something*. Something hot and electrified. I recoiled instantly.

*Jesus, what the hell was that?*

Suddenly an image flashed in my thoughts, of a man being shot to death in his sleep. The man



looked familiar. Very familiar. I was suddenly certain I knew who this man was.

But my brain wasn't working, refused to click into gear, refused to draw up any memories at all.

Another flashing image. A very cute little girl. My heart instantly warmed. *My* girl. Yes, that was *my* girl.

But I couldn't remember her name or even if she was a little girl anymore. More images. A woman I knew. An apartment I knew. Gunshots. Flashes of light. Images of a golden tunnel in the sky.

I continued backing away from the outside walkway, continued backing away from the invisible barrier that impeded me. And I backed straight through a stucco wall to find myself surrounded by mops and brooms and buckets and cleaning agents. A janitor's closet.

Disoriented and confused, I found myself falling. Straight through the floor.

Down, down.

Screaming.



I dropped into an apartment.

Inside, flashing by me in a blur, was a woman and a toddler playing near the TV. The toddler turned its little head, saw me, and pointed excitedly with a chubby finger....

But I was already falling down through the hardwood floor. I instinctively covered my face, and screamed—and passed straight through into another room.

This one was dark and vacant. I braced myself for the coming floor, expecting to pass right through it as I had done the others—

But this time I hit the floor hard and something close to pain coursed through me. Or was it the memory of pain? I lay there for a moment, scared and completely bewildered, and realized I wasn't in pain at all.

"They're all memories," said a voice behind me. "You cannot feel pain, James. Not really, not the way



you used to. But you *remember* how it felt, and sometimes that's good enough."

I looked up from the ground where I lay and there stood an angel across the dark room, glowing softly. I slowly found my feet.

"I'm not an angel," she said, blushing slightly, the color red rippling through her silvery, ethereal glow. "But I'm honored you think so."

"You just read my thoughts," I said, backing away.

"Yes, and you're reading mine, James."

Indeed, her mouth never moved, yet I heard her words perfectly, clearly.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"Just a friend," she said, although she sounded mildly hurt. Her incandescent glow now rippled with green.

I was in what appeared to be a storeroom, filled with dismantled sinks, dented trash cans, toilets and rows and rows of unused lumber.

"Why did I stop falling in here?"

"Because you are earthbound to this building, James, and as long as this building stands, you will never leave it. And should this building ever be



destroyed you are bound to the empty lot. For all eternity.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, and felt the rush of fear all over again.

“Yes, you do, James. Make yourself understand, it’s important that you do.”

“Why do you keep calling me James?”

“Because that’s your name.”

I suddenly wanted to run. I wanted to be anywhere but here in this creepy room.

“Anywhere but here?” she said, reading my thoughts. “I could take offense to that, James.”

“No offense, it’s just that—”

“You’re scared.”

“Yes.”

She continued hovering before me and glowing serenely. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. And at that thought, she smiled warmly at me, and in her smile there was so much love that I nearly broke down into tears.

“Why do you look at me like that?” I asked.

She did not answer me; instead, she continued smiling, continued sending me wave after wave of love.



"Why do you love me so much?" I asked. "I don't know you."

But her smile never wavered. I thought of the dead man I had seen in the vision, the man who had been shot to death. I looked down at my body now, at my chest and stomach. Both were dotted with bullet wounds. "I'm the dead man in the vision," I said.

She continued saying nothing, but something horrible started happening. She started fading.

"And the girl in my vision is my daughter," I cried out to her.

She smiled and faded and said nothing.

"And I'm dead," I said.

But she was already gone.

And in the empty silence and darkness of the storage room, I found myself looking at my own glowing hands. Hands that I could actually see through. "And my name is James," I said to the emptiness.

And with horrific clarity, I remembered everything in a rush of ghastly memories, and I found myself on my knees, weeping molten tears that fell from my cheeks and shriveled and dissipated before they hit



the cold concrete floor.

14.

Pauline was sitting on her couch with her legs stretched out before her. She was drinking a cosmopolitan and seemed to be enjoying it.

"It's heavenly," she said. "By the way, I hid the scarf in the church today."

"Thank you, Pauline."

"Thank your daughter, too. She gave up her scarf for you."

"I love her more than you know."

"Oh, I know," she said.

"Yeah, I suppose you would know."

In death, I had known only the apartment, known only its mirrored hallways, its many residents, its empty storerooms, and the forgotten nooks and crannies that most residents didn't know—or cared



to know—existed.

This was my home. This was my haunt in more ways than one. It was all I'd known in death. And sometimes, this was all I remembered, too.

Pauline was polite enough to let me work through my anxiety without comment. I sat on the coffee table across from her. The sitting, of course, was just an illusion. I simply made the motion of sitting. I am, after all, nothing but energy.

"You are more than energy," she said.

"How much of me can you really see?" I asked.

"I can see enough of you. The rest I fill in with my imagination."

She then got up from the couch and sat next to me on the coffee table. I could sense the heat coming off her body but not really feel it. She opened her hand and held it out to me.

"Take it," she said.

I did my best to hold onto hers, and we sat there like that in silence, holding hands. Outside, a dog barked. Inside, a medium and a ghost were holding hands. She turned her face and I saw that there were tears on her cheeks. I put my arm around her and



she unconsciously shivered. The dog continued barking and we continued hugging and holding hands.

15.

It was late and she was asleep.

Her aura had shifted toward me, but this time, I had kept my distance.

*Let her sleep, I thought. Leave her be.*

A very small part of me realized that I had been selfish by coming in here and disturbing her sleep, causing her unknown psychosomatic problems in her waking life.

She rolled over now and her angelic face angled toward me. Her eyelids fluttered. Her aura, now a soft pink with occasional flashes of red, snapped at me like tiny fiery bullwhips.

*Do it now. Before she wakes.*



As instructed by Pauline, I closed my eyes, which, somehow, I could still do. I held the image of the red scarf in my thoughts. I visualized it as clearly as I could. I saw myself touching it, holding it. I visualized it as I used to wear it: around my neck, flapping in the wind behind me as if I were a WWI fighter pilot.

*Focus.*

*Focus on the scarf.*

And so I did. I saw it around my neck, could feel it in my hands, remembered the cozy warmth it provided me from days past, days I could no longer remember.

*Focus.*

In my mind's eye, the scarf seemed to solidify, seemed to coalesce into something real, something more than thought, something more than memory.

When I opened my eyes again, there it was.

In my hands.

The red scarf.

In shock, I looked up and immediately felt a wave of dizziness. I was not expecting to see what I saw before me. I had been expecting to see my daughter's room.



Instead, I found myself standing in a cavernous church cathedral.

16.

I released my hold on the scarf, which had been tucked deep into the cushions of a church pew.

I took in my surroundings. I was in a church nave. And not just any nave. It was the church of my youth, where I had gone to school for so many years of my life, where, among other things, my fear of God had been born.

A hell of a fear.

It was the middle of the night and the church was empty—and creepy. Even for a ghost. I drifted out to the center aisle and stopped there. The ceiling was high and arched and vast. Massive stained glass windows circled the cavernous room, each depicting popular scenes from the Bible: David leading his flock, Jesus breaking bread, Moses and his



commandments, Enoch riding a fiery dervish into the Heavens.

At the back of the church, hanging high above the sanctuary, was a bloody, life-like statue of Jesus Christ suspended from the cross. Too life-like. The sculptor went a little crazy with the blood, which poured from many open wounds. Anyone looking up at the statue couldn't help but be powerfully struck by Christ's ultimate sacrifice for our sins.

I remembered the statue. As a child, it had given me nightmares. I looked away from it now.

I knew the building had once been an old monastery, and I knew the monastery had a rich cultural history—and a bloody one, too. There had, in fact, been many tragedies. None of which I could remember now; that is, except this latest one.

The murder of my music teacher.

Who would kill her? And why kill her here, at school, within this very cathedral? According to the newspaper article—which Pauline had located and recently read to me *twice*—the police had found no motive and very few clues.

I spied the piano from across the vast cathedral,



gleaming dully, sitting high on the raised dais.

The very piano she had been strangled on.

I drifted toward it, down the center aisle. I recalled that the church was popular for weddings. Down this very aisle many brides had walked arm-in-arm with their fathers before being given away. I would never give my daughter away. Ever.

As a crushing sadness threatened to overcome me, I continued down the center aisle toward the raised stage. And as I did so, I realized I wasn't alone.

*Here be ghosts.*

17.

I was about halfway down the aisle, approaching the raised sanctuary with its altar and lectern and pulpit, when a figure stepped out from behind a velvet curtain to my right.

Or, rather, stepped *through* the curtain.



It was a child and he stood there watching me, one finger raised to his lip. He was glowing softly. If not for the fact that I could see through him, or that he was pulsating with his own inner luminosity, he would have looked like any other precocious child.

Granted, one had to ignore the mortal wound in his head and the transparent blood that stained his freshly ironed dress shirt. Except I couldn't ignore it.

*Sweet Jesus.*

Ghosts and color don't exactly mix, and so the blood stain on his shirt was really just a splash of silver, which spread all the way down to his navel. Sweet Jesus...what had happened to him? I knew my own ethereal body was covered in similar splotches—thirteen gunshot wounds, to be exact.

The child watched me some more, rising and falling gently as if adrift on some unseen, unfelt current.

I moved closer to him.

"What's your name?" I asked from a few pews away, keeping my distance.

He didn't answer, just continued to bob gently on the non-currents of non-space. I drifted closer still.

I said, "My name is...." but I suddenly had to stop



and think. Panic surged through me. What the hell was my name? Jim? Jack? No, not quite. James? Yes, *James!*

“My name is James,” I said.

*I think.*

He watched me some more, then finally spoke, his voice small and hesitant, barely reaching my ears. “I don’t remember my name, mister.”

I nodded. “That’s okay. Sometimes I don’t remember mine, either.”

He next surprised me by confidently and boldly moving towards me, drifting straight through the pews. Perhaps he sensed a friend. As he came toward me, his slightly mussed hair never moved—and would never move again. And neither would mine, no matter how hard the wind might blow.

His cheeks were still chubby and I saw the ghostly hint of freckles. His eyes were bright. But the brutal damage to his head made me want to look away, but I forced myself not to. Now, of course, he did not feel the pain, just as I did not feel the bloody wounds that dotted me from head to toe.

And, perhaps most amazingly, he looked familiar.



*I think.*

"You got all shot up," said the boy.

"Yes," I said.

"Were you bad, too?"

"Maybe," I said. "I don't remember."

"I was bad and I had to die."

*Sweet, sweet Jesus.*

"Why didn't you go to heaven?" I asked.

"Daddy says there is no heaven," he answered.

"And you believe your daddy?" I asked, surprised, since I had found the boy in a church, after all.

"Oh, yes!"

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

He paused long and hard. "I think so, yes. A brother."

"Do you have a mommy?" I asked.

"Yes."

And then he did something I was completely unprepared for. He burst into tears and threw his little arms around my waist and hugged me hard, burying his nose in my hip. His deep shudders rippled through me as he cried long and hard.



I put my arm hesitantly around him. "You miss your mommy, don't you."

"I want to go home," he said, his voice muffled. "Please help me go home, mister."

18.

We sat together in the front pew.

The image of Jesus Christ hovered above us in all its contorted, bloody glory. The boy rested his wounded head on my shoulder. From this angle, I could look down into his broken skull. I averted my eyes.

I wasn't sure what to say to him or how to console him. I was certain that his lack of belief in the afterlife was keeping him grounded to the church, the place of his death.

So I asked the obvious question. "If you don't believe in heaven, then why did you go to church?"

He wiped his nose, although there was nothing



running from it. Strictly a human habit. "Mommy made us go."

"Us?"

"Yes, me and my brother."

"I see. But your dad didn't believe."

He screwed up his little face. "I can't really remember any more, mister. But that sounds about right."

"So your teachers taught you one thing, and when you came home, your dad taught you another. And you believed your dad, because he's your dad."

The boy nodded eagerly, but I was certain I had lost him, and I was also certain that he had lost the specifics of his own life, just as I was losing the specifics of my own life. Luckily, talking often to Pauline—about my life, about my past—helped me remember who I was. I suspected the boy didn't have the benefit of a powerful medium. The boy, for all intents and purposes, had been completely forgotten.

"Who killed you?" I asked.

"Some boys. Older boys. Big boys."

"Why did they kill you?" I asked.

The little boy shrugged. "I don't remember. But I



did something bad. They kept telling me I was a bad boy and that I deserved to fall."

To fall?

Suddenly, a series of violent, flashing images—all coming from the boy's own memory—came to me. As they do so, the boy begins rocking back and forth on the pew:

*Two older boys, both dressed in traditional Catholic uniform—black slacks, white button up short-sleeve shirts—were laughing at him. The images were distorted. They appeared in the boy's thoughts rapidly and probably out of order. As if a film editor had gotten a movie's sequence all mixed up.*

*An image of the older boys laughing at him....*

*Being dragged up a dark flight of steep stairs....*

*Boys and girls playing in the playground....*

*Two boys waving him over to a drinking fountain....*

*Being hauled through a dark doorway....*

*Hanging over a wooden beam—a rafter....*

*Looking down...to the sanctuary far below....*

*Children skipping rope outside....*

*Kicking and screaming, begging for*



forgiveness....

One of the older boys screaming that something had been stolen. Blaming the little boy....

Children running to a drinking fountain, jostling to be first in line....

The older boys reaching down for the falling boy, horror on their faces....

The altar rapidly approaching below....

Rapidly....

Blackness....

And then the boy, confused and terrified, hovering over his own broken, dead body. Blood everywhere....

The older boys appearing now at ground level, out-of-breath, their faces pale with shock and horror....

And then they are running, dashing through the church....

\* \* \*

The boy stopped rocking next to me. I looked at him and found him absently probing his crushed skull, slipping his fingers inside the deep gash.



*Sweet Jesus.*

"Jesus was just a man," said the boy, picking up on my thoughts. "He wasn't really God. That's what my daddy says."

I nodded, and we were quiet some more. The boy's thoughts were mostly quiet, although occasionally a very old woman would appear in them. I sensed love radiating from her, and so did the boy, but he was confused and did not remember her.

"I'm sorry you died," I said.

"It's okay. I mostly don't remember it. Just when I'm reminded of it."

"I'm sorry that I reminded you."

"It's okay," he said again. "Sometimes it feels like it happened to someone else, you know? Like I'm remembering a movie, or someone else's memories. Does that ever happen to you?"

I nodded. I knew what he was talking about. Probably what Alzheimer patients dealt with. A detachment from one's own memories. Distrust of one's own memories.

A horrible, horrible feeling.

And since we were already in a gloomy state, I



decided to go ahead and get this over with, and pushed forward. "There was a teacher killed in this room," I said. "I think this happened a few weeks ago, but I'm not sure. Maybe shorter, maybe longer."

"Yes," said the boy eagerly. "She was my music teacher."

"Mine, too," I said.

"A man killed her," he said, nodding.

"A man?"

"Yes."

"Did you...." I paused. "Did you watch the man kill her?"

He nodded again. "Yes. I saw everything."

Now images of her murder came flashing into his mind. And because her murder was recent, the images were more concrete and vivid, and the sequence seemed to be relatively in order.

And through the boy's memory, I saw it all unfold....



*My ex-music teacher—and neither of us could remember her name—is sitting at the piano in what appears to be late morning light, judging by the explosion of color that angles down through the stain glass windows above. The cavernous chapel is empty; her music fills the entire room.*

*I sense the boy's love for music. Or, rather, her music. I also sense that he listens to her each and every morning.*

*This morning is no different. He watches her from the front pew, but she is oblivious to his presence—*

*A sudden, rapid shift in perspective—*

*Now he's sitting next to her, on the bench, pretending to play along side her. She hums softly to herself; her long fingers flying nimbly over the keys, sitting straight as a board as she had always taught me to do. I could almost—almost—smell her strong perfume. Always too strong, and always a bit overwhelming.*

*As she plays, she cocks her head to one side*



as if listening for something, and then smiles to herself. Her lips move, and she forms a single word. A name, in fact.

*"Jacob," she says quietly.*

*And now she's referring to the little boy sitting next to her. She senses him, feels him. She smiles again.*

*The boy's name is Jacob.*

\* \* \*

The boy picked up on my thoughts and turned to me excitedly. "My name is Jacob?"

"I think it might be," I said. "But I could be wrong. Does it sound right to you?"

He screwed up his little face, then started nodding. "Yeah, my name is Jacob. I'm sure of it." He sat back, pleased. Then snapped his head around and looked at me. "Hey, mister, what's my name again?"

"Jacob," I said.

"Jacob," he said again. "Will you help me remember my name?"

"Yes," I said. "As best I can."

He smiled and clapped his hands and said his name over and over again.



“Jacob,” I said gently. “Can we continue with the story?”

I didn’t want to make the boy relive such a horrible memory, especially since I knew something bad was about to happen to our music teacher.

“Yes,” said Jacob, reading my thoughts. “Very, very bad.”

But I was here for a reason. What that reason was remained to be seen. I had to know.

“Are you okay remembering all this bad stuff?” I asked him.

He nodded, and as he did so, I heard him whispering his name over and over. I slipped back into his memory, and the story continued....

20.

*From behind the music teacher comes a noise, a cough, someone clearing their throat.*

*Startled, she turns. So does Jacob. And since*



*I'm seeing all this through the boy's eyes, so do I. A man is standing there in the center aisle, holding a gun loosely at his side, head cocked to one side, staring oddly at the music teacher. He sports thick eyebrows, curly black hair, and impossibly bloodshot eyes.*

*It takes me only a second or two to dredge up the memory of my own murder; in particular, the memory of my killer looking oddly at me from the doorway, head cocked to the side, holding his pistol loosely at his side.*

*Perhaps even the same pistol.*

*The man is also my killer.*

*\* \* \**

*He is speaking to the music teacher, but the boy misses most of the exchange, although I do make out "keep quiet" and "no one gets hurt" and "give me the...."*

*But Jacob misses the last word. He also misses nearly everything the music teacher says in response. The man, apparently not liking her response, suddenly points the gun at her.*

*And that's when she screams.*



The man pounces, hurling himself up the stage. Jacob screams, too. Images flash and blur, like a camera rolling down a flight of stairs. I have no clue what's happening next, but I hear grunts and cries and banging.

When things stabilize, when the dust settles, so to speak, I see the man is now sitting on top of the music teacher as she thrashes wildly beneath, fighting and clawing.

Jacob fights, too, pounding the man furiously with tiny fists that pass harmlessly through his back. Apparently a ghost boy and an old lady are no match for the man, as he hunches his shoulders and puts more weight into whatever it is he's doing to her.

The mother fucker is choking the life out of her. That's what he's doing.

This goes on for perhaps another minute: the boy pounding, the man hunched, me watching in helpless frustration. What happens next is surprising, but not unexpected.

While the teacher's physical body still fights her attacker, her spirit, an exact replica of the teacher herself, rises from the floor and floats a few feet



above the scene. Her beautifully glowing spirit looks, to say the least, completely bewildered. I knew the feeling. Below her physical self is finally succumbing to her killer. Interestingly, her spirit was released prior to physical death.

Her spirit then looks straight ahead—and straight into Jacob's eyes. Both recoil. Her mouth opens and various shades of gold ripple through her ethereal body. Jacob backs away as a bright light appears in the ceiling above. He looks up.

*It's the tunnel.*

Unaware of the events unfolding around him, the killer sits back and sucks wind. Apparently, it's hard work strangling the life out of someone.

Appearing from the stage to Jacob's left, like a troupe of heavenly actors, are a dozen or so beautifully serene and loving spirits. From them, a kindly old woman steps forward across the carpeted dais. The recognition in our teacher's eyes is instant and immediately her fear and confusion abates. The older woman, I can see, looks similar to our piano teacher, but younger. A sister, perhaps? I didn't know, but, after hugging deeply and chatting briefly, they rise together to the tunnel



above.

*Jacob scurries behind the altar and shuts his eyes. After an unknown amount of time, he opens his and peers around the altar, but the spirits are all gone, including that of his music teacher.*

*Jacob is now alone with the killer.*

## 21.

*The killer moves quickly.*

*He repositions the piano bench, which had toppled over in the melee, then moves over to the body. He struggles mightily as he lifts her, but he's a determined killer, and soon he has her back in a sitting position on the bench. He gently lays her face down on the ivory keys, closes her eyes, and folds her hands in her lap. I see that there is fresh blood beneath her nails. The killer's DNA. Something for the police to chew on. Good.*



Now he reaches around her neck—the same neck he had just choked the life out of—and unclasps something. A necklace? Good God, was he just a common thief?

Not quite. The necklace has something dangling from it.

A key.

And like a cannon shot, Jacob suddenly bursts from behind the altar and launches himself onto the killer's back, kicking and screaming and punching. Although he never materializes (and I sense the boy doesn't quite know how to materialize), Jacob somehow manages to make his presence known. The killer, who had been about to turn around, suddenly pauses and shivers and looks warily over his shoulder.

What happens next, admittedly, shocks even me.

The killer whispers a name—a name framed as a question: “Jacob?”

But the boy, angry and spitting mad, doesn't catch his own name being whispered. But I catch it.

The killer pauses a moment longer, listening, waiting—then shakes his head, and now he's



moving again quickly. Jacob, still screaming, moves with him, following him around the piano and over to a side door near the raised stage. The killer uses his freshly stolen key, inserts it into the doorknob and turns. The door opens. He steps inside, and Jacob follows right behind.

A single overhead light bulb illuminates a small storage room packed to overflowing with all sorts of church and musical supplies. Choir gowns, hymn books, a stack of tambourines and what appears to be a very old drum set. The killer heads straight for the far corner of the room. There, he moves aside a vacuum cleaner and drops to his knees and fishes around inside his jacket pocket until he comes up with a screwdriver. There's a rusted air vent located at the bottom of the wall directly in front of him and he sets to work unscrewing it, his rapid breathing filling the small room, echoing. Sweat drips from the tip of his nose. Once he gets the screws out, he moves aside the vent, reaches deep inside the dark hole in the wall.

Panic flashes across his face.

And then he smiles. He pulls something out. Something small and dark and square and



covered in dust. He quickly screws the vent back into place, returns the vacuum, steps over to the room's single light bulb. There he examines the square object under the dim light—luckily, so does Jacob.

*It's a very old leather wallet.*

*The killer opens it—and smiles again. Inside are many green bills. He removes them, shoves them in his front jeans pocket. Next, he moves quickly to the rear of the storage room and finds a suitably forgotten cardboard box stuffed with black cables and shoves the wallet deep within.*

*He turns, steps straight through Jacob and, shivering, exits the room.*

## 22.

*Back in the sanctuary, the killer stops behind the dead woman. For the briefest of moments, I see*



remorse cross his bloodshot eyes, and as the man stands there staring down at her—and taking a phenomenal risk at being caught, I felt—little Jacob does something unexpected.

The boy moves around him and faces him. Then reaches up and gently touches the man's deep wounds on his face—fresh wounds from our piano teacher's nails.

The moment Jacob touches him, the killer shivers and the hair on his forearms stand on end.

"Eli?" Jacob whispers, so low that no mortal could have possibly heard it, and yet the killer reacts instantly. He snaps his head up and looks directly into Jacob's eyes.

The two stare at each other. And because I'm reliving all of this through Jacob's memory—and thus seeing what he's seeing—I feel as if the killer is looking directly at me, too.

The name 'Eli' strikes a chord in me, too; it pulls at a distant, forgotten memory.

Jesus, what's going on here?

But I don't have time to contemplate it as the killer next shakes his head and yanks himself out of whatever drug-induced reverie he thinks he's in.



He heads straight to the altar.

Once there, he uses the same key to open a back panel. I know immediately what he's after: the church's treasured sacraments. Jacob watches quietly as the man removes a large plastic trash bag from inside his jacket and begins shoveling in the ornate crosses, jewel-encrusted goblets and golden communion plates. All would fetch a pretty penny on the black market—and all should keep him high for months.

When finished, he ties off the bag and heads back behind the pulpit. And looks up. Directly above him is the massive statue of Jesus Christ hanging grotesquely from the cross.

Was the killer asking for forgiveness? Was he praying? Was he, perhaps, mocking the Lord?

None of the above.

Indeed, he appears to be looking at what is hanging just beneath the crucifix. It's the massive oil painting depicting Christ's arrest on the Mount of Olives. Massive and old. And probably worth a fortune.

So when did junkies have a taste for art? Perhaps junkies looking for something—anything



—to pay for their next fix.

And I thought I was going to hell.

It's a big painting, and would take a lot of work for him to remove it, but the killer seems undaunted. He reaches up for it, and just as he does so something moves quickly to his left. Something dark and swift. A moving shadow, in fact. But Jacob doesn't see it, or, perhaps, chooses to ignore it, and so I lose my chance to see what, if anything, it is.

But something seems to be out there, moving.

The killer doesn't see it, and continues reaching up, and just as his fingertips touch the ornate frame, something happens.

Unfortunately, the next few images are a blur.

In one of them, I see a very menacing, red-eyed shadow rise up from the painting itself. In the next, the killer is beating a hasty retreat out of the church, his sack of stolen loot swung over his shoulder like a murderous Santa Claus. The anti-Santa. He looks back once, terror on his face, then quickly disappears through a side door and out into what appears to be a courtyard, complete with a gurgling



fountain.

*Jacob watches him go. Whatever had spooked the killer doesn't seem to affect the boy, who simply turns and looks back at his dead music teacher who's still propped up on the piano bench.*

*The boy floats over and lays his head on her unmoving shoulder.*

\* \* \*

Jacob and I sat together in silence.

The church itself was completely devoid of noise. Not even a creak. The structure had long ago settled into place. After a while, I said, "You miss your music teacher, don't you?"

"She played for me everyday," he said. "She would say my name and play me songs, and sometimes she would sing for me, too. She knew I was here."

We continued sitting together in the pew. The nave was empty and quiet and eternal. The boy inhaled, taking a pseudo breath, and rested his wounded head against my own bloodied shoulder, much as he had done with his piano teacher.

I put my arm around him and we sat like that until dawn.



It was early morning.

I was alone in one of the church's administrative offices, gazing out a partially open window. It was one of those windows that had to be cranked open. I didn't do the cranking. Such cranking was probably beyond anything I could do in this form, anyway. Now, through the gap in the frosted glass window, I could see the branches of an oak tree swaying in the early morning wind. A bird or two flitted by.

A maintenance worker had come by earlier. He'd looked spooked as hell. He *should* be spooked. Here be ghosts.

Speaking of ghosts, Jacob was off roaming the nave alone. Or, as some would call it, haunting it. I had slipped away to explore my new home, although much of it was already familiar to me. Call it more of a re-acquaintance.



The parking lot beyond the window was mostly empty, but it was still early. Only the maintenance man was out and about; of course, I was out and about, too, but then again I never slept, either.

*It's hard to sleep when you're living a nightmare.*

Now, as I gazed out the window, I tried to recall what it was like to sleep. I knew I had enjoyed it. In fact, I remembered that sleeping in had been a rare luxury, one that I had indulged in whenever I could. Now, eternally awake, I wondered *why* I had enjoyed it so much. What had been the appeal?

I couldn't remember.

I shut my eyes, tried to remember what sleep had been like, and behind my closed lids was a churning sea of eternal blackness streaked with scattered memories and flashes of light and a horrific sense of continuously falling. I snapped my eyes open.

There was no rest for me.

*Let's think about something else.*

I knew who the piano teacher's killer was. Jacob had called him Eli. (And I made myself constantly repeat the name, as I did not want to forget it.) Later, when I had questioned Jacob about the name, he



could not recall saying it and was adamant that he did not know who the killer was.

I still doubted that this Eli had meant to kill our piano teacher, probably assumed she would see the gun and simply give up the key.

Instead, she screamed bloody murder.

And his reaction was to quiet her. And quiet her he did, strangling the life out of her.

Then again, maybe I was wrong. Maybe his intent was to kill her all along. Maybe. But I doubted it. He had also been high on something, which accounted for his bloodshot eyes, and that something would have clouded his judgment.

*Just a crackhead in need of his next fix—and in need of some extra money.*

Which made me wonder: had Eli been high on something when he killed *me*? I thought back to my own death, to the look on Eli's face as he stood over my dead body. Yeah, he was definitely high on something, or drunk. Perhaps both.

The morning sun was making its appearance. Pigeons flashed across the window and into the brightening sky. I heard cars moving down a distant street, and one or two of them pulled into the church



parking lot.

One thing was certain: Eli was affiliated with the church somehow, either as a worker or as a parishioner. *Something*. He'd known about the key and the wallet and when to strike; in particular, when the piano teacher would be alone in the chapel.

Perhaps he had once been a student here, too, like Jacob and I.

I thought of the two names: *Eli and Jacob*. Both names were Biblical, and both were from the Old Testament. More importantly, both rang a tantalizing bell within me.

So what was my next step?

*Easy; find out who the hell Eli is.*

## 24.

As the early morning turned into mid-morning, I searched the church and its connecting school for



any signs of the killer.

I suspected Eli probably wasn't a teacher here—especially with all signs pointing to a serious drug problem—but he could have worked in other areas of the school: security, maintenance, administration.

I drifted in and out of classrooms and offices and hallways. I came across many people, of course, but none of them were Eli, which didn't surprise me. Any principal worth his or her salt wouldn't let an obvious addict around the kids. Unless said obvious addict was an old pro at hiding signs of his addiction.

Except Eli *wasn't* an old pro. He was just a scumbag user with a disgusting habit, a user who was willing to kill an innocent woman to get his hands on a few bucks.

And he was willing to kill me, too.

So how did Eli know about the wallet? I didn't know. At least not yet.

Although I missed my daughter, I was admittedly glad to get out of my apartment complex and see some new sights, new people—

I suddenly stopped in mid-drift.

*Jesus, what's her name?!*

Panic washed over me. Literally. I could see my



own ethereal body ripple with the effect.

*Her name, dammit? What was her name? Maddie? Mandy! It was Mandy!*

Relieved, I continued down the hallway, repeating her name over and over....

And over....

\* \* \*

The school was adjacent to the cathedral, and thus, being of the same building, permitted me ghostly access. I had already attempted to leave the church once, only to discover the invisible barrier blocking me. Who invented these ghostly rules, I didn't know, but they were there and they were damned limiting.

The classrooms all looked just as I remembered: lots of shelving and lots of religious-themed posters. Maybe even the *same* posters back from my school days. *God is Great. Jesus is the Reason for the Season.*

The teachers, granted, were younger and far cuter than I remembered.

Sometimes, as I drifted in and out of the various class-rooms, students would turn and look at me—



then usually quickly look away. Young mediums, all of them. The world is full of such mediums, most just won't admit to their abilities.

Now, as I drifted through the back wall of a third-grade classroom, a red-headed kid with braces and a thick neck snapped his head around and looked directly at me. Then promptly turned bone white. Then again, maybe he was already bone white. Hard to tell with redheads.

Unfortunately for him I was in a strange and bitter mood, and as I passed him, I said, "Boo."

He slammed his eyes shut. The kid was a powerful medium in the making, whether he wanted to be or not. Probably not, since he was now making the sign of the cross and might have just wet himself.

*Scaring little boys is not the way to go to heaven*, I thought.

I continued drifting down the aisle toward the head of the class where the teacher was droning on about the Spanish colonies of yesteryear. On the wall just behind her were various class portraits spanning many decades.

The class portraits gave me an idea. A very good idea.



*Now, just don't forget it!*

\* \* \*

I whipped down a hallway, made a sharp right, found myself in the school's administration office which was being manned by a young, serious-looking woman in her early twenties.

The sign on her desk read: VISITORS SIGN IN.

I was tempted to write: *James the Ghost*.

Instead, I drifted past her and down a narrow hallway lined with doors on either side. I peeked into all of them, whether they were open or not, and finally found what I was searching for in the very last room.

It was the copy room, and on the wide shelf above the work station was a very long row of school yearbooks.

25.

Ghosts are energy.

I understand this now, although I didn't before.



And when I say *before*, I mean back when I was living. Hell, back when I was living, I didn't even believe in ghosts, let alone that someday I would actually *be* one. Then again, maybe I'm not a ghost. Maybe all this is one long, bad dream. A very, very bad dream.

*Or maybe this is hell*, I thought.

At that moment, a very large, balding man stepped into the copy room. He flicked on the light switch and ignored me completely and opened the copy machine's lid. He punched in the number 30 and proceeded to run off thirty copies of what appeared to be a drawing of a pizza. *Aw, fractions*. While the copy machine chugged away, he shivered and rubbed his arms and looked around absently...and, perhaps, a little uneasily. His very weak sixth sense was picking up on me.

When his copies were finished, he turned to leave, but then paused in the doorway. The fine hairs on the back of his neck, I saw, were standing on end. He slowly, slowly, turned around—and appeared to look directly at me.

Did he see me? I didn't know. I doubted it. A small part of his brain knew I was there, but could he



trust that part of his brain? Most people didn't. He continued staring at me. I stared back at him. Somewhere down the hallway a phone rang. Someone answered it. He blinked first, shivered once, and then got the hell out of Dodge. Or, at least, the hell out of the copy room.

When he was gone, I went to work.

\* \* \*

As a ghost, I can draw energy from most anywhere, from the air, from the sun, from the living—and even from electronics.

*Especially from electronics.*

Ghosts and electronics are made for each other, which is why lights in a house will often flicker during a haunting. Ghosts, you see, use the electricity that feeds the lights as an energy source to materialize.

And so now, with the help of the copy machine, I began to materialize. And as I did so, the lights from its display panel flickered wildly and the whole thing sort of groaned like something old and dying.

I felt myself taking shape. First my torso formed, then, in a sort of rippling wave of solidity, my arms and legs and fingers and toes followed next. I turned



my hand over, watching it congeal before my eyes, opening and closing my fingers, making a fist. I sucked more energy from the machine, from the air, from anywhere and everywhere I could find it. Galvanized and crackling with life, I imagined this was how Frankenstein's monster felt when that lightning storm struck.

*Where's Igor when you need him?*

Solid and fully formed and feeling more alive than I had in a long, long time, I was just about to get to work when the secretary appeared in the doorway.

\* \* \*

*Shit.*

Head down and holding a piece of paper she no doubt intended to copy, she absently reached for the light switch—and then paused in mid-reach.

Her head snapped up and she gasped. How she didn't scream, I don't know. She put a hand over her chest and calmed herself.

"Oh, my God, you scared me. I didn't think anyone was in here."

I just smiled and nodded—and prayed she wouldn't continue reaching for the light switch. My bullet wounds would have been hard to miss in this



form.

“Um, I’ll come back,” she said, backing away. “Do you need any light?”

I shook my head and she stared at me for another moment, then turned and hustled off.

I knew I didn’t have much time. Ghost or no ghost, a strange man standing alone in the copy room—with the lights out, no less—would warrant an investigation.

I moved quickly over to the shelf filled with yearbooks.

I figured the killer, Eli, was in his late twenties. If so, that would have put him in high school about ten years ago. Which, if my math was right, would have put him about eight years younger than myself.

So I started pulling down yearbooks that corresponded with those dates. I pulled out four yearbooks and opened the cover to the first—and briefly reveled in my solidity. I was nearly one hundred percent congealed, and I felt almost human. Well, human enough to turn the pages of the book, which I did so now, flipping rapidly to the high school portraits, scanning faces, looking for the killer.

The church’s private school was not a big one,



and so I was able to go through the high school students rather quickly. Nothing in the first yearbook. I opened the second, repeated the process, scanning face. Nothing there, either. I pushed it off to the side, opened the third. When that proved fruitless, I had just opened the fourth, had just happened across the high school football team photo, when I heard voices coming down the hallway.

They were coming.

Which was a damn shame, since I had just spotted Eli.

## 26.

There are times—rare times, granted—when I'm thankful for being a ghost. This was one of them.

As the footsteps and voices drew nearer, I stepped away from the copy machine and, with my source of energy now gone, I immediately began to



evaporate, and just as I had risen up off the floor, two men, trailed by the secretary, entered the copy room.

One of them immediately flicked on the light, but by that time I was already hovering near the ceiling and, should they have looked up, would have appeared only as a nearly invisible misty sheen. And even the mist was fading quickly. Soon, I would be gone altogether.

*Gone, but not forgotten.*

Both men were wearing blue jeans and tee shirts. Teachers, perhaps. Or maybe coaches. Hard to tell since teachers dress so casually nowadays. The secretary stepped cautiously into the room between the two men. She looked completely flabbergasted.

"He was just here," she said. "Standing in the dark, doing nothing."

"Who was he?" one of the guys asked.

"I don't know."

"What did he look like?" asked the other.

"Tall. Hair sort of mussed. Hard to say since he was in the dark."

"What was he doing?" asked the first guy.

"Like I said, nothing. Just standing there. Looking



creepy as heck. I've been watching the door from my desk ever since. No one left."

"Did he say anything?"

"No."

The men looked at each other. One raised an eyebrow. The secretary saw the gesture and immediately turned on him.

"Look, I'm not making this up, Rick," she said.

"I didn't say you were."

She moved deeper into the room, pointed to the open yearbooks. "Look. These were not like this before."

"He was looking at yearbooks in the dark?" Rick asked, incredulous.

"I don't know. Maybe—"

"Sharon—"

"Don't Sharon me."

The men exchanged looks again, this one much more patronizing. Luckily, Sharon didn't see this. Instead, she was looking down at her arms, the flesh of which had dimpled into goosebumps.

"Why is this room so darn cold? It's usually stifling in here." She rubbed her arms and shoulders, then felt the air around her. She reached up. "The



cold...it's coming from up here." Her hand passed through my groin. "It's coming from here. It's like twenty degrees cooler here."

The men looked at each other again; cold spots, apparently, didn't excite them.

"Sharon," said Rick evenly, carefully, "No one saw a man come in here, and no one saw a man leave. Just like—"

"Just like what?" she asked, spinning around. Sharon was a young girl, perhaps in college. She would have been cute if she wasn't so pissed off. "Just like the little boy I see in the nave?"

"Yes," said the other guy. "The boy you *claim* to see."

"He's there, Jules. And I'm not the only one who sees him." Her voice rose an octave or two.

He held up his hands. "Okay, okay. We'll take a walk around campus, see if we can find anyone," said Jules. "Does that make you feel better?"

She nodded, appeased, but still didn't like it. I felt a little sorry for her. The men left, and she was left standing there alone, looking up at the ceiling. Looking up at me. She knew I was there. Or a part of her did.



“Whoever you are,” she said. “I command you to leave here in the name of Jesus Christ.”

Where was I supposed to go? I didn’t know, but I knew when I wasn’t wanted, so I drifted through the wall, out into the hallway and exited the administrative offices.

\* \* \*

I waited until the dead of night to return to the copy room.

Jacob had followed me halfway there but had gotten distracted by some new artwork tacked onto the hallway bulletin board. He was, after all, just a kid. How old, exactly, I didn’t know, but I would guess under ten, maybe seven or eight.

The offices were, of course, dark and empty. The copy machine itself was in some sort of hibernation mode. So I gathered as much energy as I could, no doubt chilling the surrounding air around me, and pressed the activation button on the machine. The copier immediately whirred on. A few minutes later when it was fully charged, I drew enough energy from it to pull down the same yearbook I had seen Eli in.

I opened it, and went looking for the same football team shot. I found the photo again in the



athletics section, and there he was, a clean-cut kid with a smirk on his face, his wide shoulder pads making him appear much bigger and tougher than he really was. I quickly found his corresponding name in the caption below the picture.

Eli Myrth.

I read it again, and again. The name of my killer. The name of piano teacher's killer.

And that's when it hit me. I remembered Eli Myrth.

Lord help me, I remembered.

*I needed that wallet.*

## 27.

I dashed out of the copy room, through the administration offices, flashed down a hallway.

I made an impossible ninety-degree turn at what would have been breakneck speed. Except, of



course, I didn't have a neck to break. I passed the dead boy. He was skipping in and out of a wall covered with photos of a recent school play, humming to himself.

The boy....

Lord, help me.

The double doors to the nave were closed. No problem. I lowered my head, blasted through—

The church, as usual, was dark and empty and creepy as hell. Even for a ghost. I whipped down the main aisle, up the platform, and into the side storage room off stage left.

The room was pitch dark. I don't need much light, but I do need some, so I gathered my energy and used it all to flick on the light switch. Once done, I headed over to the box where Eli Myrth had hidden the wallet weeks earlier.

Thankfully, the wallet was still there, wedged deep within a tangle of black cables.

I tried to gather my energy enough to lift the wallet, but my thoughts were scattered, laced with images of Jacob falling to his death.

Horrible, horrible images.

Earlier, Jacob's perspective had been as he fell,



looking up at the shocked and horrified faces of the boys who dropped him.

My perspective—my *new* perspective—was from above, watching in horror as the boy begins to slip from my grasp, realizing with horror that something very bad was about to happen.

Very, very bad.

The boy reaches up, helplessly.

But it's too late, and now he's falling, falling....

\* \* \*

*We just meant to scare him.*

I tried to calm down. Tried to focus my thoughts. No good. I paced the small area of the storage room, shook my hands. If I could have taken a deep breath I would have.

*We just meant to scare him.*

I needed that wallet. I needed to know what was inside, although I could already guess. I forced myself to calm down, to slow down. Back at the cardboard box, I gathered my energy as best as I could and plucked the wallet out from within. It dropped to the floor, flopped open.

I hovered over the wallet, wondering if I really wanted to know what was inside. Yes, I did. Very



much so. It was truly a matter of life and death.

Well, *after*life and death.

I leaned down over the wallet, then removed two items from their respective slots. The first was a Subway lunch card. Four holes had been punched in—just six away from a free sub. The other was a student body card. The student in the picture had a minor acne problem, but nothing that time wouldn't eventually clear up. He was grinning and happy, a spark in his eye. The spark would later leave with the weight of guilt. Eternal guilt.

The name on the card was mine, of course.

James Blakely.

28.

Pauline and I were kneeling together in the front pew.

She had come to light a prayer candle to save the souls of those languishing in purgatory; that, and



to see how the hell I was doing. Personally, I think she and I were connected, somehow. And my own internal anguish had registered on her psychic radar. Or not. Maybe she really did miss me after just a few days.

Also, I wasn't so much kneeling as floating next to her in a kneeling sort of way. She lit another candle, mumbled something that I couldn't hear.

"Say a little prayer for me, too," I said.

"Already did."

"What did God say?"

"Said He'll get back to me."

"It figures."

We weren't alone in the nave. Jacob was nearby miming playing the piano on stage with big exaggerated movements that he might have learned from various Bugs Bunny cartoons. Every now and then actually struck a real key, and a real note would erupt from the piano, and the handful of worshipers would gasp and look up and cross themselves immediately. Pauline would just giggle next to me. Jacob himself seemed completely oblivious to the fact that he was sometimes scaring the hell out of the



parishioners. Instead, he would often stop his pseudo playing and sob uncontrollably, his little shoulders shaking violently, the sound of his weeping reaching my ears—and Pauline's ears—quite easily.

"The boy misses his music teacher," said Pauline.

"Yes."

"And he misses something else."

I looked over at her. Damn, she was perceptive.

"Yes," I said. "I imagine he does."

"He had a twin brother," she said.

"Yes, he did."

Between my own telltale thoughts and the boy's erratic memories, I was willing to bet Pauline knew most of what was going on already.

I said nothing. While in death, events in my past had mostly stayed forgotten, unless I was reminded of them. Being here, in this church, I was reminded of them. Powerfully. And ever since finding the wallet, memories of Jacob's death had been flooding back all day. Haunting, horrible memories. And with them returned the terrible feelings of guilt.

*I didn't mean to drop him,* I thought.

*I was just going to scare him into telling me*



*where my wallet was.*

"You killed that little boy," said Pauline. Despite herself, despite our friendship and her love for me, there was a note of accusation in her voice.

I nodded. I could feel the weight of Pauline's stare on me.

"Yes," I said. "Myself and one other."

"Tell me what happened."

I did. As best as I could remember, I told her how someone had spotted Jacob going through my backpack, stealing my wallet. Because we were in a K-12 private school, we sometimes mixed with the younger kids. Jacob, if my sketchy memory was correct, had been about eight at the time. I was sixteen, and was just beginning my junior year of high school.

I had grabbed a friend of mine, a friend whose name I could not recall at the moment. Together he and I had found Jacob in one of the bathrooms. We told him that the piano teacher had wanted to see him and followed him into the empty nave. Once inside, we grabbed the boy and, kicking and screaming, dragged him up a flight of stairs to the rafters above the sanctuary. Rafters meant only for



the lighting guys—not meant for cruel teenage boys.

We hung Jacob over the railing. Demanded he tell us where my wallet was. The kid was hysterical. Didn't know where the wallet was—claimed he didn't know what we were talking about. *But he was lying! I knew it!* He had been caught red-handed by someone I trusted. We were furious. Well, I was furious. My friend had just been caught up in the moment.

So I hung him further out over the railing, demanded that he tell me where my wallet was—

And then it happened.

I couldn't believe it at first. One moment he was in my hands, struggling, fighting, scared out of his mind. The next he was falling through the air, reaching up for us, eyes wide and terrified. I lunged forward, reached out for him, but he was gone.

*Gone.*

And if he had landed on the carpeted stage, he would have probably only suffered a broken leg or two. Instead, he hit the sharp corner of the heavy altar and his head burst open, spraying blood and brain matter across the sanctuary. He jerked once, twice, and then lay still.



I watched him die from the rafters.

\* \* \*

Pauline was silent, digesting.

Jacob's death was a memory I had relived a million times. To some degree, my own death had been a welcomed relief, for then the memories of the falling boy had abated—at least for a few years.

Now they were back again.

A million and one times I had watched Jacob fall, a million and one times I had watched his head explode, saw the blood, his brains...saw it all again.

*And again.*

I looked up towards the rafters now.

And it had all happened right here, in this place. I glanced to my right. And there he was now, the dead boy, silently playing the piano, his head eternally broken open.

All because of me.

*Sweet, sweet Jesus. What had I done?*

"Don't be so hard on yourself, James." said Pauline. "I have a feeling you've beaten yourself up enough over this."

I didn't say anything. Didn't know what to say.



Beating myself up over this was a natural pastime for me. Hell, I had killed a kid. I deserved to beat myself up over this, right?

“No,” said Pauline. “You need to forgive yourself.”

“No,” I said. “I need *him* to forgive *me*.”

We both looked at the boy. Jacob was flamboyantly playing the piano in a ghostly imitation of Liberace.

Pauline dipped deeper into my thoughts. “But that’s not the worst of it, is it?” she asked.

“No,” I said. Pain coursed through me. So real and powerful that I wanted to sink down into the floor and keep on sinking forever.

“Jacob didn’t steal your wallet, did he?” she said.

“No,” I said, looking away. “It was his twin brother, Eli.”

“The same twin who later killed you?”



“Yes.”

“The same twin who killed the music teacher? Her name, by the way, was Mrs. Randolph.”

Ah. The name resonated deep within me. Pauline continued probing my mind. She was a hell of a prober.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said. “I think. Anyway, why did Eli wait so long to come after you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Does it matter?”

“Probably not, but I’ll check into some things.”

“Check how?” I asked.

“With a private investigator I know. We’ve worked on some cases together.”

“You work with a private investigator?” I asked.

“Sometimes. Hey, psychic detectives are all the rage these days. I happen to provide an invaluable service.”

“Okay, fine,” I said. “See what you can find out, but I don’t think it really matters, does it?”

I thought about what I had just said, and realized my error. Pauline picked up on my thoughts, too. “Exactly,” she said. “This friend of yours who helped you haul Jacob up to the rafters....”

“Is in some serious danger,” I finished.



“Or already dead,” she said. “Do you remember his name?”

“No.”

“I’ll have my detective friend check everything out in one fell swoop. I’ll be back when I have something.”

We were silent. The church was active. Worshipers came and went. The boy continued miming playing the piano. Luckily, he had stopped inadvertently hitting the keys. Which was just as well. Wouldn’t want the church to get a reputation for being haunted or anything.

“Do you hate Eli for killing you?” Pauline asked suddenly.

A good question.

“No,” I said, surprising even myself. “At least I don’t think I do. A part of me thinks I deserved to die. After all, I had taken so much away from him.”

“And now he has taken so much away from you.”

I thought about my daughter. I hated that she was going to grow up without her daddy. I also hated that I hadn’t been given a chance to make my life right, to correct my mistakes, to guarantee my entry into heaven.



Pauline, of course, was reading my thoughts.  
“Maybe there is no guarantee, James.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, maybe sooner or later it’s time to roll the dice.”

“Excuse me, but I’d rather not roll the dice with my eternal soul, thank you. I would rather stay here and do what I’m doing than burn in hell forever.”

“Fine. And what if I told you there was no hell, James? And, for that matter, no heaven, either?”

“I would say you were full of shit.”

“What if I told you that when you die, you go somewhere else. Another plane of existence, a spirit world filled with family and friends and love?”

“I would say prove it.”

“Some things have to be taken on faith, James.”

“So you say,” I said.



It was late, and Jacob and I were alone in the cathedral.

The kid had wandered up to the very rafters where he had fallen. Or, more accurately, where I had *dropped* him. He was often drawn to that spot, and I wondered if he even knew *why* he was drawn to that spot. Maybe, maybe not. Either way, his memory was spotty at best and the details of his own death were mostly lost to him.

*Mercifully.*

Someday soon I was going to have to come clean with him, to admit to him what I had done. And that was going to be a very, very difficult day.

I was sitting in a pew, near the main aisle, in a pool of moonlight that shone down through the stained glass windows above. Outside, there must have been a small wind blowing. The crooked shadows of skeletal branches waved across the floor and pews like somebody beckoning somebody, and as I sat there alone, gazing at nothing and everything, one shadow in particular seemed to come alive in the far corner of the room. It was high up, near the ceiling. First it appeared as a



sort of ink blot, separating from the deeper shadows of the ceiling. Then it moved sideways across the ceiling, developing arms and legs as it went. Many arms and legs. And many eyes. It paused once along the ceiling and turned toward me.

Apparently, I wasn't alone.

\* \* \*

The shadow was, in fact, *three* shadows. They appeared vaguely humanoid, with three sets of reddish eyes and many spider-like limbs. They also appeared to be moving as one, with calculated, coordinated movements. Perhaps I should have been scared. Perhaps I should have fled the nave in terror.

But I didn't. What could they do? Kill me again?

With Jacob still high in the rafters, lost in his scattered thoughts, the three shadows continued creeping sideways along the wall. Their glowing eyes, I was certain, were trained on me. Whoever—or whatever—they were, I seemed to have their undivided attention.

*Lucky me.*

As they got closer, scuttling unusually along the wall like some great black insect, I was able to reach



out and dip into their minds and sense who—or *what*—they were.

I sensed immediately great confusion and loss and fear and pain. So much pain. And flashing, distorted, murky, incomprehensible memories. Human memories.

They were human. Or *were* human.

What they were now, I did not know. Shadows of their former selves. Memories of their former selves, reduced now to nonsensical creatures who were completely out of their minds, having lost all memory of who they were or why they were even in the church

---

*No, that wasn't right.*

I did sense a purpose. A single, undivided purpose that seemed somehow woven throughout their mostly fragmented memories. I looked up at the painting on the wall in front of me. The purpose had something to do with it—but what that purpose was, I did not know.

The entities crept closer.

They seemed two dimensional, as if there was no essence to them, no depth. True shadows. Shades. They continued along the wall to my left,



crawling just beneath the stained glass windows. The bright moonlight seemed lost on them, swallowed by them.

Living black holes.

*This will be you someday*, I suddenly thought. *Losing your mind, your memory, the very essence of who you are. Forever.*

With that pleasant thought in mind, the three entities, which had worked their way along the wall directly across from me, now stopped. They seemed to be communicating with each other. Shortly, they came to some sort of an agreement, and as they did so, something unexpected happened.

Like rotting wallpaper, they peeled away from the wall, and then slowly drifted out over the pews.

*A demon kite*, I thought, looking up at the specters drifting over me like a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade float from hell.

Now closer, I was able to dip deeper into their lost minds. And what I found there were many distorted, disturbing, chaotic images: flashes of gunfire, swirling monk's robes, the sneering of cruel thieves, unimaginable torture. Again, all centered



around the massive oil painting hanging on the far wall.

“Indeed, James,” said a female voice suddenly to my right, startling me. “They guard the painting. And they do so quite well, don’t you think?”

I had been so caught up watching the steady approach of the three entities that I had completely missed the woman who had materialized on stage. She was, of course, the beautiful woman from my apartment complex, the beautiful woman whom I had no memory of. From across the cathedral, she smiled at me, then looked up. I followed her gaze. There, the three shadows were now suspended nearly directly above me. Creepy as hell, if you ask me.

“They were monks once,” she said, her melodic voice filling my head. “More significant, they were brothers, and all three were tortured and murdered here in this very church.”

I frowned. “But if they were monks, then why are they not in heaven?”

“They made a pact, James. A pact in life that they now carry into death.”

“A pact?”



“To protect the painting you see on the wall above me.”

Yes, the painting. It was a massive portrait of the Mount of Olives, depicting Christ’s betrayal and arrest prior to his crucifixion. The same painting Eli had lusted after—and run in terror from.

“You see, there had been a *fourth* brother,” she said.

I nodded with sudden clarity. “The artist who painted it.”

“Indeed,” she said, stepping off the stage. “The painting was commissioned by the Catholic church and was to be brought to the New World. But the fourth brother, the artist, died of the plague upon its completion, and the remaining three brothers took it upon themselves to transport it safely. The painting eventually found its way here, to this church, where both painting and brothers took up residence.”

“Until the thieves came,” I said.

She nodded. “*Banditos*. They were after the painting, among other things. But the brothers, given advance warning of their arrival, had safely hidden it. The *banditos* were not happy. Each brother was systematically tortured and killed, but the painting



remained safely hidden. Centuries later, it was discovered in the bowels of the church's basement, and now, as you can see, it hangs prominently."

I looked directly up. "And still they watch over it."

"Vigilantly," said the woman. "And forsaking all of heaven to do so."

She now stood in the aisle before me. I rose to my feet and stared into those heartbreakingly familiar almond-shaped eyes. I knew those eyes. I knew that face. I knew those lips. Intimately. But I had no memory of her. Nothing.

"Who are you?" I asked.

She took my hand and for the first time in a long, long time I felt warmth. I also felt love. Deep, fathomless love. As she held my gaze, images appeared in my mind. Beautiful, sweet, loving images of the two of us together, throughout time and space, born and reborn throughout many lifetimes, dozens of lifetimes. Hundreds of lifetimes. The images came fast and crazily, until at last they finally slowed and stopped. Now a single word appeared in my thoughts, pulsating, alive with meaning: *soulmates*.

This was followed by a final image. One of a



beautiful college student with long blond hair, an impish smile, and almond-shaped eyes. A student who had been killed instantly in a car accident that had left me reeling for many, many years until I eventually met my future wife.

"You were she," I said, thunderstruck, as a wave of dizziness and disorientation threatened to overwhelm me. Had I been alive I would have needed to sit. Had I been alive I would, of course, not be currently holding her hands.

She squeezed mine even tighter. "Yes, James."

"And we've been reincarnated together?" I asked, remembering the images. "Throughout all eternity?"

"Yes, James."

I sensed the truth behind her words, behind her images, but I was troubled. Deeply, deeply troubled. How could I reincarnate if I was given but one chance at life? One chance to make things right? This was how I was raised to believe. This is what the church taught.

I released her hands. "I don't believe you."

"Your belief is everything, James."



"I think you're the Devil," I said, "Here to tempt me."

And even as I spoke those words I knew them to be untrue. How could anyone love me the way she was loving me now and be the Devil? Could the Devil even love?

She continued watching me; I continued feeling her love.

Behind her, the three brothers dropped from the ceiling and, as if they had forgotten the use of their legs, crawled along the center aisle on hands and feet as their knees and elbows stuck out at odd angles. As they approached behind her, they could have easily been demons. *Her* demons. She ignored them and continued staring at me steadily. I found them to be distracting as hell.

I forced myself to look into her eyes. "I can't believe you," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Someday you will, James," and with that she began fading before my eyes. And when she had disappeared altogether, the three red-eyed beings immediately retreated down the center aisle and scuttled up the far wall and disappeared into the darkest shadows of the deepest part of the ceiling.



But I knew they were up there.  
Watching.

31.

Days passed; maybe even weeks.

I haunted the old church, the school of my youth, location of so much death and destruction. Often I sat in on many classroom lectures, learning much about history and science and social studies. All of which I forgot instantly. Just like back when I was in school.

*Some things never change.*

My friends now were the parishioners and the teachers and the students and the workers. Except they didn't know I was their friend. Mostly, my companions were Jacob and the three red-eyed beings who watched over the massive painting with unsettling single-mindedness. But not always.



Sometimes they watched me, too, doing so with a unique oneness. Sometimes the three wraiths would come down from the ceiling and swarm around me like curious red-eyed demon cats. But they weren't evil, and if they were, I certainly didn't sense it.

Often I had to remind myself of who I was, and why I was here. And sometimes I couldn't even do that. Whole days would pass until I finally remembered who I was, and then it would all come flooding back to me—all of it, all over again, reliving everything and everyone. Jacob's death, my murder, Mrs. Randolph's murder. And I would weep for my dead body, my fatherless girl and my own lost soul.

But I would weep hardest for taking the life of the young boy.

Once or twice, when I had lost all sense of who I was, I found myself creeping along the ceiling with the three entities. They accepted me as one of their own, and I found their presence oddly comforting. I found their communal thoughts a blessing, their collective will attractive. They referred to themselves as The One, and I liked that. We were The One.

That is, until I would remember who I was. Then I would peel away from the trio. But each time it was



harder and harder to leave them. There is peace in numbers. I needed peace.

Mostly I haunted the classrooms and naves and back offices and forgotten rooms. Sometimes I remembered my daughter but mostly I didn't. Sometimes I remembered my wife, but that, too, was becoming a rarity. Sometimes I would see a beautiful young woman watching me from the shadows, glowing in her own bright light, and I would wonder who she was.

\* \* \*

I knew the day would come when I would tell the boy my identity. That I was, in fact, his killer.

I also knew that how I came to be here at this Church, at this time, with him, wasn't a coincidence. Then again, maybe it was. But I doubted it. Something bigger was going on here, some grand reconciliation that I didn't entirely comprehend. Too much of this seemed pre-ordained. Too much of this seemed to have the touch of something greater going on.

Or not. We'll see.

Still, the time did not seem right to tell Jacob.



Soon, I thought. *Very soon.*

\* \* \*

Pauline checked in on me every now and then.

On this day, as we sat together in the front pew, she informed me that my memory was disappearing at a much faster rate because I was not naturally grounded to the church; that my memory would keep on disappearing until I was nothing more than one of the red-eyed entities watching over the painting. I didn't tell her that I was, in fact, already becoming like them, but I think she sensed it anyway.

I asked her again why I was here and what had happened to me, and, with great patience, she told me again. I sensed she had told me this dozens and dozens of times before. Perhaps hundreds. I didn't know.

As we sat there, Pauline took my hand and told me I needed to leave this place before I lost all sense of who I was. I told her I needed to be here until some resolution came, no matter how difficult the road ahead may be. She nodded and was about to leave when I put a hand on her forearm. Or tried to. Mostly my hand just passed through her. As sensitive as she was, she was aware of the gesture,



and paused.

"Wait," I said. "How long have I been here?"

"Two months."

"How's my daughter?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure she's fine."

"I miss her," I said.

She smiled at me sadly and told me she would be back. I watched her go, and as she exited, the red-eyed beings crawled down from the ceiling and swarmed around me.

*Just one big happy family.*

## 32.

I was sitting with Jacob in an empty classroom.

It was late evening and school was out and the teachers had all long since gone home. Only a handful of spooked maintenance workers remained. I wondered what had gotten them so spooked.

Jacob and I didn't talk much these days. I just



couldn't find it within myself to ask about his family, especially his brother. He seemed content with silence. I suspected he was very used to silence after so many years haunting the church alone.

We were sitting in a fifth-grade classroom, surrounded by surprisingly competent student artwork. I spilled out of the small desk I was squeezed in, although Jacob sat comfortably within his. Our sitting, of course, was just an illusion. In reality, we simply contorted our ethereal bodies in a parody of sitting, and if you looked close enough, we were both rising and falling gently on the ghostly tides of this nether dimension we occupied.

Jacob was humming a song, a Beatles song, I think. "I Wanna Hold Your Hand." But he was butchering it badly, having forgotten the words and most of the basic tune.

I thought about my desire to save my own soul. Was I making any progress? I didn't know. I had found Mrs. Randolph's killer, sure, but her killer had turned out to be *my* killer. And now *our* killer was the twin brother of the boy I had killed so many years ago.



Coincidence?

I doubted it. There was too much going on here.

What it was, I didn't know.

And as Jacob continued butchering the Beatles song and I continued contemplating my eternal fate, a television production crew arrived at the church. And, according to all their shirts and equipment and gear, they were here to film something called "Ghost Detectives."

*Great.*

33.

The TV crew, making a hell of a racket, set up shop in one of the third-grade classrooms.

*Loud enough to wake the dead.*

Jacob and I were sitting together in the far corner of the classroom, minus our dunce caps, watching as the film crew quickly and efficiently set up their equipment. Most of the workers were wearing black



tee-shirts with green lettering. The green lettering said: *Ghost Detectives*.

I've lived in L.A. most of my adult life. At least, I'm pretty sure I have. I do have a vague memory of living in Phoenix for a brief period, but that memory was elusive at best and I didn't put a whole lot of stock into it. Hell, lately I didn't put a whole lot of stock into *any* of my memories.

Anyway, growing up here in L.A., especially near Hollywood, one gets used to seeing such film crews and the glamor of it all wears off real quick. But this situation was different, and I was admittedly excited.

"What are they doing?" Jacob asked next to me.

"They're filming a television show," I said.

"About what?"

"Us, I think."

He looked up at me, his mouth forming a perfect oval of surprise. "Us? But why?"

"Because we're special," I said. *Because we're ghosts*, I didn't add.

"But they can't see us," said Jacob. "*Nobody* can see us."

I watched the crew scurry about, testing lights and cameras and clip-on microphones. As they did



so, another group stepped into the room, three guys and girl, all wearing the same *Ghost Detective* t-shirts. But these four felt different to me. Waves of arrogant, self-importance radiated from them.

*Ah, the stars are here*, I thought.

Immediately, one of them raised a fit. Apparently, someone was supposed to have a coffee ready for him. He was a tall guy with a shiny ponytail knotted with three evenly spaced rubber bands. An assistant scurried off and returned shortly with a steaming cup of Starbucks. The man received it without a thank you, and promptly sent the assistant, almost in tears now, off onto another task. I looked over at the boy.

"Perhaps we should *let* them see us," I said.

"I don't understand," said Jacob.

I smiled at him. "Do you want to have some fun? Play a game with them?"

He thought about that. I think the concept of *fun* and *games* was almost lost on him. I planted an image of hide and seek in his mind and his eyes lit up.

"Yes!" he said, clapping. "Yes, let's have some fun!"



I recognized the school secretary there, too, conferring with a small group of *Ghost Detective* directors and producers.

Had she arranged all of this? I suspected so. Ghost sightings, undoubtedly, had been on the rise in the church and school since my arrival. And perhaps my presence here had prompted more activity from Jacob, as well.

Standing next to the secretary was the school principal, a tall, distinguished looking lady drinking her own Starbucks coffee and looking very concerned—no doubt wondering what the hell she had agreed to.

I would be concerned, too.

Interestingly, there were no mediums in the group. I would think a ghost detecting would involve a good medium, but what the hell did I know? I was just



a spook. Anyway, with no medium in the group, I was able to flit among them sight unseen, with Jacob trailing behind like a ghostly duckling.

I worked my way over to the corner of the room, near the teacher's desk, where the quartet of stars had isolated themselves away from the rest of the crew. The guy with the ponytail was adamantly arguing his point that he should investigate the nave. Turns out they all wanted to investigate the parish; in particular, they all appeared to want a close up shot with a bloody Jesus Christ hanging over their shoulder. Ponytail smugly won out in the end by pulling rank. It seemed to me that the show was more about getting close ups of its stars than about hunting ghosts. Big surprise.

Well, they were about to get a surprise. Perhaps the surprise of their lives.

Show time.



It was midnight. The witching hour. Or, in this case, the *haunting hour*.

With cameras rolling, the secretary gave the crew—along with Jacob and myself—a tour of the brightly lit school and cathedral. She gave a rundown of the many unexplainable sights and sounds the parishioners and students and teachers had all seen or heard, and by the end of the tour I was damn well convinced the place was haunted.

Once the tour was done, the cast and crew created a sort of storyboard for how they wanted the show to flow. The plan was basic: The teams would split in two, with one group filming primarily in the cathedral and the other in the school and administrative offices. The teams might overlap depending on what evidence was discovered or if personal experiences needed to be confirmed or validated. Most of the ghost hunting equipment would be used in the cathedral, since it was not only the most visually stunning room, but where most of the unexplainable sightings had occurred. The team investigating the administrative offices, where I had



been spotted, and adjacent school and classrooms, where Jacob did most of his haunting, would be given limited equipment. Ponytail looked smug. He would be getting most of the cameratime this episode, and it obviously pleased him.

At any rate, I approved of the game plan. Made sense to me. Of course, no one asked me.

And because I could, as the crew was preparing to split for this evening's investigation, I leaned over and kissed the female star square on the lips.

Her eyes widened immediately. "Did someone just turn on the AC?" she asked.

"I don't think so. Why?" asked the young director.

"I just got a cold blast of air in my face."

That seemed to get everyone's attention. The director came over and felt the air around her. I had stepped off to the side and watched the proceedings with some interest, and maybe a little humor. He had some of the others feel the air around her, then proclaimed, rather dramatically, that there was no cold breeze coming from anywhere.

"But look at my arm," she said, pushing up her sleeve.

They all did. So did I. Her forearm, I saw, was



covered in gooseflesh. The young director, no dummy, got a camera over to her ASAP. And as they filmed both of her arms, I walked straight through the director himself.

He convulsed and nearly doubled over. "Sweet Jesus! Something just went right through me." He shoved up his own sleeve. "Look."

We all looked. It, too, was covered in goosebumps. The same cameraman took some footage of the director's mottled skin, as well.

Ah, TV at its best.

A ripple of excitement was now spreading through the crew. I heard the murmurings: Perhaps they were going to have a good show after all.

*Little did they know...*

With the whole crew buzzing in anticipation, the investigation began. Cameras began rolling. Ponytail, who appeared to be the Ghost Detective's leader, looked each of his investigators directly in the eye and intoned ominously, "Let's go black."

Apparently that meant to kill the lights. Which they all did. Last time I checked, ghosts didn't stop existing or *start* existing because of the absence, or



presence, of light. Hell, we derive much of our energy from lights—especially the light of the sun, which we sort of feed off of. So killing the lights was counter-productive, although it made for better TV. Then again, no one asked me. Typical.

As one team headed for the administrative office, Ponytail and a good-looking kid split off toward the cathedral, trailed by two cameramen.

And, of course, two ghosts.

## 36.

Ponytail, who had the annoying habit of dramatically flipping his namesake over a shoulder whenever he turned his head, was extremely thin and sinewy and had skin so orange it looked nearly radioactive. The color probably looked good on camera, even if it scared small children in line at



Baskin Robbins.

Admittedly, I didn't like him; in fact, I might have irrationally hated him.

*Hey, ghosts are allowed to be irrational.*

The other guy was okay. He was younger, humbler, and better looking. He also seemed to take this ghost hunting business a little more seriously. He was also mildly sensitive, the closest thing they had to a medium. Every now and then his eyes would drift over in my direction, linger, and then look away. He knew *something* was there, but he didn't know what, and he also didn't know if he could fully trust his extrasensory perceptions.

In this case, yes, he could very much trust them.

With Jacob already looking bored, I followed the two ghost detectives and their cameramen into the nave. And since nobody held the doors open for me and Jacob, we simply walked through them.

Once inside the main chapel, the cameramen swept their powerful lights over the pews and stage and podium. In the dark, everything looked appropriately creepy.

The two detectives separated to cover more of the chapel. Ponytail and his cameraman headed up



to the stage, while the kid and his headed toward the rear pews.

I followed Ponytail.

Taking an active interest in the proceedings, the red-eyed beings crept out of the shadows of the ceiling and stopped about a quarter of the way down the wall. Lord help anyone who touched that painting. Anyway, unless you knew what you were looking for, they appeared to be nothing more than shadows cast by the outside tree.

Ponytail was now standing directly beneath the statue of Jesus Christ. "Let's get some shots of me standing here."

The cameraman obliged, dropping to a knee and angling his camera in such a way that got both Ponytail and Christ in the same shot. The former struck a very intrepid pose as he slowly surveyed the dangerously haunted inner sanctuary. Ponytail next walked over to the piano and, with the cameraman trailing behind, turned and looked somberly into the lens.

"Over the years," he whispered with pseudo-reverence, sliding his fingers over the closed piano key cover, "there have been many reports of this



piano mysteriously playing itself.” He paused and flipped his thick ponytail from his right shoulder to his left, a completely unnecessary move. He went on, “And, in a surprising twist, the school’s music teacher was found murdered on this same piano just a few months ago.”

As he glided his hand slowly over the closed lid, I drew some energy from the camera light—which caused it to flicker—and reached down through the closed wooden lid and struck a key.

A-minor, I think.

The sound echoed through the sanctuary, and Ponytail nearly did a back flip. He jumped about a foot or two off the ground and landed on his cameraman. Both landed in a heap.

When they had untangled, the cameraman, who looked a little pissed, said, “What the hell happened?”

“Something pressed the key down!” said Ponytail excitedly.

“You mean, *you* pressed the key,” said the cameraman.

Ponytail spun on him. “How the fuck could I press



the key down if the cover is closed, dumbass?"

The commotion had attracted the younger co-star and his own cameraman, who both hustled over.

"What's going on?" asked the kid.

"The piano played by itself, Ray, I swear to God."

The kid, or Ray, inspected the piano with his flashlight. "The cover is closed."

"Thank you, Einstein," said Ponytail, and took a deep breath and collected himself. He turned to his cameraman. "How did I look?"

"Scared shitless. And that was before you landed on me. The shot is wasted."

"Fine. Let's do another take. We can edit the piano key being struck later, too."

And I proceeded to watch a rather amusing display of TV magic. On the second take, Ponytail once again ran his hand over the closed cover—then feigned hearing the sound. But this time, instead of scrambling for his life, his reaction was much more civilized and under control. He turned his head sharply, opened his mouth in surprise, then cocked his head knowingly as if he almost expected the the piano to play.

"Good," said the cameraman. "We can use that."



"What's going on?" Jacob asked me. I had nearly forgotten about the boy, and a lot of the fun I was having was lost on him.

"We're having fun," I said.

"We are?"

"Yes," I said. "Watch this."

Ponytail was currently leaning over and watching himself on some replay feature on the camera. I got the sense that he enjoyed watching himself. That he, in fact, lived to watch himself. Liking him less and less, I walked directly into his right shoulder and exited through his left. As I exited, his body convulsed nicely.

"What's wrong, Bob?" asked the other cameraman, looking at him.

Ah, so Ponytail had a name.

Bob, a.k.a. Ponytail, said, "I don't know, man. Something very cold just went straight through me."

Jacob giggled next to me. "Can I try?"

"Sure," I said.

With a big grin on his face, the boy drifted quickly through Ponytail, entering through his back and exiting through his stomach. Ponytail spasmed instantly.



“Jesus Christ!” said the lead investigator, looking around wildly. “I swear to God it just happened again! Look at my arm! Quick film it!”

The camera and light swung over to his forearm. I took a peek, too, and never have I seen such glorious goosebumps.

Ray, his young co-star, looked at his forearm, too, but with skepticism. “Are you messing with us, Bob?” he asked.

“No, goddammit. I swear to God something went through me twice.”

And Jacob went through him yet again.

Ponytail shrieked, spun wildly around, and looked like a cornered hellcat. Except nothing was cornering him. “It happened again! It’s attacking me! Help me, please!”

Jacob giggled some more. I nearly rubbed his damaged head, but stopped myself.

“Nothing’s attacking you,” said Ray calmly. He turned to one of the cameramen. “Is the air conditioning on or something?”

The cameraman swiped his hand in front of a vent in the floor near the altar. “No, it’s not on.”

Ray looked over at Ponytail. “Should we continue



rolling, Bob?"

Ponytail took a few deep breaths, calmed himself, stood a little straighter. "Of course we should continue rolling, dumbass. What the fuck do you think we're here for?"

"Bob," said one of the cameramen, "probably not a good idea to be cussing, you know, in a church."

Ponytail looked like he was about to lay into the guy, but decided against it. Instead, he turned to Ray. "Get the EMF detector."

The kid reached inside a pocket and produced a hand-held electronic gadget thingy. Ponytail grabbed it without a thank you, switched it on. A glowing LCD screen illuminated his face in a soft green glow.

"Point zero one," he said, then lowered the gizmo to the carpeted floor. "Still point zero one. Looks like our base reading is point zero—"

I waved my hand in front of the detector.

"Holy shit! Thirty-four point two! Thirty-nine! It's climbing."

Those numbers got everyone's attention. Ponytail swept the gizmo thingy around some more—and plunged it straight into my chest.



"Sweet Jesus. Fifty-eight point three!"

He raised the thing as high as my head, then lowered it down to my feet, all the while calling out numbers that seemed to steadily rise. He then moved it away from me, and the numbers lowered.

"Okay," he said, short of breath. He had worked himself up. He then shoved the detector back into my chest, which I found rather rude. "Whatever it is seems to be isolated right here."

"About the height of a man," said Ray.

I stepped to the left.

Ponytail frowned. "Damn, lost it." He swept the detector around some more until he found me a few feet away. "Okay, found it."

*Always nice, I thought, to be referred to as an 'it'.*

Ray came over and tentatively reached out his hand. His groping fingers found my face. "It's like ten degrees colder here," he reported. "A moving cold spot."

Ponytail grinned. "Looks like we found ourselves a live one, boys." He then turned and looked directly into one of the camera lens. "Here be ghosts."

*Oh, brother.*



Ponytail turned to his young co-star. "Walk with me."

The two stepped away from the cameramen. I stepped away with them. Jacob had lost all interest in having fun and was now skipping down one of the aisles, humming to himself. The kid had the attention span of a puppy.

"Look," said Ponytail, whispering to his co-star, "I'm no more a ghost detective than I am the President of the United States. I have no fucking clue what I'm doing out here half the time. This is, what, our sixth show? The other shows turned up nothing. The ratings are down and we need this show in a bad way."

"So you weren't faking any of that?" asked Ray.

"On my mother's grave."

"Your mother is alive."



“Well, then on my grandmother’s grave. Look, I swear to you, I felt like something walked through me. Three fucking times. And the piano...I didn’t touch a damned thing, I swear to you. The thing played itself.”

“Okay, I believe you.”

“So what do we do now?” asked Ponytail earnestly, and for a moment he actually seemed a decent enough guy. “I mean, what do they do on the other shows?”

“They usually talk to it and hope they catch something on their voice recorders, which they call electronic voice phenomena, or EVP.”

“Okay, good. Let’s do that.” And Ponytail immediately reverted back to his old, nauseating self. “But let me do the talking, okay? Obviously this thing is attracted to me for some reason.” He flipped his hair over a shoulder, heroically accepting the fact that he was the chosen one.

“Sure, whatever,” said Ray. “But maybe we should call the others—”

“No others,” Ponytail hissed. “This is our show, Ray. We both know who the stars are. Who’s gotten the most fan mail so far?”



“I’ve gotten three or four emails from a couple of housewives—”

“Well, that’s three or four emails more than the other two have gotten,” said Ponytail. “Which means zilch.” He flipped his long hair back over to his other shoulder for no apparent reason. Maybe his shoulder was cold? Anyway, I was tempted to flip it *back*, but I resisted the urge. Didn’t want the guy to shit his pants. At least, not yet. Ponytail went on, “Ray, you seem fairly, you know, sensitive at times. Have you seen or felt anything tonight?”

The kid thought about it, and as he did so, his eyes wandered up to the ceiling where the red-eyed sentries were watching everything quietly from above. Then his eyes fell directly to me.

“There’s definitely something in this room,” he said. “But I’m not sure what. Maybe more than one thing.”

“If one of them is the dead music teacher,” said Ponytail, “maybe we could have her, you know, play the piano or something.”

“Whatever is here isn’t the dead music teacher.”

“How the fuck do you know that?”



“Call it a hunch, but I’m pretty sure they’re men, and one of them is standing by us now, listening to us.”

“Jesus, you’re creeping me out.”

The kid shrugged. “Like I said, call it a hunch.”

“But there’s no reports of a man dying here. Just a kid and the music teacher.”

“And the tortured monks,” said Ray.

“That was hundreds of fucking years ago,” said Ponytail. “C’mon, ghosts don’t stick around that long, do they?”

The kid shrugged. “I’m not an expert. I just work here, remember?”

“Okay, fine. Let’s go before they start thinking we’re up to something,” said Ponytail, and he indicated the two cameramen.

As they headed back, with me trailing behind, I spotted Jacob chasing random beams of lights from the crews’ various cameras and flashlights. I could hear him giggling. At least he was having his own kind of fun.

*Lord, I killed the kid and reduced him to the mentality of a feline.*

“Roll cameras,” said Ponytail when they were



back with the others. "Let's see what the hell we've got on our hands."

With cameras indeed rolling, Ponytail cleared his throat and, holding what appeared to be a voice recorder, intoned dramatically, "Is there anyone here with us now?"

I assumed he was talking to me. After a few minutes, Ponytail and the kid looked at each other. The cameramen looked at each other, too, shrugging.

"We're friends," added Ray hopefully. "Just here to chat. Can you tell us your name? Can you tell us who you are and why you're here?"

*It's a long story, kid.*

"We mean you no harm," said Ponytail. "We're here to, you know, help."

*Good to know,* I thought and wondered how Ponytail intended to, you know, help me. The cameramen looked at each other again, shaking their heads. Ponytail looked confused and frustrated. His ponytail was currently resting over his right shoulder like a sleeping pet snake.

"Can you give us a sign?" he asked again.

And so I did.



I once again drew energy from the camera, and once again it flickered. When I was sufficiently galvanized, I dipped my finger down through the closed piano lid and pressed an ivory key. It might have been the same ivory key, too. Then again, I'm also tone deaf.

All four jumped at once.

"Aha! See, I told you," said Ponytail, vindicated, excited. He strutted back and forth in front of the piano like an orange peacock, hands on hips. I think he wanted to high-five someone, but no one volunteered.

Ray said, "Maybe there's just something wrong with the piano, you know, like a malfunction or something?"

So I pressed another. Then another.



"Jesus," said one of the cameramen. I noticed his camera was shaking.

And as I kept pressing the keys, the two ghost detectives actually retreated. Some detectives. Ponytail's cameraman was the bravest of the bunch; he walked right up to the piano and, still shooting, flipped open the piano key cover. I quit playing.

"It stopped," he reported.

Ponytail had gone bone white. Or, more fittingly, ghost white. "Oh...my...God," he said. "That did *not* just happen."

"If I was a betting man," said his cameraman, still standing over the piano, "I would bet that there's a mouse loose among the piano strings."

"There's no way," said Ponytail, recovering quickly. He wasn't going to let anyone steal his ghost story—and thus his ratings. And, perhaps more important, his fan mail. "There's something going on here, something *powerful*."

Ooh, I liked that! *Powerful*. I haven't been called *powerful* in quite some time, if ever.

"I agree," said Ray. "There is something going on here."



“Oh, hell, yeah!” said Ponytail, pumping his fist. “Everyone will be talking about this episode. Everyone.” He paused. “Make sure you edit that out,” he said to no one in particular.

“I still say it’s a mouse,” said the cameraman.

But Ponytail wasn’t listening. He had a sort of faraway look in his eyes that suggested he was already seeing the weekly Nielsen ratings. Perhaps he was already signing his next big contract. Maybe someday he would. But first he had to get through this night.

“Hey,” said Ponytail’s cameraman. “I think something just tried to walk through me.”

We all turned to look at him. I raised my ghostly eyebrows, curious, since Jacob was at the far side of the room and the three red-eyed sentries were still high above, watching us vigilantly.

“Really?” asked Ponytail, excited.

“Yeah,” said the man. “And since I’m a such a fat fuck, it’s still only about halfway through.” He bowled over with laughter. So did the other cameraman. Both nearly dropped their cameras.

“Maybe he’s lost,” said the other cameraman, gasping, barely getting the words out. “You know,



stuck in your fat ass.”

Both were nearly crying with laughter. And with the cameras nearly useless, I took the opportunity to draw power from the machines. As I did so, their lights flickered. So much so that everyone turned and looked at them. The laughter immediately stopped.

“Whenever they flicker,” said Ray portentously, “something happens.”

I materialized before them.

39.

For the first time in a long time all eyes were on me.

I had no idea how much of myself had materialized. I had no idea how solid I was, or even if any details had come through. Did I appear as nothing more than a bright light? Or could they see a



man standing before them, a man in his mid-thirties, hair slightly disheveled, bullet wounds dotting his chest and head and neck?

I didn't know, but they sure as hell were seeing *something*.

Ponytail lost it, shrieking as if someone had doused him with gasoline and set him on fire. He turned, started to run, forgot he was on a raised stage, and pitched forward. I heard a dull crack.

The image of Jacob falling to his death came to mind instantly.

*Jesus, what had I done?*

Miraculously, Ponytail found his feet. Woozy and punch drunk and bleeding from a sizable head wound, he managed to stumble out of the nave and out through the side door.

The others barely gave him a glance; instead, they just stared at me in open-mouthed wonder. One of the cameramen tried his camera, but it wouldn't work. No surprise there, since I was using all its juice.

"Are you guys seeing this?" asked Ray quietly, awe in his voice. Surprisingly, there was little fear.

The cameramen nodded, but Ray didn't notice



them nod; instead, he moved bravely forward and reached out a hand. He gently touched my shoulder.

"So cold," he whispered.

I noticed something glowing in his eyes, something dead center in his pupils. I realized that something was me. It was my reflection. *My reflection.*

*I'm real*, I thought.

"You were shot in the head," he said, speaking in low tones, as if afraid he might scare me away. "And the neck and chest. All over. Someone killed you."

I nodded, wondering if he could see me nod.

"Who shot you?" he asked.

I shook my head. He didn't need to know that. It wasn't his business, and there was still much I needed to work out with the boy, let alone the brother who killed me.

"Okay, so you don't want to talk about it. I get it. Can I touch you again? I don't want to be rude; I'm not sure what the etiquette is here."

I smiled and nodded. He smiled, too, and gently ran his open hand along my upper arm. When he pulled his hand away, he shivered and said, "Wow,



what a rush.”

I heard voices from outside the sanctuary. People were coming.

“You gave my friend quite a fright,” said Ray.

I nodded gravely. I felt bad.

“He can be a bit of a jerk sometimes, I know,” Ray said. “But he’s a good guy. He helped get me this job, you know.”

We looked at each other some more. The power from the two cameras was nearly depleted, which meant I was running out of energy. Already, I felt myself fading.

“Hey, you’re disappearing,” he said. “Was it something I said?”

I shook my head. The voices were now just outside the double doors that connected the cathedral to the school. Ray looked over his shoulder at the sounds.

“They’re coming,” he said, and when he looked back I was already gone. But not really. I was still standing there before him. Behind him, the two cameramen gaped at the whole scene in wide-eyed wonderment.

And just as the doors burst open. Ray leaned



forward and whispered directly into my ear. "You do not belong here, James. It's time for you to go home."

He stepped back and smiled and I stood there utterly stunned as a flood of people and cameras flooded into the nave, led by a very pale Ponytail.

40.

It was after dawn by the time the film crew finally packed and left.

The principal was the last to leave. She looked tired and beaten down and I didn't blame her. It had been a hell of a night, and I certainly didn't help things by scaring the Ponytail half to death. I still felt bad for him. He didn't deserve that.

I was alone. Jacob was off playing in one of the classrooms. It was the weekend, and so he would be playing alone. Early morning light filtered down



through the many stained glass windows, casting a kaleidoscope of colors across the pews. I liked the display of colors and could watch them all morning long, which I often did.

High up on the far wall, above the sanctuary and above the crucifix of Christ and the massive painting of the Mount of Olives, an amorphous shadow separated from the deeper, darker shadows of the ceiling. The shadow took shape and formed arms and legs, and crept slowly down the wall. It stopped between the painting and the crucifix.

And waited.

It was their way of inviting me to join them. Often I answered their call, rising up to be with them, disappearing into them, my individual thoughts ceasing to exist as I merged into The One. And their thoughts, more often than not, were centered on protecting that damn painting.

"And they've done a marvelous job of it, haven't they?" said a humor-filled voice just below the entities.

Not too many things surprise me these days; this did.

The only thing below the entities was, of course,



the statue of Jesus Christ hanging on the cross. At the moment, it appeared to be trying to pull free one of its nailed hands.

*Sweet Jesus.*

“Exactly,” said the statue. “Now, how about giving a brother a hand?”

## 41.

The statue didn't wait for my help.

As I stared up in stunned silence, incapable of moving even if I had wanted to help, the statue went to work freeing its nailed hands from the cross. As it did so, the three red-eyed beings scuttled quickly away and huddled together in the far corner of the room. I nearly scuttled away with them.

*At least I'm not the only one seeing things, I thought.*



The statue made a fist with its right hand, gripping the nail head in reverse, so to speak, and began working the spike back and forth, crying out as he did so. When the nail finally came free, the statue bellowed like a wounded and dying animal.

*Sweet Jesus.*

He did the same with his other hand, grunting and gasping, and when it came free, he found himself balancing precariously on the single nail driven through both his feet. Balancing in that position, as rivulets of sweat poured down his damaged body, he plucked each nail from the center of his palms like a magician performing a macabre magic trick. He dropped the bloodied spikes to the carpeted dais below, where they clamored and bounced and came to rest side by side.

Had I been human I would have vomited violently.

Next, he reached up and gripped the crown of thorns encircling his head. "Man alive this thing gives me the worst headache." He carefully pushed up and, as fresh blood poured from newly opened wounds, the crown came free. He tossed it aside, where it landed next to the two stakes.

The statue, sucking wind, looked down at me.



"This is where I could really use your help, James."

His words ripped through me, snapping me to attention, and, in a daze, I found myself warily floating up to him.

"I don't bite, James," he said, and gave a lopsided smile. His lips, I saw, were badly split, and some of his bottom teeth were broken near the gums. He motioned to the nail driven through his feet. "I could probably pull it out myself, but, well, my back is seriously killing me."

I nodded dumbly and reached for the nail head and wondered how much I could truly help since I was a ghost.

"Just do your best, James," he said.

I nodded dumbly again and took hold of the nail—and noticed I had solidified enough to wrap both hands around its head. Bracing my bare feet to either side of the cross, I pulled with all my strength. I resisted the natural tendency to work the spike back and forth, and as I pulled, it slowly came free. Warm blood poured over my knuckles.

*Warm blood. On my knuckles.*

As I continued to pull, Jesus Christ braced his arms against the thick wooden cross beam, holding



himself up, grunting through clenched teeth. His legs, I saw, were criss-crossed with raw, open wounds. Lash-marks.

I pulled with all my strength, grunting myself. And when the nail finally came free, blood sprayed free in a crimson arch, glinting in the multi-colored morning light shining in through the stained glass windows.

*Sweet Jesus.*

The iron spike, slick with blood, slipped from my fingers and bounced and rolled and came to rest next to the others.

"Thank you," said the man, or statue, in front of me. I looked up into his face; he winked at me. "You're a real life saver." He then gave me another lopsided grin and dropped down from the cross. He landed loudly on the raised stage.

I drifted down from the cross while he spent a few moments bending and stretching his back. As he did so, something caught his eye in the far corner of the room.

"Wait here, James. I'll be back in a moment."



For someone who had been hanging around for unknown decades, he moved surprisingly well—and even looked pretty good in a loincloth.

Criss-crossing his back were dozens of open wounds. *Cat-o'-nine tails*. Some of the torn flesh was literally flapping free with each step. But if he was in any pain, he didn't show it.

He walked swiftly over to the far corner of the chapel until he stood directly beneath the three red-eyed sentries. The beings, who were shifting agitatedly high above, watched him restlessly, churning, moving in and over each other, their red eyes flashing warily. Where one began and another ended was nearly impossible to tell. Christ, or more accurately, the *living statue of Christ*, spoke to them. What he said, I didn't know, but it seemed to calm them down.

They slowed their fidgeting, then stopped



altogether.

He said something else to them, and they looked at each other, and I knew they were silently conferring together. They came to some sort of decision because a moment later, a single, shadowed being emerged from The One, and crawled tentatively down from the wall.

I watched, stunned. Never had I seen the brothers separate.

And when he was just above Christ's head, he stopped and reached out a shadowed hand from the wall....

Christ reached up and took it, and when the two hands were together, something miraculous happened. That is, something *e/se* miraculous happened on a night of a thousand miracles.

The shadowed hand turned into a very real hand. And the shadowed being turned into the brilliantly glowing spirit of a real man. A bald man wearing a long flowing robe. A robe that was riddled with bullet holes.

*My God.*

Still holding Christ's hand, the monk drifted down from the wall and immediately buried his face in



Christ's shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably as Christ hugged him tightly.

In that moment, the golden tunnel appeared in the ceiling above. It glowed invitingly, serenely, and I watched as dozens of spirits emerged from it, surrounded Christ and the monk. One of the spirits, a young man covered in what appeared to be splashes of paint—the fourth brother, perhaps?—embraced the monk in a massive bear hug. When they separated, another spirit, a middle-aged woman, took the monk gently by the hand and led him up to the tunnel in the ceiling.

The monk never looked back, and a moment later, he was gone.

Christ repeated the process with the next brother, and a moment later a slightly taller monk was now standing before Christ. After a deep hug of his own, this second monk was led away as well.

After the third and final monk had been led off, the portal in the ceiling disappeared, along with the dozens of spirits.

"That went rather well," said Jesus Christ, looking up, hands on his hips. He then turned to me and said, "We need to talk, James."



We sat together in the front pew.

It was still early morning and the three red-eyed spirits were gone. The place felt oddly empty without them creeping above. Jacob was still off playing somewhere, probably in one of the empty classrooms.

“Indeed,” said Christ. “In fact, he’s sitting in his old classroom now, pretending to be a student, although sometimes he really thinks he is a student and wonders where the other kids are.”

“How do you know this?” I asked.

Christ smiled patiently at me. “It’s easy to do, James, once you know how.”

“What’s easy to do?”

“Being dead,” he said. “Although I would argue that you are very much *not* dead. Anyway, it has its



advantages.”

“Death has its advantages?” I asked.

“Sure.”

“Such as?”

“Well, knowing where others are at all times, for one. Being connected to anyone and everyone you wish to be connected to.”

“I wish to be connected to my daughter,” I said.  
“But I’m not.”

“You are. You just don’t know it yet.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You have chosen to experience death in this...limited manner,” Christ said.

“What limited manner?”

“As what you call a ‘ghost’.”

I thought about that. “So I can choose another way?”

“You can choose any way you want.”

Morning sunlight crept over the pews. Some of the light found his right leg and revealed clearly his many deep wounds. I looked away. I still hadn’t asked him who the hell he really was, although I seriously doubted he was Christ. *I mean, come on,*



*he was just a statue, wasn't he?*

I looked up at the cross on the wall. At the *empty* cross.

*Yeah, I'm going insane.*

"No, you're not," said Christ, reading my thoughts. "And don't be so hard on yourself."

"But I just watched a statue come to life," I said. "I just watched *you* come to life. I think I'm entitled to some crazy talk."

"Hey, and I'm sitting next to a ghost. Maybe we're both a little nuts."

Despite myself, I laughed. He did, too. His laughter was rich and booming, and as he laughed, more blood poured free from his many open wounds.

"You're bleeding all over the pew," I said.

He looked down. "So I am."

I looked at the lash marks covering his legs and torso. "Are you in pain?"

"I'm in whatever I choose to be in," he said. "And if I choose to be in pain then, yes, I imagine I would be in considerable pain."

I needed some real answers or I was seriously going to lose it. "Were you or were you not just a



statue?"

"I chose to be something that would get your attention," he said. "And I think I have succeeded."

"Are you really Jesus Christ?"

"For the sake of simplicity, I will just say yes."

"And what's the complicated answer?" I asked.

"I have been called many things by many people in many languages, throughout time and space, for eons upon eons—"

"Okay, let's stick with the simple answer."

He smiled, nodded. As he did so, beads of blood worked free from his damaged scalp and dribbled down into his ear.

"Is there any way we can get you to stop bleeding?" I asked. "I find it very distracting."

He smiled and nodded again, and by the time he was done nodding, his body had completely healed. Even the blood that stained the carpet around his feet was gone.

"So you really are Jesus Christ?" I asked. "Please. Just the simple answer."

"The simple answer: Of course, James."

"The same Jesus Christ I worshiped as a child?"

"The one and only."



“Are you really the son of God?” I asked.

“We are all children of God,” he said. “Although some of us are, let’s just say, *older* children of God.”

I think I understood. “And you are an older child. Perhaps the oldest of them all.”

He smiled easily. “Old or young, James, we are all sons and daughters of the Creator.”

The church was quiet, a rarity for this time of day. Perhaps there was some divine intervention going on here. Christ sat motionless next to me, although his chest rose and fell steadily. He was solid, real. Myself, not so solid.

“Am I going to hell?” I asked suddenly.

He turned his head slowly and I could feel the palatable weight of his stare on me. I could also feel his love. But I also felt something else coming from him.

Sadness.

“I’m sorry, James,” he said gently. “But, yes, you are going straight to hell.”



A door opened somewhere. Probably the morning maintenance crew going about their job. Or Jacob doing a hell of a good job of haunting up the place.

"So that's it, then," I said.

"I'm afraid so, yes."

"Is it as bad as they say?"

"Worse."

"Fuck," I said. "Sorry."

"Cuss all you want, my friend. You've reached the point where it really doesn't matter anymore."

"So I'm beyond help?"

"Yes. Again, I'm sorry."

"So basically I could sin all I want—"

"Right. And it wouldn't matter."

"Fuck."

"Yes, that's the spirit."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

A moment later, after my little tirade, we sat



together in silence. Had I been in the flesh, my chest would have been heaving.

Christ said, "Bob didn't deserve what you did to him."

"Bob?" I asked distractedly; after all, my thoughts were on flames and torture and eternal damnation.

"Ponytail," he said.

"Oh, him," I said dismissively.

But Christ pushed on, "He's a real piece of work, I know, but he's coming along. Making some great progress, truly evolving."

"Look, Jesus. I mean no disrespect, but I could give a damn—"

But Christ plunged forward, cutting me off. "He has a girl dying of cancer. Bob really needs this job, and he really needs this show to be a hit. If this show takes off, he can give his little girl the care she's going to need."

"And that's an excuse for him acting like an asshole?" I asked.

"Yes and no," said Christ.

But my mind was still on burning beds, burning caves, burning devils laughing at my misery. I thought of pain. Eternal pain.



"If I'm going to hell," I said, changing the subject, "then I'd rather stay here, in this church, and lose my mind."

"That's your choice, too," said Christ.

"Good. Then that's what I choose."

"So be it," said Christ.

"Just like that?" I said.

"Yes; just like that."

We were silent some more, but I found his words tumbling through my non-skull. "Wait. You said I could choose to experience death any way I want."

"I did indeed."

"But you also just said I was going straight to hell."

"And you were, until you just decided otherwise. I believe your choice was to haunt this church and lose your mine. Admittedly, it wouldn't be my first choice, but to each his own."

"Then why did you say I was going to hell?" I asked.

"Because you *were* going to hell, James. You had already condemned yourself there."

"I don't understand."

"In death, the soul experiences what the soul



wants to experience.”

“But I didn’t want to go to hell.”

“True enough. But you condemned yourself there anyway.”

“But I was told there was a heaven and a hell.”

“You were told wrong.”

I sat back, stunned. “But I was told by *you*, in the Bible, and by my priests, everyone.”

“My words were misconstrued.”

“I think you’re the devil,” I said suddenly. “Come to trick me.”

“You may think what you want, my son, but the path you are on surely leads to hell.”

“Fuck.”

“You can say that again.”

But I didn’t. Instead, I was mulling over his words. “And what would happen if I chose not to believe you?” I asked. “What would happen if I really do go to hell?”

“Well, then I would imagine you would be highly uncomfortable.”

“And when I am done being uncomfortable?”

“Then you would leave,” he said, patting my hand.



“And go to your intended home.”

“Intended home?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“What kind of home?”

“Let’s call it a place of healing. A place of respite. You need a lot of healing, my son.”

He patted my hand again, and his warmth radiated through me, and I suddenly wanted to hug him, whoever he was.

“Then hug me,” he said.

And so I did. I hugged him with all the strength I had, I hugged him with all my heart and soul, I hugged the man I had been raised to love and to worship. I hugged the man who was even now giving my heart hope.

While I hugged him, he whispered into my ear, “My son, heaven awaits.”

And that’s when I wept.



"You have other questions for me," said Christ.

Morning light came through the stained glass windows and alighted on him. His skin shone milky white, pure, untouched. He had an elbow propped up on the back of the pew.

"I do," I said. "Just a few."

He looked at me steadily, love in his eyes, a touch of humor. "You want to know if I answer prayers. If so, you want to know why I seem to answer some prayers and ignore others. You want to know if I did indeed perform all those miracles in the Bible. If so, you want to know *how* I performed all those miracles in the Bible. You want to know all of this and more. Much, much more."

"No," I said. "I just want to know if the Lakers will win this year."

He burst out laughing, slapping my shoulder. His hand, amazingly, did not pass through my shoulder. It was a real slap. Real touch. Real interaction.

"Not this year," he answered, "but soon."

I savored his touch. Savored his laughter. I felt like a son sitting next to his father, like a younger



brother sitting next to his older brother, a friend sitting next to his best friend. All rolled into one.

"Yes," I said, when the laughter had subsided. "Yes, I have all those questions and more."

"Then I ask you to wait for the answers. Your answers will come soon enough. All of them and more."

I sighed and nodded.

He asked, "Would you care to know why you experienced my touch just now?"

"Yes."

"Because you chose to, James. You *wanted* to feel my touch, and so you did."

"Just like that?" I asked.

"Just like that."

He leaned back on both elbows and closed his eyes and seemed to relish the warmth coming from the colorful beams of sunlight. I had a sense he had not taken a human form in quite a while.

I said, "I'm going to have to journey through the tunnel."

He nodded. "That would be your first step, yes."

"But I have business here," I said. "Unfinished business. With the boy and his brother."



Christ regarded me with his dark brown eyes, and some of the humor left, replaced by deep love and even deeper concern. "Ah, yes, Jacob," he said. "May I ask a favor of you, James?"

"Of course."

"Will you help me bring him home? He trusts you, you know."

"But I killed him."

"You are going to have to ask for his forgiveness."

"Will he forgive me?"

"Try him, he's a good kid."

A wave of new guilt threatened to overwhelm me. I fought it back. "I'll do my best to bring him...home."

"It's okay to feel guilty," said Christ. "You did end his life, James. But his life was not ended prematurely. Remember that. The two of you are bound together, to the very end. Or, at least, to the end of this story."

"And where does this story end?"

"Wherever you want it to, James."

"What about his brother? What do I do about him?" I asked. "He did, after all, kill me."



“What do you think you should do?”

I thought about that. “I don’t hate him, nor do I wish him ill. I know his current mess was caused by me. I can’t imagine what it must have been like for him to lose his brother at such a young age—especially a twin.”

“Eli’s guilt threatens to overwhelm him, too,” said Christ. “He feels responsible for his brother’s death. In the very least, Eli feels he should have been the one to fall to his death, rather than his innocent brother.”

“Tis a tangled web,” I said.

Christ smiled at me. His teeth, I noticed, were small and white. “Not as tangled as you might think.”

“So what do I do about Eli?” I asked.

“You’ll know when the time comes.”

I suspected he would say that. I changed the subject, as I sensed my time with him was coming to an end. “What happened to the three guardians?”

“Ah,” he said. “Although they did an admirable job watching over their brother’s painting, the time had come for them to return home, too.”

“But how did you convince them to go?” I asked.

“I told them I would watch over their painting.



Their work here was done.” Jesus suddenly stood and stretched his arms. “Now, will you help me back up on the cross?”

“Back on the cross?” I asked, perplexed.

“Yes, James. It’s time for me to go, too.”

But I didn’t want him to go. I wanted him to stay, and comfort me, and keep telling me everything would be okay.

“I’m always here, James,” he said, reading my thoughts, patting my back. “Always. You need only to look up.”

He then strode quickly across the raised stage and once under the empty cross and, in a surprising feat of dexterity, pulled himself up onto a brass light scone and grabbed the cross arm of the cross.

“Be a good man, James,” he said, looking over his shoulder, “and get me one of the nails. I laid them out nicely for you.”

I stared at him briefly, then rose up from the pew and fetched one of the nails. I drifted over to his side.

“This next part might be a little difficult for you, James, so I need you to be strong for me, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I need you to drive the nails back in.”



He waited. I looked at him. He smiled at me. His eyes twinkled, but he was serious.

I nodded.

“Yeah,” I said. “I can do this.”

“Good,” he said. “Then let’s do it. Now.”

## 46.

And so I did.

Christ braced himself. He wrapped his left arm around the crossbeam of the cross, and positioned his right hand over the hole in the wood, the same hole the nail had been removed from earlier. He nodded to me. Already there were small beads of sweat on his brow and upper lip.

I felt sick as I positioned the iron stake in the center of his palm. As I did so, the tip briefly touched his flesh, and his hand spasmed slightly.



*I can't do this.*

I gathered my wits. He watched me carefully, sucked some air, then nodded.

It was time.

Using the heel of my right palm like a hammer, I drove the spike straight through his hand and into the wood behind him.

He jerked and arched his back and cried out loudly.

I wanted to run. I wanted to vomit. I wanted to be anywhere but here. Blood seeped immediately from the new wound in his palm, around the edges of the thick spike. Sweat now poured down his cheeks. His skin was clammy; he looked deathly.

"The other nail, James," he said, gasping. "Please."

I knew he could choose to experience pain, and I also knew he could choose *not* to experience pain. So why did he choose to feel pain now? I suspected I knew.

I quickly fetched the second nail. As I moved over to his right hand, he shook his head. Amazingly, he smiled through gritted teeth.



“No, James. The feet are next.”

I drifted down to his bare feet. He had positioned them already, the left over the right. Both feet were shaking, perhaps with anticipation of what was to come.

“Now, James. Do it now. Please.”

Once again using the flat of my hand, I drove the stake as hard and as deep as as I could through the top of his left foot. But the nail only went so far, and I was forced to keep pounding and pounding until it punched all the way through his right foot and into the wood behind. All the while he cried out, and blood poured over my hands and knuckles and down the center beam of the cross.

He gasped, hyperventilating.

“Are you okay?” I asked, looking up, completely shaken.

“Always,” he said, sucking air. “Always.”

I quickly retrieved the third and final nail. His right hand was already in place, and without hesitation, I drove the spike through his palm and into the cross. He screamed and convulsed, and when he finally found his voice again, he gasped, “The crown, James. Mustn’t forget the crown.”



“Please, I can’t—”

“It’s okay, James,” he said through clenched teeth. “I promise you. It’s okay.”

The crown was still caked with dried blood and bits of skin. I held it in both hands and brought it back to Jesus Christ.

He smiled at me weakly. “Don’t feel bad, okay? I’m just a statue, remember?”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“There are people coming, James.”

Indeed, I now heard voices approaching, too. Morning mass was about to start.

“Will I see you again?” I asked.

He took in some air, and his ribs pushed out against his bare chest. I noticed that the bloody slashes and gashes had returned. The spear wound in his side was back as well, dribbling blood and water.

He looked at me, and winked. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

And with that, I lowered the crown of thorns down onto his scalp. At his insistence, I pressed it all the way down to his forehead, just above his eyes, opening deep and ghastly wounds along the way.



Blood poured into his eyes and down his face and into his ears and nose and mouth.

“Thank you, James,” he said.

The heavy oak door behind me creaked open and I turned and saw a priest nervously step into the sanctuary. He flipped on some lights.

And when I turned back to Christ—

He was gone, replaced by an ancient, painted wooden statue, complete with cracks and dust and cobwebs.

## 47.

Many days passed after that incident, and still I had not worked up the courage—or nerve—to speak with Jacob.

My memory seemed stronger since my encounter with Christ, and often I drifted up to the statue to study it more closely. Had it really come to



life? Was he really in there somewhere? Or had my mind played a massive and not-very-kind trick on me?

The wooden statue looked as ancient as ever. Hell, it was even rotting in some sections. Interestingly, the nails themselves were made of wood, too. Definitely not the iron spike I had driven through the soft flesh of his palms.

*You single-handedly crucified Christ.*

Lord, help me.

Real or not, trick or not, I had come face to face with *something* overwhelming and powerful, *something* that had given me peace of mind. And *something* that had given me the promise of heaven.

Also, the three red-eyed sentries were indeed gone, so that fact alone was proof that something had indeed happened.

*Maybe it was the devil come to collect their souls?*

I doubted it. I would always remember Christ's love, his overwhelming and powerful love for me. Could the Devil even love? Could the Devil even *fake* love? I doubted it.



Was the Devil even real?

I didn't know, but what I did know was this: Jesus Christ was here. He spoke to me, reassured me. Died for me.

I would often find Jacob alone at night in the various classrooms, raising his hand to answer unasked questions, pretending to drink from the classroom drinking fountain, playing games alone, singing alone, coloring and writing alone. He also did this when school was in session, and a couple of very sensitive kids watched him from the corner of their eyes. And, of course, they would watch me, too.

Perhaps a week after my encounter with Christ, Pauline came by one evening to see me. She wasn't alone.

She had brought Jacob's twin brother, Eli.  
My killer.



Pauline and Eli sat together at the far end of a pew about halfway down the center aisle.

They were the only ones in the chapel, but I knew that could change at any given moment. As they sat, Pauline spied me watching them from the stage. She whispered something in Eli's ear. He nodded imperceptibly, and she left him there in the pew and came over to where I was standing near the altar.

"I see you brought a guest," I said.

Pauline dropped to her knees and bowed her head as if praying. Maybe she was praying, but certainly not to me. She was, I saw, feigning prayer.

"You seem somehow different, stronger," she said. As she spoke her lips barely moved. To the average person, she appeared only to be whispering a prayer.

"Well, I had a little talk with someone," I said.

She glanced up at me sharply, scanning my thoughts. Then flicked her gaze up to the statue of Jesus Christ hanging above us. Her mouth dropped open. "You have got to be kidding?"

"The one and only," I said.

She shook her head, grinning, then looked at me



some more. "You look better, James. Brighter, iridescent."

"Iridescent?" I laughed. "Yes, I feel better. And my memory is coming back, too."

I looked over her shoulder at the young man sitting alone with his head bowed and hands clasped before him. He could have been any other worshiper, except I knew for a fact that he had shot me in cold blood and murdered Mrs. Randolph with his own hands. Seeing him again, in the flesh, was fairly emotional for me.

"I take it your private investigator was successful," I said.

"Oh, yes. Found him still living at home. His mother is a wreck. Whole family is a wreck. All of it dates back to the death of Jacob."

Great. Killed a kid and ruined an entire family in the process. How the hell was I *not* going to hell?

"Get a grip on yourself," she said, listening to my thoughts.

I did, and focused instead on Christ's last request of me: to help Jacob move on.

*I can do this*, I thought.

Pauline continued, "Yes, the family is in a helluva



mess, a mess they can't seem to climb out of. The father divorced the mother a decade ago, and the surviving twin, our boy Eli, has been selling drugs and stealing cars ever since to support her."

"Shit," I said.

"It gets worse."

"Great."

"Hang in there," she said. "He was caught selling drugs in his early twenties, and spent five years in jail. He got out two years ago."

"Two years ago was when I was killed," I said.

"Yes."

"Which would explain why he had waited so long for his revenge."

"I suppose so," she said.

"And what about my partner in crime?" I asked, and, amazingly, his name was coming back to me. "Dustin something or other?"

"Yes, Dustin Hicks, the boy who helped you drag Jacob up to the rafters. He was murdered outside his apartment two years ago, too. Unsolved."

"So Eli got us both."

"Appears so," she said. "But that didn't



necessarily make things any better for him. In fact, it probably made things even worse. My P.I. friend says that word on the street is that this kid owes a lot of money to the wrong people and is in some serious shit.”

“Which explains why he came looking for a wad of cash he remembered hiding on that fateful day,” I said. “The cash in my wallet.”

“And hocking the church relics,” added Pauline. “By the way, what were you doing with all that money in your wallet, anyway?”

I remembered. I remembered with almost perfect clarity. Wonderful, electrifying clarity.

“I was on the high school football team,” I said. “Part of being on the team meant we had to sell advertising for our weekly football program. One of our sponsors had given me cash the day before. I was going to turn it in.”

“And you probably showed it off to someone.”

I nodded. Seemed about right.

“And Eli probably saw you do it,” she said. “You must have left your wallet lying around—”

“It was in my gym locker. He busted into it.”

“Fine. He breaks into your locker, steals it.



Someone spots him do it, but fingers the wrong twin. And you go after the wrong brother, and....”

She stopped for a breath. Thank God. I looked over at Eli, who was still seated with his head bowed, a miserable wreck of a man. A drug addict, a drug dealer, an ex-con, a killer, and now an only son....

“And the rest is history,” I finished.

49.

“So how did you get him to come here?” I asked Pauline. “And why, exactly, is he here?”

“You know why he’s here, James.”

“I do?”

“If not, then you will,” she said. She was still on her knees and still sub-vocalizing beneath her breath, her voice audible only to me and God. I felt special. “And as far as how I got him here, easy. I



confronted him about the murders.”

“Confronted alone?”

“No, the private investigator was with me. Luckily, the guy doubles as a bodyguard. He’s waiting in the foyer, by the way. Anyway, I approached Eli about everything. To say he was shocked was an understatement.”

“How did you explain catching him?”

“Told him we had a witness in the church.”

“How did you explain your involvement?” I asked.

“I didn’t. Not really. He was rather shocked and numb and probably a little high on whatever it was he had last taken. He didn’t ask who I was or how I was involved.”

“So how did you get him to come down here?”

Pauline smiled. She looked tired. I could see this had taken a lot out of her. Confronting a serial killer, I’m sure, had been stressful.

“You bet your ass it was stressful,” she said. “You owe me big, mister. Maybe you can ask your friend Jesus to toss me a miracle or two.”

I grinned. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She went on, “So I told Eli, quite bluntly, that I was a medium and that his brother was still haunting the



church of his death and that he, Eli, needed to do something about it.”

“And Eli believed you?”

“He’s here now isn’t he?”

“Okay, so he believed you,” I said. “What’s next?”

“That,” she said, “is between you, Eli, and Jacob. And maybe the police. And maybe even God.”

## 50.

At Pauline’s request, I retrieved Jacob from one of the school hallways, where I found him trying unsuccessfully to drink from a drinking fountain.

Now the four of us were standing near the altar, the scene of so much pain and suffering. To the naked eye, of course, there would appear to be just two people standing at the altar.

Pauline was holding Eli’s hand, which should



have surprised me, but didn't. I felt neutral toward Eli. Yes, I had taken much from him, but that had been a reckless, stupid accident. Eli, on the other hand, had hunted me down and killed me in cold blood.

*Tit for tat.*

Jacob was by my side, and his little face was screwed up in utter bewilderment as he took in the scene. On some level, I knew the boy recognized his twin brother, but I also knew that Jacob saw Eli as his music teacher's killer. I sensed the kid's confusion and conflicting emotions. I looked from one to the other. It was hard to imagine that these two had once been identical twins. I had taken so much away from them. One was so young and bloodied, and the other so much older and damaged. One had stopped growing in death, while the other had marched on into misery.

"They're both here," said Pauline gently to Eli.

For the first time since entering the church, Eli raised his head. "Who's here?" he asked. His voice was soft, yet hoarse. A smoker's voice. A screamer's voice. The voice of someone who had neglected his body in one way or another.

"Your brother," said Pauline. "And, James, one of



the men you killed.”

A melange of emotions crossed his at once: doubt, amusement, fear. In the end, I think he settled on dubious trepidation. He was still a handsome guy. Dark hair, flecked with premature gray, perhaps indicative of a life not very well lived. He was also not very tall. Pauline had him by a few inches, which might have given her a false sense of security. Indeed, Eli had wide, round shoulders. Strong for his size.

He said, “You mean, you know, like here from the other side? Like in that show, ‘Crossing Over’?” As he spoke, he did so with a pseudo-Brooklyn tough guy accent. Except I knew he had lived in LA most of his life.

“Close, Eli. These two never crossed over. They have been with us ever since.”

“I don’t understand,” he said. The Brooklyn tough guy was gone in an instant.

“Your brother has been haunting this church since his death, Eli. For nearly twenty years.”

The bigger twin suddenly looked sick. He also looked like he needed to sit somewhere.

Pauline pushed on, “And James never passed



on, either.”

“Never passed on?” he asked weakly, confused.

“Crossed over,” she explained.

“Where...where are they?”

“Standing by my side.”

He looked by her side at a place somewhere in-between Jacob and myself.

“Bullshit,” he said. “I don’t fucking believe it.”

He adjusted his shoulders. The tough guy was back. The street drug dealer, the ex-con, the killer. But Pauline was a tough girl, too, and she was unafraid. I also knew she preferred not to waste her time convincing skeptics, but, apparently, this case was different.

“Eli, your brother is standing next to the man you killed. They are both looking at you. Your brother is wearing a school uniform. Dark pants and a short-sleeved white dress shirt. The dress shirt is covered in blood from a massive head wound. His neck also appears as if it might be broken. Your brother understands very little of what is happening presently. Young spirits are often confused, and he is very, very confused, Eli. He needs your help to move on.”



And as she spoke, the drug-dealing, murderous ex-con slowly broke down. I saw his face change shape. The hard lines softened. The lower lip quivered. Eyes watered.

She pressed on without pause, "And the man who accidentally killed your brother is here, too. The man you, out of revenge, killed in return. James is standing next to Jacob."

Eli got hold of himself at the mention of my name. Pauline was in a near trance-like state now that she was truly locked in to the two spirits in the room. Sometimes I took her mediumship for granted. I knew such focused concentration took a lot of effort.

"James is really here?" said Eli.

"Yes, Eli. He really is."

But he still didn't seem entirely convinced. He also didn't seem entirely stable, either.

"What about Dustin Hicks?" he asked.

"Dustin passed over long ago and is not here, although he is taking an active interest in this from afar."

*Oh really?* I thought. Pauline never ceased to amaze me.



"Thank you," she said to me.

"What?" said Eli.

"Nothing," said Pauline.

But Eli wasn't really paying attention. Instead, he was focused on the spot between Jacob and myself. Sweat had formed across his brow, and he was absently cracking his neck, rolling his head around on those wide shoulders. I could only imagine that his neck was tense as hell.

"What about the old lady?" he asked.

"Mrs. Randolph?" asked Pauline. "Whom you murdered a few months ago?"

I didn't know a murderer could look sheepish, but Eli managed to do that now, ducking his head a little. "Um, yeah, her."

"She's not here, either. She has passed over and is taking no interest in this."

He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out and so he closed it again and hunched his shoulders some more.

"From what I understand," said Pauline, cocking her head and listening to voices even I couldn't hear, "she has forgiven you and holds no ill will toward you for taking her life."



He opened his mouth to speak again, and this time he was successful. "I never meant to kill her, you know."

"She knows."

He cracked his neck again. "So James and my brother are really here now?"

"Yes," said Pauline.

"Is there, um, any chance they can give me a sign or something?"

"Your brother doesn't understand the concept of 'giving a sign,' Eli, but James might oblige."

He nodded. "Fine. Could you, um, ask him for me?"

"He's right here, listening to you," she said. "What would you like him to do?"

"I dunno. Maybe move something."

There was a silver candlestick holder on the altar. I took Eli's hand, drew energy from him, and promptly pushed over the candlestick. It landed with a thunderous clang, and Eli jumped back.

"Holy sweet Jesus!" He gripped his chest, looked at his forearm, which was now completely covered in gooseflesh—a result, no doubt, of me grabbing his hand. "Is he going to hurt me?"



"Are you going to hurt him?" Pauline asked me.

"Of course not," I said.

"He says of course not."

Eli had backed up all the way to the edge of the stage. He looked as if he might bolt at any moment.

"Tell him to come back," I said to Pauline.

She repeated my request to him.

Eli did so, grudgingly. He said, "Tell James no more, you know, proof. I believe he's here."

I sighed. Scaring the hell out of him had been, admittedly, kind of fun.

"So what now?" Eli asked. There was a little more pep to his voice. Being scared half to death has that effect on people.

"Now," said Pauline, "is when things get interesting."



“First of all,” said Pauline to Eli, “we need to get Jacob up to speed here. He’s very confused. Mostly he recognizes you as Mrs. Randolph’s killer, but there’s a part of him who thinks he might know you from somewhere else.”

“Why...why doesn’t he recognize me?” asked Eli, truly hurt.

“It’s the nature of lost souls,” said Pauline. “With no real feedback from, well, anyone...they lose sight of themselves, forget who they are, and their memories subsequently go, as well.”

“He doesn’t even remember who he is?” asked Eli, and I could hear the anger and pain in his voice. I was also aware that the anger was probably directed toward me.

“Mostly he doesn’t,” said Pauline. “Sometimes he has glimpses of who he is, and who he was. But everyday he forgets more and more, Eli. Everyday the condition worsens.”

“You mean, someday he won’t even remember who he is?”



“Exactly.”

“Then we need to help him,” said Eli firmly. “Send him to heaven or something.”

“It’s not going to be that easy, Eli. His own father planted the seeds of doubt of the afterlife, which is why he is still here.”

Eli didn’t say anything at first. Sweat continued to bead along his forehead, and he seemed to be growing paler by the minute. I wondered if he was ever going to get his color back. Finally, he started nodding.

“Yeah, Dad was an atheist. Hardcore atheist. Mom wasn’t. Dad was against us going to Catholic school from the beginning, but Mom won out. Still, whenever we were alone with him, he would tell us we were wasting his money and that there was no God or heaven or hell. We believed him. Hell, he was our dad, we would have believed anything he said.”

“What do you believe now?” asked Pauline.

“I believe there’s a ghost in here—a ghost who can fucking knock over a candlestick. That’s enough for me.”

Pauline nodded. They were silent.

After a moment, Eli asked, “So there really is a



heaven and a hell?"

"There is whatever you want there to be, Eli. Your brother believed in no heaven or hell, and so he is stuck here, in disbelief."

"Then why is James stuck here?"

"Ah," said Pauline, smiling over at me. "He had the opposite problem."

"Opposite?"

"He believed *too* much."

"I don't get it," said Eli.

"He truly believed he was going to hell, Eli, and he was afraid."

"And why was he afraid of going to hell?" asked the bigger twin. He had inched closer to the altar. Not quite as close as before, but he was growing braver.

"Do you really want to know?" asked Pauline.

"Yes."

"He regrets killing your brother, Eli. Regrets it more than you will ever know."

Amazingly, Eli looked right at me. People are more psychic than they know. He looked and said nothing.

"You didn't have to kill him, Eli. He was killing



himself, slowly, surely, much the same way you're killing yourself now."

The young man suddenly covered his face and broke down into tears. Pauline never moved, but Jacob did. The little boy was by his brother's side in an instant, trying unsuccessfully to take his brother's hand.

It was heartbreaking and piteous.  
And it was all because of me.

52.

"My hand is cold," said Eli between sobs. He opened and closed his hand slowly. I could see the occasional shiver coursing through him.

"It's your brother," said Pauline. "He's trying to hold your hand. He's trying to comfort you."

Eli looked down at his empty hand. "What...What does Jacob look like?"



"Ah," said Pauline. "He's young. Maybe eight years old. Seems sort of small for his age. Hair disheveled. And..." Pauline stopped. I knew she had been about to mention Jacob's wounds, but caught herself. "And he loves you. But he still remembers you as his piano teacher's killer, Eli, and so you will need to speak with him."

"What do I say?" Eli was still looking at his hand. His forearm was completely covered in gooseflesh.

"First, let's sit."

And Pauline led the way over to the wide first step leading up to the raised stage. She sat and patted the spot next to her. Eli slouched over and sat next to her.

"Invite your brother," said Pauline.

"How?"

"Just ask him to come over."

Eli looked at her for a moment, clearly trying to decide whether or not she was crazy—or perhaps trying to decide if this was another drug-induced hallucination. Finally, he nodded, resigning himself to accept as true the strange events unfolding around him.



“Jacob,” he said quietly, looking over at Pauline as if to ask: *Is this how I do it?*

She nodded approvingly.

Encouraged, Eli raised his voice. “Jacob, it’s me, Eli. Your brother. Come sit with me, okay?”

Jacob didn’t move. Instead, he looked at me, eyes wide, mouth open, confused as hell.

“Go on,” I urged him. “It’s okay.”

The confusion turned briefly to fear, then to hope. I encouraged him again, and finally he drifted over and sat cautiously next to his brother on the carpeted step. All three of them—Pauline, Eli and Jacob—were now facing out toward the empty church. I stood behind them.

“He’s sitting next to you now,” said Pauline to Eli.

And, surprising the hell out of me, Eli said, “I know. I...I can feel him.”

I moved off the stage and sat before them in the front pew. Pauline glanced over at me. “I owe you big,” I said to her.

“I know,” she mouthed quietly.

Needing no further prompting from Pauline, Eli said, “Hi, Jacob. I’m your brother Eli. Do you remember me? We were twins. We *are* twins. We



did everything together. Do you remember any of that?"

Jacob, who was about half the size of Eli, looked up at his twin brother in complete confusion.

"Keep going," urged Pauline. "Keep reminding him of who he is. Talk about anything that comes to mind."

And so Eli did. He opened up about everything, especially about their immediate family, speaking at length about their mother and father, repeating names often, telling funny and sad stories. As he spoke, Eli broke down often, fought through the tears, picked up where he had left off, and went on. All the while, he held out his hand for little Jacob to hold onto, which the boy did.

"And I had no idea you were still here, Jacob. If I had known, I would have visited you every day. I'm sorry you were alone for so long. I'm so sorry you lost your memory. I'm so sorry I stole the money and you got blamed. I'm so sorry you got killed. It should have been me. Not you. I'm so so sorry, so sorry...."

Pauline was in tears. Eli was in tears. And Jacob was hugging his twin brother with all his ghostly strength. After a while, the boy turned and looked



back at me.

“This is my brother, Eli,” he said excitedly.

I smiled and nodded and he went back to hugging his brother.

53.

“He’s hugging you,” said Pauline, wiping her eyes.

Eli nodded. He knew. He was getting used to this stuff. He and his brother hugged some more, while Pauline and I watched them, saying nothing. Finally the boy pulled away and looked up at his brother.

“Where have you been, Eli?” asked Jacob.

“He’s asking where you’ve been,” relayed Pauline.

Eli, aware that the physical connection with his brother had been broken, sat up a little straighter and dried his eyes on his sleeve. “Tell him—”



“No,” said Pauline. “You tell him. He can hear you.”

Eli nodded. “I’ve been away, Jacob.”

“Where?”

“He’s asking where,” said Pauline.

“I’ve been in jail. I’ve done some bad things, Jacob. Very bad.”

“Why?” asked Jacob.

Pauline repeated the question. Eli, who was still seated, suddenly stood. He ran his hand through his oily, unkempt hair, and paced the wide carpeted area between the front pews and the stage.

Eli answered, “It was the only thing I could think to do, Jacob.”

We were silent. Jacob was still sitting next to Pauline. He looked up at her. She smiled down at him. He then looked at me, and I smiled, too.

“I don’t understand,” said Jacob. I wasn’t sure who he was addressing, but I sensed it was my time to step in, and so I did.

I drifted over and settled next to him.

Pauline spoke, “Your brother is still very confused, Eli. James just sat with him.”



“Why is James sitting with him?” Eli paused, spitting the question.

“James is here for a reason, Eli. He has his own issues, and he needs to resolve them with Jacob. You need to let this happen, it’s okay.”

Eli didn’t like it, but he resumed pacing. Jacob alternated watching his brother and watching me.

“I don’t understand,” said Jacob to me. “Eli keeps telling me I’m dead, but I’m not dead.”

Some days were better than others for Jacob. Today was a bad day, remembering little, if anything, of his death. And it would only get worse for him. If ever there was the correct time for him to move on, now would be it.

Pauline caught my eye and nodded. I knew what she was thinking: *Yes, now was the correct time.*

I said to the boy, “About twenty years ago, Jacob, you fell from up there.” I pointed to the rafters above.

Jacob followed my finger. His mouth fell open a little although he said nothing.

I went on, “Do you remember falling and hitting your head?”

His eyes traced the path from my finger to the altar below. “I...I fell on that?” he asked. It was partly a



question, partly a statement.

“Yes, Jacob.”

“There was a lot of blood,” he said. He was remembering.

“Yes.”

“I got killed.”

I nodded, unable to speak.

“I was a bad boy,” he said.

“No, Jacob,” I said. “You were a good boy. I was a bad boy.” And so, after many days and weeks and years of living with the guilt—and dying with the guilt—it was time. “Jacob, do you remember the boys who dragged you up to the rafter, the boys who hung you over the edge?”

He scrunched up his little face as he thought back. “There were two of them,” he said, and now that he was being prodded, his memory was coming back to him in bits and pieces. Pauline watched us silently, listening, tears in her eyes.

“Yes, two of them,” I said. This was going to be harder than I thought it would be, but I forced myself onward. “Jacob, I was one of those boys.”

He looked sharply at me. “I don’t understand.”

“Jacob, I was one of the two boys who pulled you



up to the rafters. I was the one who hung you over it. I was the one who accidentally dropped you.”

“But I don’t under—”

“Jacob, *I* killed you. It was *me*. I dropped you. I caused you to fall and hit your head. It was me who killed you.”

The nave was empty. Outside, in the adjoining halls and rooms, I could hear a vacuum running and the murmur of voices. The main church itself was empty, except for the four of us, two humans and two ghosts.

Jacob said nothing at first. He stared up at me with his head tilted slightly, his little knees pressed together. I couldn’t help but notice the ethereal blood from his wound was everywhere: over his collar, down his shirt, even up along his sleeves.

“I’m sorry, Jacob,” I said. “I’m so very, very sorry. I didn’t mean to kill you. I didn’t mean to drop you. I was just trying to scare you, I was just trying to find my wallet, but you had no idea what I was talking about, and you were scared, you were so very scared, but I didn’t believe you—”

I broke down completely, weeping into my hands, unable to speak, unable to think, unable to focus,



unable to live, unable to die, unable to do anything....

I felt another presence next to me.

It was Jacob, and he had wrapped his arms tightly around me.

54.

I was standing with Pauline off to the side of the sanctuary, near the piano, while Jacob and Eli sat together on the stage's top step. Pauline was holding my hand.

"Jacob forgives you, James."

"Yes," I said.

"Now it's time for you to forgive yourself."

"I know."

Jacob was jabbering away non-stop to his brother. Eli gave no indication of hearing him, but if



this bothered Jacob, he didn't show it. As I listened in now, Jacob was busy telling Eli about what had happened to him in school on some unknown day in some unknown year. Whether or not the boy was dead or alive on this school day, I didn't know, and I don't think Jacob knew, either.

Amazingly, no one had yet to step inside the church, and I wondered if Pauline's big private eye guarding the outside foyer had anything to do with that.

"Either that or divine intervention," said Pauline, reading my thoughts.

"You think?" I asked.

She grinned. "Naw. Just dumb luck."

I thought of my daughter growing up without me. I thought of my wife moving on without me. I thought of the world spinning around without me. I really *was* dead. I really *was* moving on.

"You can always come back, you know," said Pauline.

"From the dead? I thought that only happened in horror movies."

"Hey, sitting in a creepy old church with a serial killer and two ghosts *is* a horror movie," she said.



“For some people.”

“But not you,” I said. “You’re a brave girl.”

“Or a stupid girl,” she said.

I looked at her. “I couldn’t have done this without you, Pauline. Thank you.”

“What’s a medium to do?”

We were quiet some more. Jacob wasn’t quiet. He hadn’t stopped or slowed down. Eli, for his part, sat quietly and seemed to revel in the presence of his twin brother.

“When you said I could come back, what did you mean?”

“Reincarnation,” she said. “That is, if you choose to come back. Or you can come back in other ways, too. In spirit, in dreams, in thoughts. Not to mention every time your daughter thinks of you or speaks your name or asks for your help, you can instantly be by her side.”

“How is that even possible?” I asked, amazed and thrilled by the prospect of seeing my daughter again.

“My dear, there are far greater things in heaven, than on earth. You’ll just have to ask around up there.”



As if on cue, a glow appeared from above. The tunnel had returned.

55.

And it was closer and brighter than ever.

From it poured a multitude of friendly, smiling spirits, filling the church sanctuary. Some I thought I recognized, but I couldn't remember them.

Pauline's eyes widened. "Looks like they brought the whole welcoming committee this time."

I nodded nervously. I still hadn't completely wrapped my head around the fact that I was leaving, nor had I entirely escaped the old fears and doubts.

*Be strong, James. Be strong.*

Eli came over and stood with Pauline, completely unaware that a portal to the heavens had opened above him. Jacob stayed behind on the step, staring wide-eyed at the outpouring of spiritual activity



around him. I recalled the boy hiding in fear while Mrs. Randolph was shown the way to the tunnel. This time, Jacob did not run or hide. *There is strength in numbers.* I had learned that lesson from the red-eyed sentries. The boy had been alone before; now he was not.

Jacob looked at me, grinning from ear to ear. "Look at all the angels!" he said, clapping.

"Aren't they beautiful?" I said.

"So beautiful!"

I turned to Pauline. Eli was still standing next to her. I could tell he knew something was going on, that a shift had occurred, that there was something in the air. Boy, was there something in the air.

I said to Pauline, "Tell Eli that I'm so very sorry for killing his brother."

As she did so, Eli turned and looked directly into my eyes. "I'm sorry for killing you, James. I'm sorry for shooting you in your sleep. That was cowardly and wrong and now I'm going to pay for it."

I told him I forgave him. I told him that he needed to forgive himself, too—words I knew were easier said than done.



Pauline relayed all of this to Eli, who nodded solemnly. She then led him over to his bother, who was now playing catch with a beautiful, raven-haired woman, using a glowing orb that looked remarkably like a little sun. I knew this woman. I knew her deeply and passionately and knew I had known her since the dawn of time. She was my soulmate, my passion, my love. I just couldn't remember who the hell she was.

*Soon, I thought. Soon.*

She glanced over her shoulder at me and smiled so brightly that my entire countenance flared briefly, especially over my heart. She went back to playing with Jacob and I looked up into the golden tunnel above.

So bright. So welcoming. So beautiful. So warm.  
*So very warm.*

I hadn't been warm in a long, long time.

And now I noticed for the first time that a crystal stairway led through the tunnel. I hadn't noticed it before; then again, I hadn't been this close to the tunnel before, either. I thought of my daughter again. Would I see her again? I was sure I would, somehow. I thought of hell, and I glanced over at the wooden



cross. The statue of Christ was as unmoving as ever, but I smiled at it anyway. Jesus Christ had said everything was going to be okay, and I believed him.

Pauline was by my side again, and this time she was holding little Jacob's hand. She passed it over to me. I took it firmly. Jacob looked up at me and smiled excitedly.

"Are we going home?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "We're going home."

He bounced and smiled and waved at various spirits flitting about the sanctuary. One was an elderly woman, quite possibly his grandmother.

I looked at Pauline. "I'm a little nervous."

"It's going to be okay, James."

I nodded. I knew it was going to be okay. I knew this in my heart, and I trusted my heart. I also knew it was time to move on. It was time for peace. It was time for rest. It was time for healing.

"Would you do me a favor?" I asked Pauline.

"Anything, James."

I gave her my request and she immediately nodded and dashed off. A moment later, she returned with the red scarf my daughter had given me.



"It was still there," she said, "hidden in the cushions."

"Please give it back to her and please tell her that her daddy loves her very much," I said.

"I will, James."

"And please tell her goodbye for me."

"I will, James."

"You're an angel, Pauline."

"I know."

I smiled and looked up into the tunnel again. Remarkably, it seemed even closer, hovering now just above my head. I could almost see through it all the way to the other side. All the way to God.

"So what do I do?" I asked Pauline nervously.

"Do you see the stairs?" she asked.

The crystal stairs had descended now all the way to the church's raised, carpeted platform.

"Yes."

"I'm being told that all you need to do is to start climbing, James, and you will be shown the way. But the first step is your choice. No one will do it for you."

I understood. I gripped Jacob's hand tightly. Pauline was crying softly now. The stairway was just a few feet away.



*I'm really doing this*, I thought.

"I want go to heaven," said Jacob excitedly, bouncing up and down next to me. "I want to see grandma!"

I turned to Pauline. "I love you, you know."

Tears were flowing freely down her cheeks. "I love you, too, James. Now get going."

I turned back to the stairway. Yes, *I'm really doing this*.

Gripping Jacob's hand, I lifted my bare foot and stepped up onto that first crystal step...and for the first time in a long, long time, I felt warm.

Gloriously warm.

*The End*

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### *About the Author:*

J.R. Rain is an ex-private investigator who now writes full-time. He lives in a small house on a small island with his small dog, Sadie, who has more energy than Robin Williams.

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