

Gayle Farmer  
COLD FUSION



*Gayle Farmer*

***Cold  
Fusion***



This book is dedicated with gratitude and love  
to my beloved husband,

Jeff Farmer

Without whom there would be no books

And to my inspiring editor, and dear friend,

Irene Gardner

Thank you

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**Published by Omega Publications  
Palm Springs, California**

**[www.OmegaPublications.net](http://www.OmegaPublications.net)**

# ***COLD FUSION***

Omega Publications, Palm Springs, CA

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ISBN 978-0-9822303-9-8

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Cover design and page layout by  
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Fusion***



## Chapter 1

The sun began its nightly dip into the ocean, throwing splinters of mauve, red and gold light into the sky and piercing the billowing clouds like lightning. With a dramatic Hollywood flair befitting a blockbuster movie and an almost audible hiss, it sank into the open arms of the sea, nestled a moment on the horizon and then disappeared.

The restaurant lights flashed on and the neon sign buzzed to life just as Terry entered the parking lot of *ELLA's* Restaurant. She pulled to a stop at the back door and hopped out of the car.

The classic '94 red Jaguar XJS, top down on this warm summer evening, and presently crammed with brown parcels, glowed in the setting sun.

Terry scooped up as many bags as she could carry and pulled the heavy door open with a grunt. "Ella, Chef? *Anyone?*"

Chef popped his head around the kitchen door and grinned in recognition. A tall white hat cocked jauntily to one side of his head gave him a debonair look. He nodded at her, eyes fixed on her full arms. "Yo, maiden comes bearing gifts, I see. Whoa, Echo Gardens *and* Seafood Paradise. I was a good boy, huh? You sure are a good girl."

He chuckled at her and peered into the bags, blue eyes alight. "Oh, my God, Terry, you outdid yourself. Just look at all this good stuff. The avocados are as big as your head and just give a look-see at those artichokes. Our dinner special is about to

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change. How about a ceveche served on half an artichoke, a tad of crème fraiche and a caper or two? To die for. Or maybe some snow crab....” He turned toward her and winked. “I’ll get Brian to bring everything in from the car and then we’ll tear into those sacks. I can hardly wait to get started.”

He rubbed his hands in glee and continued to chuckle as he headed toward the dining room. After ensuring there were no customers to hear his unseemly display of bad manners, he bellowed for the busboy, who hurried across the dining room, brow furrowed in dismay.

“Good God, what?”

“Follow me and keep a civil tongue in your head.”

“Me? You’re the one screaming like a cow in labor.”

Chef gave him glare for glare, hesitated a moment, then returned to the kitchen with Brian in tow. He pointed at the bags and grinned, beetling his brows. “Incoming, my friend. Many more are waiting for you in the back seat of the car. There’s a treat in it for you if you’re quick.”

Brian leaned over the counter, surveying the goodies. “A treat? Sounds like a plan, Chef.”

Terry handed him her keys. “When you get it unloaded, can you park in the back? We’re going to be busy tonight, especially with live entertainment in the lounge. She’s taking up a prime spot and I’m here for the duration, so she’s gotta move. Just be sure to raise the windows and hit the alarm button, okay?”

The grin on Brian’s face spread from ear to ear. “Like totally thrilled. Anywhere in particular you want me to park it, Terry?”

Sparkling dark eyes alight, she tilted her head. “We have a ton of reservations, so leave the choice spots for the customers. Doesn’t really matter where, just so it doesn’t take up one of the front slots. Find somewhere in the back where it won’t get dinged by anybody else’s door.”

“You got it.” Brian left the kitchen twirling the key and humming.

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“Stay in the lot, Brian.” Terry grinned at his retreating back then turned to Chef, watching him prowl through the bags. “You won’t believe the prawns. I got five dozen and the Ahi is so gorgeous, I bought you eight pounds of it. I couldn’t resist. Just wait until you see it, bright red and so fresh it smells just like the ocean.”

She opened one of the bags and pulled a large package out. Plopping it on the stainless steel counter, she slit the white butcher’s paper open, flipped it and exposed the ruby-red fish. It made a striking contrast to the next package containing huge, dark green prawns. Terry handed both plastic bags to Chef with a wide grin and a pat on the shoulder. “Do I know how to make you happy or what?”

“Girl, you have the eye of the tiger when it comes to food, I’m telling ya. Pan-seared Ahi suddenly became the catch of the day. And those prawns? I think I’ll stuff them with prosciutto and Brie cheese and that great pepper sauce reduction you love. Top with a little crème fraiche and a sprinkle of caviar for \$45 a plate. How’s that sound? Make you a bet I’m sold out within the hour.”

“Me?” she said with a knowing smile. “You think I’d take a bet like *that*? You couldn’t give me good enough odds.” She arched her eyebrows and then turned to the newly arrived bags.

“All the fruits and veggies are outstanding, but the tomatoes and avocados are perfect, ready to go and so fragrant.” She picked up a tomato and sniffed the stem. “Look at that, would ya? I can’t remember anything as good as this season’s crop, can you? The fruit is beautiful, too, especially the melons and peaches. Man, you’ll be impressed.” Terry headed for the dining room. “Have fun, Chef.”

Outside in the parking lot, she heard the familiar growl of the Jag’s engine. Angel’s tires screeched across the blacktop as Brian parked the car.

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Lenny and Jim stopped at the light on West Sunset Boulevard, waiting in the seemingly endless line wanting to make the right turn onto North Beverly Glen. Their destination, the hills of Bel Air.

“I’m not sure about this one,” Jim said, inching the Suburban toward the approaching street. “It could end up being one of those endless deals, an extremely lucrative full-time job we don’t really want. I’ve never done a body guard job before and I’m not sure we need to start now. If only we could talk Baker into buying one of our dogs and leaving it at that. Rudy has two that’d be just right for them. Actually, Baker’s fine with it, but his wife’s scared of big dogs. Seems like she has some past issues.”

Lenny snickered. “Maybe we can talk Rudy into developing a buffed-out, athletic Chihuahua just for her. Ferocious little buggers when they want to be and absolutely fearless. Pound for pound, they’d rival a Dobie in a heartbeat.”

The traffic stopped again as a herd of tourists wandered across the street, eyes wide in wonder, gaping from one side of the road to the other, oblivious to the cars threatening to mow them over.

Only three cars ahead of them now. All drivers on alert, they jockeyed for position, eyes flitting from rearview mirror to side mirrors and back again, vigilant and ready to duke it out with the inevitable red light-runners who studiously ignored the signs warning of \$300 fines for doing so.

“You have to wonder why he called us. You’d think he’d just get a bodyguard from one of the services and be done with it. That’s the advice I’d give him.”

Nodding, Jim laughed as he muscled his way ahead of a determined Ferrari now caught in the middle of the intersection, attempting to make a left turn against the light.

A variety of indignant horns burst into song.

“Just sit there,” Jim shouted out the window. “Idiot!”

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The Ferrari, not about to take that insult standing still, cut sharply to the left and charged down Beverly Glen on the wrong side of the line, sliding in front of a little girl in a BMW who was not about to argue, although she did flip him the bird.

The driver of the Ferrari stuck his arm out his window and sent everyone the American salute. It was promptly returned with vigor by the dozen or so closest drivers along with two more irate horn blasts. The teenager in the BMW edged her car forward until she was barely a breath away from the Ferrari's non-existent bumper. She grinned big and gave him a finger wave.

"Ah, don't ya love the City of Angels? Can't beat it for diversity, that's for sure." Lenny stared out the window a moment, checked a street address and peered back down at his map. "Let's see here, three miles up to Via Verde. Turn left and follow it all the way up to the end."

They didn't move fast enough off the line when the light changed and three horns blasted in unified impatience. One irate passenger in a convertible stood up in his seat and pounded his chest like a gorilla, shrieking insults at everyone in a three lane radius.

"Look at that asshole. I swear, Angelinos have to be the rudest drivers in the world," Jim said, scowling in his mirror.

Indignant, Lenny snorted in reply. "Ha! These aren't Angelinos. Holy shit, man, most of the people on the road aren't even from the United States, let alone California. They're all driving rental cars. Check the plates. Wacky tourists. You can tell from the weaving, the staring from side-to-side and don't ya love the right turns from the left lane. God, *look* at that! A laugh a minute. It's the only time I wish I still wore a badge."

Scowling out the window, he pretended to talk on his cell phone and take down license numbers. Studiously ignored by all concerned, he gave up and turned toward Jim. "Idiots."

The winding road continued to climb, passing the gated entrances of one huge country club or equestrian estate after

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another. Trees towered above them, shading the entire road; only dapples of late afternoon sun penetrated the heavy cover.

“It should be coming up pretty soon,” Lenny said, once again checking the addresses on the wrought iron gates.

“Man, it’s gorgeous up here, isn’t it? High up like this, there’s no smog ... and the view? Look over there.” Jim pointed to the right and the top of the Los Angeles skyline. “Whoa. We’re definitely in the upper multi-millionaire neighborhood.”

“Yep, great zip code. Here it is, Jim.”

They stopped at the wide ornate gates and Jim pushed the button on the call box. Shortly, a voice said, “Baker residence. May I have your name, please?”

“Jim Sessions here to see Mr. Baker.”

The gates began to open before Jim finished. Tall California oaks lined the red brick driveway which forked in the middle. On the right, expansive emerald green lawns rolled down to a lovely white barn and a white paneled arena shaded by more huge trees.

To the left, a huge, multi-windowed, ultramodern house soared three stories into the air, rising out of the lush foliage like an alabaster phoenix. The ground level consisted of floor to ceiling windows and shaded patios nestled amidst flamboyant tropical gardens. The top floor, with its expansive lanais, offered an incredible view of the Los Angeles basin even as it reached for the fleecy white clouds that floated by on unseen winds.

Jim parked in front of the flagstone footpath, glanced at Lenny and shrugged. They stepped out of the SUV, clutching their attaché cases close to their sides. They wove their way along the path, flanked on both sides by ponds full of colorful Koi, hiding behind lily pads or nibbling the sides of the pool.

“What do you figure is behind door number one,” Jim said as it swung slowly open.

“A very wealthy man.”

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A middle-aged woman in a black uniform opened the door. She nodded. "I am Mrs. Hodges. Please come in. Dr. Baker is waiting for you on the veranda. This way, please."

Jim and Lenny glanced around the room, taking in the minimalist furniture and avant-garde art. Their heels clicked across the highly polished gold travertine marble floors as they followed Mrs. Hodges.

She led them to a wide set of French doors, opened them and stepped onto the flagstone patio. "Dr. Baker, Mr. Sessions and Mr. Browning have arrived." She stepped back, ushered the men outside and closed the door behind her.

Arnie Baker approached them, hand outstretched. Introductions made, he indicated chairs next to him at the table.

"I appreciate the quick response. May I offer you some refreshments?" He shrugged at the pitcher of iced tea, saw their nods of approval and poured.

Jim took the offered glass and gazed over the low wall to the distant riding arena below. A young girl of about ten jumped her pony under the watchful eyes of her trainer.

He returned his glance to Arnie and nodded. "What can we do for you, sir? I understand you're concerned that someone might be stalking your family?"

The man continued to stare at the child for a moment, his expression filled with pride and loving concern. "That's my daughter, Sara, taking a riding lesson. I've got the best seat in the house." He chuckled a moment and then heaved a deep sigh. "Some man is watching my family, following them around and it's scaring them to death. I'm so afraid they'll be kidnapped I can hardly sleep."

Lenny flipped the switch on his pocket tape recorder and leaned forward. "Why, beyond the obvious, would you think they'd be kidnapped? Has anyone tried to approach them or make contact? Your family consists of your wife and daughter, correct?"

Baker nodded. "Sara is ten. She's the light of my life, and my wife is named Candace. She should be down any time

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now. They're going for a ride after we finish and she's changing into her riding gear." He continued to watch the child and her pony.

"Why do you think they're being stalked, sir?" Jim took a grateful swallow from his glass, then shifted in his chair and began to rise. A young woman dressed in beige breeches and tall black boots strode across the veranda from another section of the house, a velvet helmet in her hand.

"Please, gentlemen, be seated," she said, smiling at Jim. She took his outstretched hand and then reached toward Lenny and nodded. "I'm Candace Baker, pleased to meet you." She patted her husband's arm several times and took the chair next to his. "Am I late? I hope I haven't missed anything important?" She placed the helmet on the table and reached for a glass of iced tea.

"No, darling, on the contrary. Your timing is perfect. Please tell them what occurred the other day at Lawson's."

Candace nodded, pale blue eyes blinked twice as she glanced at her daughter. "It was so strange. Sara and I wanted to make a special dinner, something we'd seen on a TV cooking show, so we went shopping to pick up some special ingredients. It all started in the vegetable section. Some man came up to me real close, you know, stepped into my space and started rooting through the onions, reaching across me, almost touching me.

"I moved away pretty quick, picked up some mushrooms, I think, and a tomato and headed for the meat department. Next thing I know, he's right there at my elbow. This time he talked, asked me if I needed a handyman, anyone to work around the yard or the house." She paused a moment, slightly out of breath.

"I told him I didn't need any help, picked up some veal chops and headed down another aisle. He just stood there, watching me as we picked up some risotto. He never took his eyes off us. I could feel him staring. We got in line and he walked out the door as soon as he saw us getting ready to leave. By that time, Sara had noticed him as well.

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“Anyway, we only had a couple of things, so we got through the line fast. We felt kinda spooked, so we hurried across the lot. I threw the bags into the back seat ... the top was down ... and slid behind the wheel. I barely got the engine started when he was, like, right there.”

Her voice rose and a light film of perspiration glistened on her upper lip. Candace’s right leg started to bounce and she clasped her hands until the knuckles showed white with strain.

“He said I did so need a handyman and there was no sense in denying it. The guy was very ... *determined*. He put his hand on the door handle like he was about to open it. Man, I just slammed the gear into drive and took off. I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

She picked up her glass of iced tea and took several swallows. “That happened on Monday. On Thursday, Sara and I went to the library to return our books and pick up some new ones. I never saw him approach. It was like, one minute he was just *there*. He told me I’d better change my mind and stop playing games with him. His tone was positively ominous, kind of like, *or else*.”

Arnie reached out for her quivering hands, taking them in his. “Candace, you’re safe here, honey. Don’t worry. Jim and Lenny will make sure nothing happens to you.” He turned to the men, eyebrows elevated in question.

Lenny responded with an eyebrow lift of his own. “Have you talked with the police, made a statement?”

Arnie shook his head in disdain. “God no, why bother? In the first place, there’s nothing they can do because no crime was committed. If, by some horrible chance a paparazzi nut gets hold of this, they’ll be parked along the road to the house and chasing us everywhere we go. No, that’s why I want to hire you.”

“Well, there are a couple of problems with that,” Jim said. “We’re Private Investigators. We aren’t bodyguards and we don’t offer that service, although I agree it’s what you need.

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That's why I strongly suggested to your husband that you buy one of our dogs."

Before he could continue, Candace held up her hand. "He doesn't need the convincing. I'm the one against buying a dog, especially a big one. I don't think it would be a good idea around the horses, for one thing, and Sara is only ten and little for her age." Her voice drifted and stopped. Finally, "I think she would be afraid."

"Mrs. Baker, please let me assure you, our dogs are highly trained for the exact job you need. They'll give their lives protecting you and Sara. As for the horses, the dogs will ignore them. Let me ask you, would you mind if I brought someone in to visit you?"

"It's a dog, isn't it?" Her tone said defeat but her eyes were angry. She shot a quick glance at her husband, then stared at Jim. "It better not make a mess ... or ... anything."

"I'll be right back. While I'm gone, please give Lenny as complete a description of that man as you can, what he looked like, his clothing, his speech patterns. Anything you remember."

Jim went into the house, back across the huge entry room and out the door. As he approached the SUV, a glossy black head popped up in the driver's seat. Round dark brown eyes wide, ears up, he smiled. Jim opened the door and snapped his fingers.

A sleek black body glided out of the car and stood in the rays of the morning sun, glistening. His huge body rippled with muscles, his neck smooth and well-developed. Long, powerful legs confirmed his ideal balance. He was a perfect specimen in every way, able to climb a chain link fence and clear a six foot wall in one leap. Utterly fearless and totally devoted, he was Jim's constant companion.

They entered the house and the clackety-clack of the dog's nails produced an almost musical tone on the marble. As they stepped out onto the veranda, Jim said, "Mrs. Baker, this is Tony."

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Her mouth dropped open as she stared at the dog. Gaping in amazement, she said, "Oh, my God, a Doberman? He's magnificent, but they have a bad reputation, don't they? I've heard all kinds of stories about them turning on their owners or on kids." Visibly taken aback, she leaned into her husband and took his hand.

Expression outraged, Jim said, "Excuse me, but that's just not true. I've been in the business of breeding Dobies for almost fifteen years, and my trainer has even more time invested in schooling them. If an animal is loved, trained and cared for by its family, it does not turn on them ever. When you hear stories like that, you can be assured the owners did their best to alienate and anti-socialize the dog. It's never happened with any dog we've trained. Never, not even once."

Candace pursed her lips and gazed at Jim a moment. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. That was just rude. It's just that when I was a child, my neighbor's police dog got loose and attacked me. I try not to carry it around, but sometimes it's hard to forget." She reached an unconscious hand to her lips and then shuddered.

"I can understand that. Being attacked by a dog is very frightening, but as far as our dogs are concerned, you can put that fear out of your mind. Properly trained animals, especially Dobermans, always bond with their families. Their loyalty is unquestioned. The dogs we breed are expected to do a variety of things, and we train them according to their temperaments. Take Tony, here." He glanced at the dog by his side, stroking the silky head.

"He loves to play with people, interacts very well, and has a couple of tricks that come in handy in my work. When he was young, he used to be very standoffish, the way a guard dog should be with strangers. Over the past couple of years he mellowed with age. On top of everything else, he keeps very bad company."

"Bad company?" Candace tittered under her breath as her eyes roamed his body, noting the perfect conformation, the

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glossy coat and bright, intelligent expression. “He’s a splendid animal. I breed thoroughbred show horses and I know quality when I see it. May I touch him?”

“Absolutely. Stretch your arm out and make a fist. Offer him your knuckles to sniff.”

“Tony,” she murmured in that sing-song way people instinctively use when talking to a strange animal. “You’re such a good dog, oh yes, you are.” She continued to croon as he approached and licked her hand. Smiling, she ran gentle fingers along the top of his head and sighed as the dog closed his eyes, tongue lolling out the side of his mouth, completely relaxed.

She turned to Arnie, hands clasped in front of her stomach now, unsure and vaguely defensive. “What do you think about this, hon? Do you feel comfortable with a big dog like Tony around?”

“Yes, I do. I have from the beginning. I did a lot of checking and in the world of guard dogs no one is better regarded than their trainer.” He turned to Jim as though for agreement.

“Mrs. Baker, instead of going for your ride, why don’t you all come out to the training facility, meet Rudy and the dogs and see how you feel. It’s a nice drive, about an hour and a half and mostly in the country. At least you can give it a try, meet the dogs and make a decision based on knowledge.”

Candace hesitated a moment and then pulled out her cell phone. She punched a button and waited. “Luci, would you tell Sara to come up to the house when the lesson’s finished? We have to pass on our ride, but we’re still going on an adventure. Yes, thank you.” She closed her cell and glanced at Arnie.

Face like a thundercloud, Sara Baker stomped up the path from the barn to the house, waving her arms and muttering. She hurried across the veranda to Candace, scowling.

“Mommy! You promised we could go on a trail ride and Luci just told me plans changed. Again. That’s twice this week. Why?”

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“Sara,” her father admonished, “we have guests. Please say hello to Mr. Sessions and Mr. Browning.”

Color tinged the young girl’s cheek as she nodded. “Excuse me. How do you do?” She turned back to Candace and made a face, mouthing the words, *What’s up*, as her mother leaned forward.

“We’re going to take a ride out to the country and check out a dog. One like that.” She pointed at Tony.

“Oh! Oh, my goodness, he’s beautiful, Mommy. What’s his name? Can I pet him?”

Candace glanced at Jim, eyebrows arched. She shrugged.

“Sure you can,” he said. “Just reach out your hand and let him sniff it first.”

She followed his directions to the letter, walking quietly to the dog, hand extended. Murmuring to Tony, she sat next to him on the floor and chuckled as he licked her fingers. “You’re sweet.” Sara patted his head while Tony wriggled in appreciation. “He’s a very nice dog, Mommy. We’re gonna get one like him to take care of us, aren’t we? A great big one.” She turned back to the dog and embraced him, hugging his neck.

Tony clamped his ears to his head and closed his eyes, brows furrowed in canine ecstasy. Tongue hanging out of his mouth, he smiled, his short tail rotated quickly, wagging his hips.

Non-committal, Candace rose and smiled at her daughter. “Honey, let’s scoot upstairs and change clothes, shall we? It’s a bit of a drive and we want to get started.”

## *Chapter 2*

The sign on the chain link fence read: *Elite Dobermans ~ Breeding and Training Facility.*

Jim aimed the remote at the control box and the gate swung open.

The Bakers followed Jim's SUV down the long driveway that cut through lush, rolling acres of thick green grass. Tools of the dog training trade studded the lawns in all directions: walls, tunnels, ladders, fences and every manner of training device available including some original obstacles Rudy, the trainer, created on his own.

They parked in front of what looked like a large warehouse and entered the office. Rudy rose from his desk, crossed the large room and smiled, shaking hands while Jim made the introductions.

In the corner, sitting on separate mats, two juvenile Doberman females watched the newcomers with interest, ears cocked, expressions inquisitive. Bright brown eyes flitted from person to person.

"Please come in and have a seat." Rudy nodded, inviting them to have a seat on the long leather couch and matching armchairs. He smiled at Candace. "Jim brought me up to speed on what you're looking for and I think we have two really good candidates to choose from. Now who will be the primary handler? Sara or Mrs. Baker?"

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Candace shrugged. "I guess it better be me. I spend most of my time with Sara, except for school hours. Still, I want the dog to relate to her or whatever." Uneasy, she glanced at the two dogs. "They're littler than, er, Tony, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are, but they're still puppies. Eight months old, same litter. They're full sisters and just as sweet as sugar. They won't get as tall as Tony, but they'll still be plenty big and as muscular as you decide to make them. They need lots of exercise, so run with them, play, socialize them to the degree you would like. They'll give you all the stranger protection you want by instinct, and they'll be standoffish with others, but with their family, they'll give their lives, no questions asked." He stared at Candace, as a variety of emotions flitted across her face.

"If you decide you want one, we'll discuss at length exactly what is expected of the dog and then I'll teach you how to get it. Never let a stranger touch her for any reason ... there is no good reason for it, ever. Same goes for your friends. I mean, if you decided to carry a handgun, you wouldn't let them touch or handle it, would you? Friends can admire from afar, but the fewer people who touch her the better. They should keep their distance, especially for the first month or so.

"By the time you've had the dog for that length of time, she'll be bonded to you and the training transfer will be complete. Then it's just a matter of nature taking over. If your friends really bug you about it, explain you got her to protect your life and it's a break in her training if they touch her. If they can't understand that, they're not really your friends. She is not a pet. It's really important that everyone knows that, Mrs. Baker."

Resigned, but still unsure, she said, "Have you ever had one go bad on you, attack you or a new owner?"

The look on Rudy's face said it all. "Never, absolutely not. I cull the pups from the time their eyes open. I know their pedigree and disposition, their aggression level, their desire to please, all the critical things that matter and by the time they're weaned, I know where to place them. I segregate them according to temperament and intelligence. We have dogs that are very

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aggressive, bred mostly for police and military use. They are the true attack dogs. They'd rather fight than eat and need no human direction to commence hostility where they perceive danger. It's a very narrow field and those that qualify are worth their weight in gold."

Candace blinked, glancing quickly at her daughter. "What kind of dog would be best for us, Rudy?"

"What you're looking for is a companion/guard combination. He turned with a grin that spread from ear to ear and gestured at the dogs. "You have before you two ideal candidates."

Candace smiled at the happy expression on Sara's face as she gazed from one dog to the other. "What do we do now?"

"I personally think, after talking with you, that Sadie is the better of the two choices, so we'll start with her." He turned to the dog and nodded. "Sadie, come."

The dog rose with a grace that belied her youth and trotted over to Rudy, her backside wiggling. Rudy took her face between both hands, bent low and slowly rocked her head back and forth, all the while talking to her under his breath. Sadie closed her eyes to slits, but still gazed at him. She sighed, smiling broadly, while the stump of her tail made quick circles.

"Oh, my God, she's showing her teeth at you." Candace blinked several times and pushed deeper into the sofa, hugging herself.

He glanced at Candace, chuckling. "No she's not, she's smiling at me. They find this kind of thing irresistible. They love to make eye contact with their people, just like they hate it in strangers. They think it's very intimate which, of course, it is. Coming from the wrong person, it's something they find quite confrontational and combative."

Rudy gave several quick hand signals to the dog and then stroked her head.

Sadie sat, tail still rotating. On Rudy's direction, Candace rose and approached the dog, her hand outstretched in a fist, knuckles up, just as she'd made friends with Tony.

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“Hi, Sadie. You sure are a pretty girl.” The dog gazed at her a moment, ears up then down, head slightly tilted. The tail started again. The dog placed her long, slender muzzle right into Candace’s palm and whined slightly under her breath. Meanwhile, her ears and tail continued in a full flutter of independent motion. She drew deep breaths, as though absorbing a new, wonderful aroma. She glanced at Rudy for approval and began to bond with this wonderful new human who smelled so good.

“Oh,” Candace said, blinking several times. “Oh, she’s so sweet. Oh, my, and her coat is like velvet.” She sat on the floor before the dog, stroking her head and then tracing the narrow outline of the contrasting gold fur across the black chest.

Sadie glanced once more at Rudy and turned all her attention back to Candace. Gently, she laid her head in the woman’s lap. She sighed again and rolled slowly over on her back, offering her stomach.

Rudy made eye contact with Candace and smiled. “This is what it’s all about, Mrs. Baker. She already wants to love you. About five more minutes of that belly scratching and you’ll have it.” They all chuckled, especially when Sadie wagged her tail.

“Mrs. Baker, I...”

She raised a hand, interrupting him. “Please, my name is Candace. No need for formality when I’m putting my life in your hands. Yours and Sadie’s.” Her smile rivaled the sun as she stared at the snoozing dog. “She’s wonderful, just what I want. We’ll take her.”

Arnie Baker nudged Jim, not wanting to break the mood. He flicked his head toward the outdoors and nodded. They left the office and strolled down to the kennels.

“What do we do now, Jim? What an incredible stroke of luck. She did *not* want to do this at first, and she can be a stubborn cuss, but I know my wife; she’s in love.”

“Rudy will want to work with you all for a couple of days, get everyone accustomed to the dog, how to work with her,

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familiar commands she already knows. All of you should be involved, actually. We have a guest cottage that is more than large enough for three. Why don't you stay over so you can get started working with Sadie as soon as possible."

Arnie glanced at his watch and nodded. "I could drive back to the house, pack a couple of suitcases and return in a few hours." He looked through the window at Sara who sat on the floor next to her mother, playing with the dog.

Jim noticed the direction of his attention. "When do you leave for Europe?"

"Four more days. If it could be any kind of a fun trip, I'd bring them along and ditch the drama. Unfortunately, the itinerary is a killer and they'd have a terrible time by themselves in the middle of a hot, muggy summer. I'm speaking in eleven cities in nine days. It's an impossible schedule for them to meet. If I weren't the keynote speaker, I'd bag the whole thing, but I just can't. People paid good money and they're depending on me."

Arnie walked across the porch and reached for the door handle. "I want to talk with you about an idea I have. Let's get Candace, Sara and the dog all settled in first. Maybe you can ride along with me while I go back to the house? It's important."

\* \* \*

Tom Harris sat across the street from the Baker estate, concealed in the dense foliage of the oleander bushes. Bright gray eyes darted from side to side, ears alert to any sounds that might emanate from the property across the road. Tall trees ringed the wrought iron gates. Gardens filled with flowers and shrubs ensured no part of the estate but the first twenty feet of driveway was visible from the outside.

*Where could they be?*

He glanced from side to side, fearful of discovery. He ran his hand across his eyes, wiping the gathering sweat from his brow.

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*She looks so much like mother used to, soft and blonde like that. I bet her hair is soft, too. That damned kid reminds me of Annie, too. Why is it always Annie? Damned kid. I hate her.*

He ground his teeth and shifted his gaze to the empty street. Seeing it clear, he crept across to the pillar on the left side of the driveway, hoping to use it as a shield to hide behind. Unsuccessful, he stood there exposed, standing in the open, visible to anyone who might drive up. Eyes darting from side to side, he dodged around the pillar and stood with his forehead pressed against the gate in a vain attempt to see the house.

Dense, dark green shrubs and clumps of colorful ornamental undergrowth blocked his sight as effectively as a brick wall. He tightened his fists around the iron bars, shaking them in fury, face red with rage.

*I won't take it again, not again. She has no damned right to do this to me. Why? It's just like always. Nothing's changed. She thinks it never will, but this time she's going to be so frickin' sorry because when I find her, she'll pay. Pay for all those times when she was mean to me, when she left me alone to go play with Annie. I know that's what she's doing right now. They're having fun together with no consideration for me at all. Just like always.*

Tom struck the gate with his fist, panting. The sounds of a car climbing the hill almost made him jump out of his skin, and he ran back across the street and into the bougainvillea, scratching his face and arms. Down on all fours, he watched the large Mercedes slow for the turn, the gate already opening to allow the car to pass onto the grounds.

Tom's heart soared as he recognized the convertible, only to have his hopes dashed moments later when he realized the man had returned without her. They'd all left together earlier in the day. Where could she be now?

Fear and anger swept through him in huge up and down waves, first hot, then cold, often in unison. His stomach turned, boiling with acid. Rivulets of sweat poured down his ribs as his

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stomach churned hot burning fluid into his throat. Swallowing convulsively, he started to cough.

*She can't leave me again, not again. I won't let her.*

Tom scurried up the side of the road, heart pounding in his chest with such force he wondered if this time he might be having a heart attack. He finally reached the turnout where he'd left his old blue panel van. Except for the Mercedes, no other cars had driven this far up the road. Located at the top of the dead end street like this, with no other houses around, he felt safe and secluded. No witnesses would pop up later to identify him or his van.

*Maybe something was wrong. Could she be sick? No, she just wanted to be with that other kid, that girl, Annie. It was always like that, so why should he think it would be different now? Well, it was gonna be different. He'd make sure of that.*

He climbed behind the wheel, trying to take deep breaths and failing at first. A paper bag lay on the seat near him. Tom placed it over his mouth and nose and breathed into it. Finally the hyperventilation subsided and his breathing returned to normal.

Tom made a U-turn and drove slowly down the road past the estate. The gate had closed behind the car and it was obvious she was not home. He gathered speed, made the turn and headed down the hill toward the freeway leading him home to Los Angeles.

\* \* \*

“Okay, Candace, that’s one way to hold the leash. She’s relaxed and happy, just like when you’re out walking alone on your property and there’s no need for the dog to be alert.” He smiled, nodding at her in encouragement. “On the other hand, it won’t work when you’re away from home with other people or dogs around. Now, don’t do anything yet, but watch her demeanor change. Be aware of the difference in her ears, her

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facial expression. Okay, shorten the leash and snap your fingers.”

Immediately, Sadie raised her head and came to heel, her eyes fixed on Candace, waiting for the next command.

“Next, I’ll teach you the guard command. It’s as simple as pie. Just slap your thigh twice, real quick. From that point on until you give her the signal to back off, no one will be able to touch you or infringe into what *she* considers your space, which is even bigger than you think it is. Dogs intuitively smell a threat and depending on the size of the danger, they react.”

They practiced the command several times, and Sadie followed her training to the letter, never failing to guard.

“In my opinion, until the stalker is caught and neutralized, I think you should give her the command to guard whenever you leave your home. Let me guarantee something, because you can depend on it. The first time this guy comes face to face with Sadie, he’ll get the picture loud and clear. Unless he’s unique or extremely motivated, that should be the last you see of him. Except for the celebrities, most random stalkers will move on to their next, and in your case, much less formidable victim when they see force like this.”

“How much is she going to change, Rudy?”

“A lot, but you’ll hardly notice. She’ll grow up to three inches taller and the weight and muscle mass she gains is dependent on her conditioning. You ride, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes. Sara and I ride every day. We love to go on the trails. Will Sadie be able to come, too? We have twenty acres of really thick woods on our property, and my girlfriend has an adjoining twenty acres, so several of us ride together on any given day.”

Sara spoke up for the first time, a wide smile on her lips. “We have jumps, too, like a cross country course and there’s a stream that runs every winter and spring. Can Sadie play in it? It’d be loads of fun.” Her eyes, light blue like her mother’s, twinkled, creasing at the corners in a most engaging smile.

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Rudy nodded. “You sure can. Won’t be long before she looks like a female version of Tony. Dobies love to run, so watch that you don’t overheat her. Humidity can be rough on a dog, too, so pack her a little water when your stream runs dry. She works out on the treadmill every morning so she’s fit and ready to go. Just watch the heat.”

“You have a dog treadmill? That must be something to see.”

Rudy shook his head, laughing. “It can be quite entertaining, believe me, ‘cause they’re very competitive. I should make home videos of it. It’s made for horses, so it can accommodate four dogs abreast, and it’s quite long, so I can have a whole bunch of them going on a run at the same time. They love it, of course, and there’s always somebody who wants to be first, so it keeps them sharp. Watching it can be a hoot because they’re very gung-ho.”

Candace continued to work with Sadie, mastering one command after another.

Bored with the adult conversation, Sara sprawled on the thick green lawn, sheltered by the dappled shadows of a giant oak. She watched her mother and Sadie work, amazed at her mother’s unusual behavior.

*She must be scared to death to be able to make friends with Sadie so fast, and there’s only one reason for it. We must really be in trouble.*

Her mother’s lifelong fear of dogs was no secret to Sara and neither was her reason for it. Being attacked like that when you were just a little kid and bitten so savagely would be scary, for sure. Still, her mother clearly made a point of overcoming her personal fears as she worked with Sadie.

Sara had wanted a dog forever. Now, thanks to that creep in Lawson’s, it looked like it might happen. When they saw him in the library a couple of days later, her mom freaked, calling her dad on her cell and crying, the whole deal. And the guy was creepy looking, no doubt about it. That’s why Sara

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decided not to mention seeing him again when they were at the mall yesterday. Mom would come unglued, especially with Dad going away.

She flipped over on her stomach, poking through the grass, looking for lucky clovers and lady bugs. Thinking about having a dog at long last made her giggle. All her friends had dogs and some of them were quite well trained in the art of Frisbee retrieving. Her best friend, Megan, had a canine terrorist disguised as a Jack Russell. Sara thought that breed entirely too pushy and especially crafty regarding food containers. There was also the oddball who loved carrots. On the other hand, she was not at all sure about a Doberman, although they were built for jumping.

*I wanted a Corgi, not a guard dog. They were the latest rage at the horse shows and everyone had one. Sadie is not exactly what I wanted, but she sure is beautiful. Wonder if we'll be able to take her to the horse shows. That'd be a kick. We might start a new trend. At least we won't have our food stolen.*

Always the pragmatist, she viewed Sadie through new eyes. If ever there was a dog built to win at Frisbee, it was Sadie. *We'll have to keep that a secret from Rudy. I don't think he'd approve.*

Mood uplifted, she continued to watch her mom put the dog through her paces.

\* \* \*

Rudy glanced at Candace, watching her body language. "How do you feel handling Sadie? Confident?"

"Real good, Rudy. She's so sweet and the way she looks at me, oh, she melts my heart. I'm good to go." She reached down and stroked Sadie's head, then continued with the now familiar routine of heel, sit, and down on command. Stay, go and stop completed the repertoire of the young and as yet inexperienced guard dog. What she lacked in experience she

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more than made up for in devotion, never taking her eyes from Candace's face.

"I'm ready to let you guys go home. I know Arnie leaves for Europe tomorrow and you'll want to spend tonight with him at home, so you have my official seal of approval."

Candace gazed at the dog, a smile playing on her lips. "We're ready to go home; we miss riding and I can't wait to introduce Sadie to the horses. I know she'll be just fine."

"I know she will, too. Just make sure they're introduced slowly. Most horses like dogs, so it shouldn't be a problem. If anything comes up that you don't know how to handle, or you want to talk, just give me a buzz. My card's in with the bill of sale and her papers. Have fun."

\* \* \*

"Where are we going, Mom?" Sara glanced around the parking lot, a grin slowly spreading across her face. "Oh, I know. Pet Smart, right?"

Candace chuckled as she parked the little convertible under a large shade tree. "We need to get her a whole bunch of stuff." She turned and snapped the simple black nylon leash on Sadie's matching collar. "Rudy gave me the name of the food he feeds her, plus she needs a bed and some toys."

They headed toward the large door, Sadie at heel. Sara pushed the cart, following her mother down the aisles.

As usual, Pet Smart had several doggie shoppers walking the aisles. Ahead of them strolled an elderly Basset hound, long ears dusting the floor. He cast a mournful look over his shoulder and continued following his mistress down to the clothing section. She stopped at a rack of plaid coats, pulled a large red and black one off the hangar and held it up to the dog. He stared at her in embarrassment, shook himself and glanced over his shoulder at Sadie. He whined lightly under his breath.

Sara picked up a large water bowl and matching flat food dish and dropped them into the cart with a clatter. They

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bounced off the large bag of kibbles. “She needs some treats and a Frisbee, for sure. I hope she’s good at catching it.” She bent over and stroked Sadie’s head and got a lick square across her lips for her troubles.

“Eeuw! That’s gross. Don’t do that.” Sara rubbed her mouth across her arm.

Sadie seemed to understand, wagged her tail hard and licked the girl’s cheek several times.

“Okay, that’s much better.”

The bed Candace chose was too big for the cart. As she virtually staggered down the aisle with it, a young teen approached.

“Can I help you, Ma’am?” he asked with a smile. He reached for the bed, taking it from Candace. Grateful, she handed it over, pleasantly aware that Sadie had come to heel, her eyes fixed on the boy’s face in stony silence.

“What a beautiful dog. She’s just a pup, huh?” He grinned in appreciation and nodded. “We have one, much older, though. Is she a guard dog?”

Candace glanced down at Sadie, noticing the expression on her face. “Yes, she’s not even a year old yet. She’s still in training.” She chuckled under her breath and patted the dog in comfort.

“I can tell. You’d need a platoon of Marines to be safer,” he said, laying the bed on the checkout counter. “They’re the best.” He removed the remaining items from the cart, laughing as he hefted the Frisbee. He placed it on the counter and nodded at Sara. “She’ll be the neighborhood champ in no time.”

Sadie continued to watch the boy as they made their way through the checkout line. He accompanied them to the car and waited while Candace opened the little Mercedes’ trunk. He stuffed the bed and the bag of food inside and shut the lid.

“Have a nice day, Ma’am. That sure is a gorgeous dog.” He waved goodbye and returned to the store, whistling.

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The canopy of stars spread across the heavens as far as the eye could see. Soft, whispery breezes played in the treetops. The smell of flowers and fresh mowed grass wafted in the air.

Mrs. Hodges had cleared the table and retired more than an hour ago.

Sara raised her hand to her mouth, covering another yawn.

Like a cloak, the night air wrapped around them, offering a mantle of warmth to guard against the stealthy chill that crept in from the sea. Pungent with the sweet smells of summer, it lingered long after the sun set. The outside of the lemonade pitcher developed a lush layer of frost as the ice melted.

“I wish I didn’t have to leave my best girls,” Arnie said, a frown drawing lines across his forehead. He pursed his lips and glanced from Candace to Sara. “I’ll call every day and we’ll chat. Send me emails, keep me posted on the net and I’ll be home before you know it. You won’t even have time to miss me.”

“Oh, yes, we will.” Sara yawned again as she rose from her chair. Smiling, she grabbed his hand and squeezed. “Can I ride to the airport with you, Daddy? I’d really like that.”

“Not this time, sweetie. My flight leaves extra early, so I’m going to LAX in the airport limo. They’re picking me up a little after four. Way too early for you guys to be up.” He bent down and kissed her cheek. “Are you just about ready for bed, sugar? I’ll come up and tuck you in. Just give me a buzz.”

“I will, Daddy. Night night.” Sara gave her mother a hug then turned and walked across the veranda. The screen door closed behind her.

They walked arm and arm to the edge of the veranda, wine glasses in hand. The lights of the city spread before them, twinkling in the silky darkness as though to rival the stars. They sipped their wine in easy silence, leaning into each other. He

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drew her head to his shoulder and stroked her hair. "Sweetheart, would you do me a favor?"

"Of course, Arnie, what is it?"

"Do you think you and Sara could stay here on the property while I'm gone? Mrs. Hodges can get whatever you might need at the store, or have it delivered." He shook his head and pulled her even closer, wrapping her in his arms. "I know it's paranoid, but I'll be so far away and you're here alone at night. It would make me feel a lot better. I've notified the security patrol that I want them to pay special attention while I'm gone."

"Arnie, we'll be alright. We just spent a fortune on a guard dog, so we'll be safe, but if you'd feel better if we stay put, then that's what we'll do. The last thing you need to be doing is worrying about us. I'll make it like a party for Sara. I'll see if she wants to invite some of her friends for a sleepover. We could have a camping weekend."

Her smile widened as she gazed up at him. "Actually, that sounds like a good time. We can ride around the trails, swim, have a barbecue. She'll love it. All the kids will."

He nodded. "One more thing. If anything scares you, honey, even a little bit, call Jim Sessions. I've already talked with him, and he and Lenny will come over and rotate shifts each night until I get back if you want them to."

Arnie glanced at the dark shape sleeping at Candace's feet and sighed. "I have to remember that you aren't alone here. We have our Sadie now and she's settling in quite nicely."

The dog melded and became part of the family, and in just four days already enjoyed the curious position of being taken for granted. She followed her new god everywhere and slept at the foot of Candace's bed on her own fragrant cedar mat. She loved Sara and spent hours chasing the Frisbee, but her devotion and obvious commitment went to Candace. Just the way the dog looked at her gave Arnie a good comfort level.

"Things are working out great with Sadie, aren't they? You still feel fine about her, right? That's another thing to call

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Jim or Rudy about if you're worried. They're on the ball, so don't hesitate."

Candace nestled closer and kissed his neck. "We're going to be just fine here, so don't worry. You must be incredibly excited about this trip. Talk about a whirlwind tour. Are you sure you'll get the funding from..."

The sound of the intercom drifted across the veranda.

"Daddy, I'm ready."

### Chapter 3

From the moment he realized she was gone, Tom haunted the land around the Baker estate. The acreage across the street was unimproved and unfenced, a mini wilderness inhabited by nothing but wildlife.

The properties adjoining the Baker estate on either side shared their fences with the Baker's, making it impossible to gain access from the street except through locked gates. The lot above them, although sporting a *for sale* sign, remained undeveloped, splendid in its thick, lush underbrush. The wild shrubs and weeds that covered the property could have provided adequate cover for a small herd of buffalo. A single individual moving with stealth and purpose would never be detected.

Tom followed the fence to the corner where it turned right and skirted along the edges of a steep hill. The ravines, concealed in years of undergrowth, provided a perfect hiding place if needed.

Between the perimeter fence and the barn ran a long grassy pasture, separated into three large, white-fenced paddocks. Deeper into the property he made out the shadow of what looked like an office or a small house and beyond it, two large riding arenas, one filled with fences and obstacles for the horses to jump over. At the top of the property, crowning the knoll like a tiara, the huge house hung over the edge of the hill as though it grew there.

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Tom squinted at the top of the ten-foot fence and realized the additional four lines of electric wire that bent outward toward him made climbing the fence impossible.

There had to be another way, but what? How could he get inside? Entrance to the estate belonged only to the pre-approved.

Stumped, he squatted in a little ravine and tried to think. Although he'd kept a close vigil, he hadn't seen the woman since she drove off with the man and the little girl earlier in the week. He'd seen the man come home alone and since then, there'd been no sign of her or the child.

*The man came home alone.*

That could only mean one thing, the event he feared more than death itself. The thought haunted him as fear swept his body. *She got away again.*

Devastated, he climbed back in the van and drove down the hill.

\* \* \*

Candace waved again as the limo drove up the driveway. It stopped at the gate then turned left and disappeared down the hill.

She paused on the front steps and yawned, unsure what to do next. Sara wouldn't be up for at least three more hours. She debated whether to go back to bed or get another cup of coffee. She finished her cup to the dregs and hesitated again. The coffee won and she headed for the kitchen.

The dark sky lightened with each passing moment. The eastern exposure in the kitchen gave a breathtaking view of the preparations underway to greet the sun. Blue emerged, almost gray at first, the hues intensifying as the sun neared the horizon.

She filled her cup, added a dollop of cream and walked out onto the veranda. The tops of the tall oak trees glittered in anticipation, first mauve, then pinkish gold, giving way to clear,

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bright green. Like a kaleidoscope, the colors changed, shadows disappeared and leaves took individual shapes.

Candace and Sadie stood together in the early morning light, watching the spectacle unfold.

“Hey, girl, let’s go for a walk. It’s too nice to go back to bed.”

They walked down the steps to the path that led to the barn. Sadie sniffed the fresh morning smells, glancing at Candace from time to time while rooting in the gardens that lined both sides of the path with fragrant blossoms.

They entered the large barn and received a variety of greetings from the equine inhabitants, from deep throaty chuckles to shrill whinnies.

A large gray pony stretched his neck over the stall door and nickered at Candace, begging for a treat. She stroked the velvety soft nose while she talked to Sadie. “Remember this little guy, Sadie? This is Sara’s pony, Thumper. He’s a good boy.”

Sadie gazed at the pony a moment, tail revolving in slow circles. Polite rather than interested, the dog’s attention strayed as she spotted something in the hay. Front legs rigid, she pounced on the loose flake and whined in delight as a little field mouse scooted from behind the bail and ran down the aisle, Sadie hot on the trail.

The mouse tore across the paddocks and made it to the grassy exterior. Instinctively seeing safety on the other side of the fence, he slowed just enough to scoot through the chain link. It ran between the legs of the man who squatted before him and disappeared into the underbrush.

What started as a simple game of chase turned deadly serious as Sadie skidded to a stop, five feet from Tom. A ridge of fur rose along her neck and spine. She flattened her ears to her skull and snarled, baring her fangs. Head lowered, eyes squeezed to slits, she approached the fence, stiff-legged.

Without warning she sprang at him, moving so fast Tom had no time to react. Her body slammed into the fence, knocking

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him on his butt. Eyes wild, he sat in stunned silence while Sadie, outraged at being unable to reach him, bit at the fence, barking.

“Sadie?” From a distance came a familiar voice. Candace poked her head out of a stall, looking for the dog. “Sadie, come.”

The irate dog glared at Tom a moment, then turned and trotted back to the barn.

“Did you get the little mousie, Sadie? Aren’t you just a brave little attack dog?” She chuckled, stroking the sleek black head.

Sadie stared down the barn aisle to the distant fence, lips lifted. She turned back to Candace and whined.

“Come here, Sadie. I want you to meet Jet.” She slid the stall door open and an elegant black head reached down to smell the dog.

Sadie took the obligatory sniff of the leg Candace patted, totally indifferent to the horse. Jet, equally unimpressed, snuffled Candace’s shirt, hoping for a carrot or a horse cookie.

The dog heard him first and whirled as Juan walked down the barn aisle pushing a hay cart.

“Morning, Senora.”

“Hi, Juan. I want you to meet our new dog, Sadie.”

She took easy hold of the dog’s collar and beckoned Juan to her. “This is a friend, Sadie. Be nice.” She continued to stroke the dog that waited, non-committal, as Juan approached. He extended his hand as instructed, letting the dog sniff it.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a napkin. Three strips of bacon, part of his breakfast, came into view and the aroma made the dog salivate. Before Candace could say anything, he broke off a piece and offered it to Sadie. She took it gently, her tail rotating slowly in appreciation of the treat.

“Ha, you know dogs, Juan.”

“Si, just like all animals. Way to heart starts in mouth, moves to stomach. She very much beautiful, Senora. I likeit the teeth. Very big, she take good care.”

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“I hope so, Juan. Everything okay while we were gone? No problems?”

“No problema, Senora. Quiet here, like little paradise.” He glanced around, satisfaction on his dark face. “I much likeit here. You good boss.”

He tossed the last of the hay to the hungry horses, grinning as he heard the mare in the last stall squeal.

“Is time to wean. The mama getting mad, baby too big, bites her teats. Hard.” An indignant and irritated whinny followed by a thump emphasized his words.

“She breakit sonethin’ soon, Senora.”

Candace walked over to the stall just in time to see the outraged mare take a sharp bite out of her son’s rump. He rose on his hind legs, squealed back at her and struck out with both front legs.

“You’re just a little bully, aren’t you, Teddy? Took advantage of Mama’s good nature and now she’s playing rough, huh?” She glanced at the roughed-up fur on his butt and chuckled. “Just what you deserve, too. Nowhere near the heart, my friend; you’ll live. Today you go to pasture. Let you get out with kids your own age. I’m going to give Jane a call and have her come over and pick you up, tough boy.”

Sadie followed Candace back up the path to the house, still excited by her morning adventures. She’d chased many a mouse at the training center, but the guy on the other side of the fence presented a different matter entirely. She glanced over her shoulder at the woods that surrounded them and whined.

\* \* \*

Heart in his throat, Tom Harris watched the dog trot away from him, cross the grass paddocks and enter the barn. He shook as though swept with ague, teeth clicking together like castanets. Sweat poured from his body in rivulets and his eyes stung. Furious and terrified at the same time, he tried to catch his

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breath as he scurried away into the thick underbrush, slipping on damp leaves.

“Frickin’ dog,” he kept muttering over and over again. “Wouldn’t ya just know it?”

The dog put a different light on his plans. For one thing, that wasn’t just any old mutt. It charged the fence with such ferocity he had no doubt of the intent. The only thing standing between him and a torn throat was a chain link fence.

He threw the wire cutters into the passenger seat and shivered again as he slid behind the wheel of the van. Twice he tried to slip the key into the ignition and twice he failed. Finally dropping the keys on the floor of the old van, he screamed a banshee wail and pounded his fists on the steering wheel. *Son of a bitch!*

\* \* \*

Sadie lay under the table while Candace and Sara ate breakfast. From time to time, they’d call her name which made her tail go around in circles. Her eyes, although no longer hyper alert, remained watchful. Most of the property was out of her line of sight, but the path to the barn and the woods behind the paddocks were in plain view.

A plump young rabbit sat in the garden, eating the top off a flower with slow and careful deliberation. Its nose twitched, as did its ears, always vigilant for predators.

The dog sighed then turned her attention back to the barn area where the horses had been turned out to play.

Juan pushed the cart to the dumpster and began to shovel the manure into the bin. He’d only worked for the Bakers for a little over a year, but in the way of most of his people, he felt a strong and loyal connection to the family that offered him not only a lovely little house to live in and a good salary, but the hand of friendship and respect to boot. Well aware of the reason

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why Candace bought Sadie, he nodded in approval as he watched the dog watching him.

Born in Tijuana, Mexico, he was no stranger to dangerous people and he feared for his Senora and the little Senorita like they were his family. They were family, he often said to his wife, and it was his responsibility to watch out for them, especially while Senor Baker was away. The advent of the dog pleased him in more ways than one.

It was not Juan's prerogative to come to the house except to tend to the landscaping. There was a clear line, a difference between friends and workers. Nonetheless, after he'd overheard Sara telling Luci about the man who had scared them so bad, he made it a point to be aware of what went on around the estate.

His wife, Maria, worked in the house, assisting Mrs. Hodges with the chores and doing occasional cooking. She, too, was concerned, especially after Mrs. Hodges told her in confidence that she was afraid for Candace.

From that day forward, they made themselves aware of the comings and goings on the estate, ever vigilant and alert to any threats, real or perceived. Juan now lingered when the feed store delivered hay, shavings and grain. He watched with deceptively lazy eyes as the man unloaded their order and stored it in the grain room, never leaving the barn until the truck drove back up the hill and out the gate.

Candace pushed her grapefruit aside, poured herself another cup of coffee and smiled at her daughter. "Jane should be here any time to pick up Teddy. We have to get him away from Tessa before she kills him. He's such a brat and he's asking for it. Can't blame the mama, but I don't want him hurt. Today he goes out to pasture."

"It's always that way, isn't it? The colts are so rough. The fillies are much nicer. I think I'm a mare girl. At least that's what Luci calls me."

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Candace chuckled. "I have to agree with you. I like them better, too." She glanced at the book in Sara's hand and said, "What are you reading?"

"It's from Pony Club." She waved the paperback at her mother and grinned. "I'm studying for my test to move up to D3. There're five of us taking the test together. I hope I do okay. Thumper's getting his lead changes so well, and he really likes to jump, so I know I'll pass first time around." She nodded and began to read, her lips moving ever so slightly.

Candace took her cup with her and perched on the low stone wall surrounding the veranda. The property spread before her, alive with wildlife.

Chipmunks and squirrels shared the land in noisy harmony and all kinds of birds lived in the trees. Even the occasional coyote that trotted down the road came and went without disturbing the peace and tranquility of her home.

A low buzzer sounded, announcing someone at the front gate. Moments later, Jane's rig drove down the driveway toward the barn.

"She's here," Sara called as she started down the trail. "Let's help her get Teddy loaded."

Jane grinned as Sara hurried down the hill and across the grass. "This should be fun, huh?" She unhooked the tie and started to back a chestnut pony down the ramp. "Look what I brought you."

"Oh, Jane, she's darling." Sara reached for the lead rope attached to the halter of the cutest pony she'd ever seen.

"Starlight." She read the name on the bronze nameplate and smiled. "Perfect. We'll call her Star, huh?" She ran a hand down the mare's neck, grinning.

"That's her name," Jane said as she grabbed the apple picker, scooped up a steaming pile of poop and threw it in the muck bucket.

Candace called hello as she walked into the barn area, now bearing two mugs of steaming coffee. She handed one to

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Jane and grinned as she approached the pony. The velvety muzzle reached for Candace, searching for a treat and chuckling in appreciation at the warm, loving pats.

“She’s just a treasure and so beautiful. Where’s she headed?”

“She’s a real fancy mover, great canter. If she’s honest and has good form over fences, she’s headed for pony hunters. Luci’s been over twice to ride her and she’s anxious to start jumping, so the timing is perfect. I take it Mr. Tuff Stuff is about to get a taste of real life from his mama, huh? Let’s go rescue him.”

Juan had both horses’ legs wrapped and ready to travel. Teddy danced around on his toes, throwing his legs in all directions in an attempt to rid himself of the boots and anxious to get out of the stall. Candace took the mare and headed for the trailer.

Tessa walked up the ramp with Candace and followed her down to the farthest stall. They closed the dividing partition as Juan led Teddy up to the trailer. The mare gave her foal a whinny of encouragement, urging him to come into the trailer. The colt wasn’t sure about the ramp but he was not about to be separated from his mother. Half way up, he gave a shrill whinny and took a leap, landing in the middle of his section of trailer, puffs of pine shavings rising into the air like snow.

Juan secured the tie to his halter, closed the partition and pulled up the ramp. He’d travel with Teddy in case the colt got nervous about his first trailer ride.

Candace waved goodbye as Jane, Juan and both horses rode back up the drive. Once at Jane’s farm, they’d take the colt to the pasture and turn him out with the other weanlings. They’d be back with the mare in less than an hour.

Sara led Star to the empty stall next to Jet. The other ponies called hello to the newcomer. Star hesitated a moment, then walked into her new home. The little mare took a quick bite of hay, made a rapid circuit of the stall and located the water

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bucket. She took a sip, popped her head over the door and let out a low chuckle as if to pronounce her new home acceptable.

Slipping her arms around the long, silky neck, Sara said, "I sure am one lucky kid."

"Yes, you are. Think of all the little girls in this world who would give anything just to have one pony." Candace rested her arms across the top of the door. "We have a wonderful arrangement, huh? You get a constant supply of new ponies to show and I get a good place to wean the babies."

Sara patted Star one more time and then left the stall, locking it behind her. "It sure is. Where does Jane find all these wonderful ponies?"

"Well, being a horse trainer, she knows lots of people from all over California, plus she's got a great name in the horse world, so people call her if they have a horse or pony to sell or hear about one she might be interested in buying. She's been in the business a long time, so her contacts are very widespread. This little pony comes from Arizona. Her old family kinda fell on hard times. She had no training to begin with, so Jane got her for a song. She's only had her for thirty days and in that time, her flatwork has improved to the point where she's ready to show in the under saddle classes. Tomorrow, Luci will start you jumping her and if she continues to progress, we'll have you show her when the fall season starts. Then she goes up for sale."

"I think when I grow up I want to be a horse trainer. What a fun life and so exciting. She gets to go to all the shows around the state, plus it's very satisfying to bring a talented pony along, don't you think?"

"When you grow up you can be anything you want to be, sweetie. What happened to being a physicist like your dad?"

Sara laughed. "Well, I can't do that. No matter what else I end up doing, I always want to have horses and show, so I'll have to be careful I don't get involved in a job like daddy has." She laughed, tossing a flake of hay to Star. "Got to get your priorities right and he works much too hard. Maybe I'll be a vet."

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Grinning, Candace gathered the grooming box and a bag of carrots and followed Sara back into the stall. They continued to chat as they brushed the immaculate pony.

On the other side of the aisle, resting against a bale of hay, Sadie watched the fence line where she'd first encountered Tom. No longer interested in mice, she had her eyes peeled for two-legged prey. Her ears flicked up and down and her gaze shifted equally between Candace and Sara while she watched for the dangerous stranger. Unlike Juan or Mrs. Hodges, who were accepted household members just like the horses, Sadie knew that stranger was bad.

## *Chapter 4*

In order to get a better view of the entry gates and avoid detection at the same time, Tom drove the van across the street and down a short distance on a dirt fire road, carefully screening himself from sight behind a thick clump of oleanders. Although obscured from the road, his position allowed clear scrutiny of the entry gates and driveway.

His breathing returned to normal, but his acid reflux continued to churn. He pulled a bottle of Maalox from his glove box and took a swig, then another, and forced himself to relax. He put the bottle back in the box and removed a small handgun. It was loaded, but he checked again anyway, just to be sure.

*So much for the mutt.*

He turned it over in his hands several times, then tucked it in his pocket and gazed around, fearful, agitated. There had to be a way to get onto the estate. Once he figured that out, she was his, but the question needed to be solved quickly.

The sounds of engines climbing the hill grabbed his attention and he slid lower in the seat. Amazed, he watched a black Lincoln Towne car crest the hill and follow a little white BMW convertible to the turnaround on the property adjacent to the Baker estate. They parked in the spot he'd been using for the past several days and vacated not five minutes ago. The thought of getting caught before he even had a chance to get to Candace caused Tom to shiver.

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Imagining them arriving earlier and catching him just sitting there like that, parked where he had no business being, would have brought the cops. This was not an area where people just pulled over to the side of the road to rest. He would need an explanation, which he didn't have ... his plans would be ruined. They'd send him back and he'd never see her again. He couldn't let that happen.

The small, art deco sign on the BMW's door said *Bel Air Realty*. An attractive woman in her mid-fifties wearing a beige cotton skirt and a short-sleeved pink and white blouse hopped out of the car. She slipped off a pair of high heels, exchanged them for walking shoes, and placed the heels on the floorboard of her car. Clipboard in hand, she approached the men and proceeded to point in a variety of directions, including the Baker estate. She made a beckoning motion with her finger and led them down the length of the dividing fence, disappearing from Tom's view for a short while.

They reemerged shortly and the men, dressed in business suits, picked their way back up the trail with care, trying to avoid snagging their clothing on the weeds and jagged plant tops. They nodded periodically at the woman, glancing in whatever direction she pointed.

They followed her up the road to the farthest boundary of the property and stopped next to the metal barrier that signaled the road's end. As they walked back down the hill to the corner of the Baker's fence, snatches of unintelligible conversation floated across the street to Tom.

Before long one of the men reached into his pocket, wrote on a long slip of paper and handed it to the woman. Smile wide, she extended her hand, shook with both men, pulled the *for sale* sign out of the ground and put it in her trunk. Moments later the little car turned around and drove back down the hill.

The men gazed at the Baker property, checking out the area surrounding the land they'd obviously just purchased. They talked for a bit, then walked to the trunk of their car, raised the

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lid and pulled out overalls from a large black bag. They stepped into the protective uniforms and walked back along the fence line again, disappearing from sight.

Mystified, Tom watched them retrace their steps back down the path. *What the hell is going on? Okay, they bought the property and now they're inspecting it. But they'd already walked down that path. Why are they interested in seeing the fence again? What are they looking for? Why not check out the far section of the property instead of retracing their previous path?*

While Tom mulled that quandary over in his head, he heard the distinctive sound of a diesel engine climbing the hill. The same white truck and horse trailer that had left earlier that morning swung wide to the left side of the road and then stopped by the gate. A slender arm reached out the open window, pressed several numbers on the keypad and the gate started to open.

Presented with a perfect opportunity and left with no time to think it over, Tom jumped out of the van and scooted through the shrubbery. He crossed the road and stood right behind the middle of the trailer. Thus invisible to either the driver or the camera that filmed the entrance, he moved along with the vehicle. The moment he came even with the gate, he darted into the heavy shrubbery that lined the interior fence and disappeared. He never saw the men crest the rise, but they saw him.

“What the hell was that?” Dimitri Kosaloff shrugged at his companion, Anton Chesky. “Do my eyes deceive or did someone just run in behind horse carrier?”

“I saw it, too. What do you make of it? Do we have competition already? How many people can know of the breakthrough this quickly?”

The taller man shrugged again. “If that is the case, Anton, it does not bode well for us. We must get formula at all costs.”

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Dimitri pulled his cell phone from his pocket, dialed, and waited a moment. Speaking in rapid Russian and nodding several times, he grimaced and pursed his lips. He closed the cell with a flick and slipped it back into his pocket.

“So far there is no buzz. Control maintains we are only ones aware of imminence of breakthrough.”

“Then what did we just see? A man sneaks onto Baker estate and immediately hides in shrubbery? What it can mean? Obviously this is not welcome guest.”

“I am not sure, Anton. I know what we saw, but the significance, who can say? These crazy Americans do many strange things.” They stood near their car, hesitating, unsure what to do next.

“This was more than strange,” the older man said. “I have feeling Control might be wrong. It would not be first time, comrade. Do we take him out before he messes up plans or do we wait and see what he does next?”

Dimitri shrugged and pursed his lips. An expression of trepidation wreathed his dark face. “This is not good, not part of plan. Whatever we do it must be clean, no mistakes, no police. For moment we watch, we wait. Things get crazy....” He pointed at his temple, made quick circles then pulled the imaginary trigger.

They nodded at each other, turned and walked back to the car. Once inside, Dimitri unlocked the glove box, removed two handguns, two silencers and an unusual remote control device.

Anton opened a black leather duffle bag and pulled out a pair of wire cutters and heavy gloves and stuffed them in his pocket. Their plan, cut through the fence where the foliage grew thick but passable. They tucked their guns into the holsters under their arms and got out of the car.

Now the role of happy new landowners became their cover as they continued with their elaborate charade. They walked to the corner of the fence, gesturing at the existing trees and shrubs as though deciding which to keep, what type of house

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to build. When the occasion required, they lapsed into Russian, but for the most part, they played to their audience. They had no idea who he was or what he wanted, but he could not be allowed to get in their way.

“This stretch here may be best. Those shrubs with red flowers have thorns, very sharp. These, not so much. We could cut and not be seen inside estate or from road. It is good place.”

Anton nodded. “True. And still close enough to car for easy escape.”

“Then is agreed. Tonight, when dark comes, we do it. And strange man in front bushes? We get him now.” Dimitri patted his holster.

\* \* \*

Tom lay in the dirt, afraid to breathe, afraid to move. *Okay, so you're finally inside. Now what?* His mind in a psychotic whirl, he vacillated between his fear of being discovered and sent back to the hospital and his anticipation of a deadly and unavoidably noisy confrontation with the dog. It would surely expose his position and bring the police no matter how it went down. Either eventuality would be his undoing and he knew it. He could not possibly shoot the dog without drawing attention to his presence, and if they caught him, his life was over. And what would happen if he just wounded the damned thing and only pissed it off real good? It was big enough to kill him and that was its intent, no doubt about it.

The warm afternoon sun lulled the insects, the woodland creatures napped in their dens and burrows and even the birds did not lift their voices in song. Eyes focused on the exterior of the house, Tom crawled along the perimeter of the fence, systematically peering out of the foliage for signs of Candace, that lousy kid, and any hint that the damned dog was about to pounce upon him.

On the downside of the hill, to the right of the Baker land, he knew a huge A-framed house nestled beneath tall trees.

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It could not be seen from the road, but his investigation of the back fence bordering the entire neighborhood showed a large and obviously vacant property. In this endless week of surveillance, he'd never seen a car come in or out and no lights shone on any part of the property, not even the normal exterior ornamental lighting so common to the area. He concluded the house was empty and confident he would not be observed, he got to his feet and hurried down the fence line.

The sounds of voices came to him, accompanied by light, tinkling laughter. He peeked from behind a thick palm tree, eyes darting from side to side. Finally, he located the sounds.

Two women and several children lounged around the concrete deck of a rectangular swimming pool. One of the girls perched at the top of the slide and waved at the kids in the water. Shrieking, she gave a hard push and flew down the silvery sheet of metal, landing in the water with a resounding splash.

Candace sat with her back to him, only her blonde hair visible above the chair. A dark haired woman of compact build sat next to her. Their conversation, languid as befitting the warm afternoon, came to him in snatches.

"I think a late afternoon ride will be great fun; the kids sure are excited about it." Jane stretched her arms high over her head. "Campouts are always a ball. I remember the fun we had doing that when we were kids."

"I'm glad you and Betsy could join us, and isn't little Shelly just a doll. It's so nice they all get along so well."

"God bless pony club." Jane chuckled, shading her eyes to watch the kids sitting on top of the slide like a train, arms locked around waists, legs straight out. They rocked their upper bodies in unison, building momentum.

"Go!" Sara screamed. Locked together, they tore down the slide and into the water, laughing with delight.

Candace and Jane shrugged as the kids jumped out of the pool and started climbing the ladder again.

"Oh, man, were we ever that young?"

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“Or energetic?”

Watching the kids playing in the pool made the reflux boil again and Tom grabbed his stomach in pain. Caught up in painful memories and unable to forget the past, he gagged

*She never plays with me like that, never smiles at me in love. When was the last time she hugged me? And yet, that kid, that Sara bitch, all soaking wet, just plopped down on her lap, laughing, and she got a hug. A big one. Bitch.*

Tears of fury glazed his eyes and he jammed a filthy fist into his mouth to keep from screaming. *That kid is frickin' history, her and that miserable dog. She gets all the attention. Well, not any more, not after tonight. I'll get all the attention then and she'll be dead, nothing but a memory or a bad dream.*

Consumed with jealousy and hatred, he turned away, unable to watch any longer. He buried his face in his elbow and sobbed like a child.

\* \* \*

Dimitri started at the bottom of the fence and with quick, twisting motions, cut through the barrier, following the post up to about five feet in height. The sharp metal bolt cutters sliced through the chain link with ease.

The men brushed away the accumulated leaves and dirt that gathered at the base and rocking the chain link back and forth, worked it free of the ground.

“We should cut across top too, make it easier in case we must leave in hurry.”

Anton nodded and they resumed their work, quickly cutting through the strands of chain link. With their task completed, the fence sagged, allowing them to gain easy access to the property.

“First, we find that man and take him out.”

Anton snapped the silencer on his gun and nodding, followed Dimitri down to the bottom of the property. The barn

## *COLD FUSION*

and its inhabitants slept in the late afternoon sun, somnolent, peaceful.

The men made slow, cautious progress across the bottom of the property, eyes searching the shrubbery for their quarry. The line ended at right angles and proceeded up the slope, ending at the top of the road.

Unlike the back side of the property that led to the woods and the riding trails beyond, the landscape here consisted mostly of clipped oleanders and large, towering palms. Bender board separated the garden from the lawn, undulating in clever patterns and clearly visible from house and pool.

Lush, fragrant flowers perfumed the whole area, beguiling the bees that wove in and out of the blossoms seeking nectar. Hummingbirds floated on the air, kissing the buds.

Anton slowed his pace to a crawl, eyes searching the bushes for Tom. He peeked around the corner of a tree, and there, flat on his stomach under the oleanders, was his man. Dimitri stopped in his tracks as Anton, gun drawn, approached to within five feet of the man, who whirled at the sound of a snapping twig. Anton shot him twice in the forehead. Tom collapsed on his back, eyes and mouth wide open.

Dimitri frisked the body, withdrawing a wallet and keys while Anton unscrewed the silencer and slid it and the gun into his holster. They turned and retraced their steps back to their car and waited for night to fall.

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## *Chapter 5*

Candace and Jane sat on the veranda, enjoying a glass of wine and a small plate of cold appetizers, thanks to Mrs. Hodges.

They'd washed up after their trail ride, exchanging their breeches and tall boots for shorts and tennies, trim tanned legs stretched out before them on chaise lounges. As the sun began to set, thoughts turned to dinner and the barbecue they planned with the kids.

The girls had remained at the barn to clean their tack and help Juan feed the horses.

Sadie seemed to enjoy the trail ride as much as the kids and now slept on one of her many rugs, curled near Candace's feet and snoring lightly.

"That little Star is just a darling, isn't she? Sara says she has a dreamy trot. She sure is well behaved on the trails."

"Ha, that was her life before I picked her up. I don't think her other family ever did anything else with her. They had three little girls and they all rode her. I felt so sorry for them. It's terrible when your finances tank so bad you have to sell your kid's pet. I got her so cheap, if I get the price I think she'll bring, I'm going to send them a check. The one little girl just sobbed her eyes out."

"Ah, that's so sad. This economy being the way it is, I'm afraid we'll be seeing a lot of horses selling for cheap. And aren't you a doll to do that?"

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"It's good karma, I think. So, where's Arnie off to this time?" Jane asked, a wide smile lighting her face. "Europe, you said?"

"Yeah, he and his assistant are poised on some threshold of discovery and need funding. Big, huge bucks."

"What are they about to discover?"

Candace snorted. "Good Lord, I haven't a clue. He never tells me anything about his work. Everything he does is all top secret. He says it wouldn't matter anyway, because I wouldn't understand it unless I morphed into a nuclear physicist. He works with all these super technical procedures. Green stuff, he calls it."

"Money?" Jane popped an olive in her mouth, giggling.

"Who knows? I'm always in the dark. Tell the truth, it gets kind of embarrassing not knowing what your husband does for a living." She stared at her best friend, face suddenly strained. "I'm not complaining, Jane, don't get me wrong. We have a wonderful marriage. I couldn't be happier and I know he feels the same. We adore Sara, our home life is idyllic, but you have to admit it's strange when your husband goes to work every day and you have no idea, no *real* idea what he does." She twisted the large diamond on her finger and shrugged.

"I mean, like what does a nuclear physicist do? Sometimes when he goes away like this, I don't believe him ... at least I don't believe he's where he says he is. Like this latest trip, where he's supposed to be going to Europe for funding? That's ridiculous and we both know it. He knows I don't believe him, but we never talk about it. Give me a break, his company works for the Federal Government. Who has more money than the Feds?"

"You can't be serious. Are you saying you think he's cheating on you?"

"Oh, God, no, not at all. I just said our marriage is solid. It's whatever is going on at work. He spends so much time at the lab we feel left out and even when he's home, he's preoccupied. Sometimes I think he's scared, at least quite worried, especially

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this last couple of months or so. Sara and I get lonely, and yet I don't feel I can really complain because I knew this going in. His job has to be his priority. I just wish I knew what it was. Plus, you have to admit ...." She waved her hand, taking in the house, barn and pool.

Jane shrugged and took another sip of her wine. "This is nothing new, his being a workaholic, but I've never heard you talk this way before. You sound really worried."

With a deep sign, Candace brought Jane up to speed on their experience with the stalker.

"Good grief, no wonder you want to stay close to home and it certainly explains the dog, too. When I first saw her, I just about fell over, especially knowing how you feel about big dogs. Sara sure is a little trooper. I never had a clue she was scared about anything."

"You know kids, they're invincible. She just doesn't want *me* to worry. And truthfully, now that we have Sadie here, I feel a lot safer. The security people are good and we even have a safe room, so no, I'm not worried, not really. I just would be a lot happier with Arnie home."

"A week goes by pretty quickly. I'm sure he'll be back before you know it and I'm right down the street. You can count on me, you know that."

\* \* \*

Dimitri and Anton relaxed behind the darkly tinted windows of the Lincoln. They ate fried chicken from a local fast food restaurant and swigged down bottles of beer. They listened to the radio, waiting for night to fall.

Dressed in black from head to foot, ski masks concealing their faces, they stepped out of the car. Along with his handgun, Dimitri carried half a dozen stout plastic cable ties, a small bottle of chloroform and a sponge. Anton hefted the flashlight and nodded

## *COLD FUSION*

They made their way down the fence line, invisible in the dark night.

\* \* \*

Sara grinned at her mother as she and her friends trooped back up from the barn where they'd helped Juan feed and water the horses. They crossed the veranda, laughing, and snagged containers of soda from the tub of ice.

"Star is settling in nicely, Mom. I think she has a crush on Thumper. She keeps snickering at him and lifting her lip." She gave an exhibition, then chuckled and hugged her mom tight. "That sure was a fun day. I'm starved. We smelled the grill clear down at the barn. What are we having for dinner?"

"Oh, all your favorites. Corn on the cob, fruit salad and steak. You got back just in time." Candace made an exaggerated sniff and licked her lips. "Mrs. Hodges just threw the steaks on the grill. Go on in and wash your hands, girls. Dinner won't be long."

They sat at the long trestle table, enjoying their meal. After a day of high physical activity, including romping in the pool and an hour-long trail ride, followed by the heavy dinner, the girls' heads began to nod.

Sadie curled up on a rug, watching her new god with adoration and gently accepting steak scraps. Whenever Candace laughed, the dog's stumpy tail made happy little circles.

"Mom, can we do some sparklers before we go to bed? That'd be so much fun."

Candace shrugged and glanced at Jane. "That all right with you?"

"Oh sure, you're talking about the ones like you have for the July Fourth celebration, right? No problem. I just hate the ones that fly around. Especially here." She glanced at the trees and heavy underbrush. "We'd be toasted in seconds."

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“Okay,” Candace said to the kids as she got to her feet. “One each, but that’s all. Deal?”

“Deal,” the girls said in chorus, yawning.

As always, Sadie followed Candace into the house. They walked into the kitchen where she opened a drawer and after rummaging around, removed a package of sparklers. While she pulled out the sticks, Sadie went into the mud room for a sip of water and a couple of bites of food.

Just then, the phone rang, further distracting Candace, who hoped the call might be from Arnie. Her excited hello garnered no response. The obvious wrong number made her frown, but she couldn’t help wondering if the stalker might have been on the other end of the line. The silence as she listened for a reply was unnerving. She hung up, absentmindedly stuffed the package back into the drawer and walked across the floor to the door.

Although she knew in the back of her mind that Sadie had followed her into the house, she forgot as she went back out to the veranda. Shutting the door behind her, she called out to the girls, “Okay, we have to go out on the grass to do this.”

They trooped down the steps to the sprawling, rolling lawn that skirted the woods and led to the pasture.

The girls held the sparklers at arm’s length while Candace lit the tips. Keeping plenty of distance between them, they made sweeping motions through the air, some fast, some slow, leaving intriguing trails of light in their wake. Squeals of delight along with appropriate vocal appreciation filled the night.

Sadie heard the door close and trotted across the kitchen, whining under her breath. When no one answered the whine, she barked. She barked again, cocking her head, trying to catch sounds, some sign of Candace’s whereabouts.

She rose on her hind legs and looked out the window. No one was in sight. The dog turned on her heels and trotted through the house, her nails clicking on the slippery marble floors. She charged up the curving staircase toward Candace’s

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bedroom. The door stood open and she hurried to the French doors, butting them several times with her nose. When they wouldn't give she slammed them hard with her forehead and they bounced apart. Inserting her snout in the crack she shoved the door open and hurried onto the patio.

Far below her she saw Candace standing by the edge of the woods, watching the kids play. In a blink, someone jumped out of the bushes, grabbed Candace's face and pulled her into the dark shadows. The kids continued to play with the sparklers, unaware of what had just transpired.

Sadie gave a sharp bark of anger and raced back across the room. She bounded down the stairs, snarling under her breath. Skidding slightly as she made the turn, she hit top speed as she approached the back door.

Jane walked across the veranda, headed for the restroom and another glass of wine. She opened the door in time to be mowed over by a frantic black shape. She hit the flagstone floor hard, banging her hip on the door along with the back of her head when she landed. Stunned, she lay where she fell.

Forgetting the stairs the dog raced across the veranda, leapt off the edge to the grass ten feet below and landed in stride. She never missed a beat as she ran to the last place she saw Candace. Clods of grass flew as she dug into the turf.

Sara saw the dog charge across the lawn out of the corner of her eye. She turned to her friends and said, "Be sure not to let Sadie touch the sparklers." Amazed, she watched as the dog bounded past her into the bushes and disappeared.

"Mom?" she called, glancing around. She turned to her friends. "Did you see where my mom went?"

Betsy shrugged, making quick circles in the air with her sparkler. "I didn't see your mom leave or anything, but I heard my mom tell her she needed to use the restroom. Maybe she followed her up to the house."

Sara shook her head. "Nah, she would never leave us here alone with these guys." She nodded at the sparklers and

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shrugged. “Sadie’s on a tear about something. She just ran into the bushes.”

The dog hit the fence in time to hear car doors slamming. Redoubling her frantic efforts, she crashed through the hole and raced up the hill. Dimitri had just closed his door when seventy pounds of furious Doberman hit his window. The car rocked, the engine caught and they began to move.

Unable to do anything else, Sadie jumped on the trunk of the car, scratching feverishly at the back window, finally losing her balance as it rounded the turn and tore down the road. She slipped off the car, following it until the taillights disappeared around the curve. Disconsolate, she sat in the middle of the road and began to howl.

## Chapter 6

The film ended and the ceiling lights came up. Arnie Baker approached the podium as the host speaker introduced him, reciting his credentials and bona fides. Properly impressed, the members of the committee murmured in approval as the host touted his qualifications.

On the table before each member lay a black binder with his or her name on it. Under each name screamed the words *EYES ONLY*.

Arnie smiled. "After watching that film, I'm sure there are questions. Please." He nodded at a portly gentleman at the front table. "What is your question, sir?"

The man introduced himself, identifying his company and the country he represented. "So basically, in words of one syllable, you want us to believe you've discovered a way to build a reliable nuclear fusion reactor that could be reconfigured to serve in business and industry? That eventually, smaller models could be available for the home?" He leaned over a moment, scanned the documents before him and shook his head. "Ridiculous."

A light, disbelieving chuckle rippled across the room. Heads cocked, eyebrows elevated, shoulders shrugged.

Arnold Baker laughed as well, turning the jab to his advantage. "Yes, indeed, Dr. Evanston, that's exactly what I'm saying. And it is unbelievable, I grant you. I can hardly believe it

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myself. Nonetheless, it's true." He picked up the binder on the podium before him and flipped through it.

"In front of you is a full report of our experiments spanning the last three years. Please turn to page four and take a moment to read the findings. It's complete with printouts of the results of all our tests. Please don't rush. I'll wait."

The committee did as asked. Slow murmurs rose and fell as they read the conclusions of exhaustive tests performed in every conceivable condition, including sub-zero temperatures.

Arnie accurately interpreted the expressions on their faces and smiled once again. "Conclusive beyond any margin of error and I can say unequivocally that we now have the means to become energy independent. Implementation of the process could begin in eighteen months."

Subtle, controlled chaos broke out in the room as the impact of his words hit them. Whispers escalated.

The Chairman of MARDEX, the company hosting the meeting, cleared his throat and tapped the report with his index finger. "Can you break this down a bit, put it in non-scientific terms?"

"I'd be glad to, Mr. Fischer. The references here to He-3, helium-3, are key to understanding the process. By today's estimates, very indulgent estimates, I might add, the United States requires forty metric tons of He-3 to match the present uses of the power grid for the entire country for one year. Now just imagine what that means, the changes that will bring about."

He paused dramatically, eyes searching the faces of the men and women who held his future in their hands ... his, theirs and the rest of the world's.

"We can achieve that in eighteen months on a first-time basis. As with everything else, experience and new, more efficient equipment will improve our productivity exponentially. Where could we be in ten years? I would venture to say that in three months, we could mine our energy needs for the entire country for a year."

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Arnie glanced around the room, rightfully smug. “The United States and her allies will be energy independent and if we so choose, we can make the rest of the world independent as well.”

The Ambassador from Canada spoke. “It sounds like you’re talking about the end of the stranglehold OPEC has on the world energy market. They aren’t going to be happy when they find out about this.”

“It won’t just be OPEC. Our friends in Venezuela will not be amused.” Mr. Fischer beetled his brows a moment, a small smile parting his lips.

“Or Russia,” said another.

Arnie nodded, a grave expression on his face. “No, they certainly won’t and that’s why this meeting is top secret. They might even consider it worth going to war over, but it doesn’t really matter; they can’t stop it.”

“Dr. Baker, how much He-3 does the moon have and how long will it take us to deplete the available source?”

“The supply is infinite. We won’t run out in what is considered the foreseeable future, but even if we did, it’s so *far* into the future, by the time the supply was depleted, we’d be in a position to mine the other planets, which also have limitless amounts of He-3.”

A buzz rippled across the room as the words sunk in.

“What will it cost?”

“Billions, no doubt about it.” Arnie glanced around the room, head tilted to one side. “Nothing this valuable ever comes easy or cheap. Multiple millions have already been spent to reach this point. Both private investment and government funding is needed for such a monumental undertaking, but think of the rewards. Leaving out every other advantage, we will no longer deposit billions of dollars each year into our enemy’s treasury.”

As the truth of his statements hit home, the attendees began to buzz with excitement. They leaned toward Arnie, poised, waiting for each word like it were a precious jewel.

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“For seventy years we’ve supported our mutual enemies in their goal of world dominance. Through our need, we’ve enabled them to become so powerful they are now a threat to global security. Their desire to inflict their religion and their system of government on the world is a well-known fact. They are close to realizing their vision of world supremacy and we have less than a decade to act. After that, nuclear war will be our only choice and there will be no winners then. Ending their hostilities, if nothing else, would justify the mission, but there are so many real benefits I hardly know where to begin. It will finally put to rest the fears regarding global warming, both real and perceived. Even the poorest most underdeveloped countries will be empowered by having access to cheap energy.”

“Does the President know of this?”

“Oh, yes, of course. The White House is up to speed on the entire undertaking. Their support level is total. The President is preparing to meet with several European heads of state next week in hopes of building a joint venture of mutual benefit.”

“Does your Congress know as well?”

“Congress? Not so much. Only hand-picked individuals such as yourselves with a vested interest in the success of the project, highest-ranking members of the Armed Services Committee, as well as the heads of DOD and DOE know, but the entire project is top secret. The whole enterprise could be jeopardized if the wrong people get involved and Congress is notorious for its lack of discretion when it comes to keeping secrets. Lobbyists run them for the most part, and those representing established energy providers have a strong motivation to scuttle the project. As you can well imagine, numerous factions exist with agendas that do not work well with cheap energy, nor do they operate in the best interests of the United States and her allies.”

Arnie picked up his water glass and swallowed several times, using the break to read some faces and get an idea of the reception thus far. He hid his smile behind another sip of water and then glanced at the assembled body. “Has it occurred to

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anyone to consider the impact of a twenty-five cent per gallon gas price?"

"A quarter a gallon?"

"Impossible!"

Murmurs rippled through the room.

Arnie nodded. "It wouldn't be gasoline, of course, but He-3 will run cars, planes, machinery, industrial plants. They'll all be He-3 powered and run clean, producing a zero negative impact on the ecosystem of the world. The applications are universal. No more pollution, no more coal, no more oil rigs off our coastlines, no unsightly windmills dotting the deserts ... just inexpensive power run through existing plants that are modified for He-3."

A hum filled the room as the assemblage began to absorb the fiscal impact of his words. Eyes wide, they shook their heads back and forth at the seeming impossibility of the mission.

A woman in a dark business suit spoke up. "Isn't there any He-3 on earth? Nowhere closer, easier to access than the moon? I take it there's virtually none on our planet."

"The moon is the closest available source at this time, Ms. Weingold." Arnie nodded, lips pursed. "There isn't enough He-3 on earth to matter, but the way is already paved for lunar mining and it won't be as difficult as it might sound. The United States alone has three space shuttles capable of bringing back a payload of twenty-five tons of He-3, each. One trip per *year* per ship would provide more than half the power required for every home, farm and small business in the United States. Two trips per year would power all U.S. industrial, governmental and manufacturing requirements with a good bit of excess to sell. Imagine what one trip each, per *month* could yield."

A ripple of questions swept through the assembly as they did the math.

"My recommendation is that the work be continuous and that additional shuttles be built, increasing the size of the existing fleet to cover the needs of all. We already have two

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more shuttles nearing completion. Think for a moment what that would mean to third-world countries.” He paused again to allow them to assimilate the information and then continued. “Five freighters, making two trips a quarter would bring back enough He-3 from the moon to give energy freedom to the entire world in under two years.” He paused for emphasis. “Imagine it.”

“How do we mine the moon, Dr. Baker?”

A small smile crept across Arnie’s lips. He wished Candace could savor the victory. He’d been holding back the best for last.

“On page twenty-nine, please see the final schematics and drawings pertaining to the mining equipment my team and I invented. We estimate the time it will take to send the shuttles to the moon, make whatever repairs are needed, mine the He-3, load it and return to Earth at a bit under three months. It is possible to mine enough He-3 to fill at least one shuttle fleet every three months, quite possibly more, depending on how many workers are dedicated to the projects.”

A man from NASA spoke up. “Each shuttle can carry up to six passengers. We could build another space station and devote it to housing the miners. That would increase production tenfold.”

Arnie nodded. “We have a prototype of the rig at our lab. We need at least two more, four would be better. Working round the clock in eight-hour shifts, I believe we could have two more rigs built and ready to go in a few months. From that point on, we would be on our way to economic freedom from fossil fuels. We could start using the He-3 upon the shuttle’s return.”

“In a time-frame of six months? That’s incredible, Dr. Baker, absolutely incredible.”

“How quickly could we retrofit existing machinery to be compatible with using He-3?”

“That depends solely upon the workforce involved. We anticipate less than three years for all necessary industrial retrofit to be implemented.”

“Can we do it? Realistically?”

## *COLD FUSION*

“We can do it.” Arnie nodded again. “Yes, we can. Are there any further questions?”

## *Chapter 7*

Sara hurried up the steps, Shelly and Betsy hot on her heels. She hardly noticed Jane sprawled against a chair leg as she charged across the veranda. “Mom! Are you here....” The door banged closed behind her. Voice raised almost to a shriek, Sara ran through the living room and up the steps to her mother’s bedroom. After a quick search, she hurried back down the stairs and through the kitchen to the veranda.

On the verge of tears, she joined the girls kneeling over Jane’s prone body, alarm on their faces.

Betsy bent over and reached out a shaking hand toward her mother’s shoulder. “Mommy, are you alright? What happened to you?”

Jane pulled herself from the floor with the help of the deck chair. Grimacing, she said, “I’m okay, sweetie, don’t you worry. Sadie just knocked me over a bit ago and I was kinda resting up. Did you see her? Where’s Candace?” She winced again, drawing a sharp gasp as she put weight on her hip.

“I don’t know,” Sara said, throwing her hands wide. “She was right there with us while we played with the sparklers. Then, like all of a sudden, I don’t know, here comes Sadie, tearing across the lawn like a bullet, and she just ran by us, y’know, and charged into the bushes and then we heard this car and now,” she pointed at the road with a shaking finger and shuddered. “Now listen! I know that’s her, that’s Sadie, and she’s supposed to take care of Mom and....” Sara burst into tears

## *COLD FUSION*

and threw herself on the chaise. “We have to call Mr. Sessions and we have to get Sadie back. That’s her crying, I just know it is.”

Jane opened both arms and shook her head. “Sara, come here sweetie. I’d come to you but my leg really hurts.”

Sara dashed a hand across her eyes and scurried to Jane’s side, wrapping her arms around the woman’s neck. Next to her parents, no one in Sara’s life offered more to her sense of safety and wellbeing than Jane.

“I have to go get Sadie back in the yard.” Tears filled her eyes and ran down her cheeks in rivulets. “I’ll be right back.” Resolute, Sara ran down the steps and up the driveway. She keyed in her code and the gates opened. Sadie sat in the middle of the road, just down from the gate, howling.

“Sadie?” she called. “Come.”

The dog rose, ears laced to her skull, body low. She approached the child, her mouth making a variety of sounds like nothing Sara had ever heard before. Sadie thrust a rude nose into the child’s hand and pushed, all the while wooing, chewing, growling and even giving an occasional snap as she narrated in the only way she could what had happened to Candace. As the repertoire reached its conclusion, the dog began to howl again.

“Oh, Sadie!” At her insistence, the dog followed the child and together they walked back down the driveway toward the house. As Sara approached the steps leading up to the veranda, the dog barked and continued toward the lawn where they’d played with the sparklers.

“Come, Sadie,” she called as she climbed the steps. “Here, girl.”

The dog ignored her, ran across the yard and disappeared into the woods as she had the last time. Soon, the sound of howling filled the air as Sadie resumed her place in the middle of the road.

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“Sessions and Browning, Private Investigators. The office is closed at this time. Please call back between the hours of eight and five and we’ll be happy to speak with you. If this is an emergency, please press four and leave a message at the tone. We will return the call shortly.”

Jane hit four and proceeded to leave her message. “Mr. Sessions, this is Jane Byron. You don’t know me, but I’m best friends with Candace Baker and she just disappeared out of the back yard and we don’t know what to do. We’re having a terrible time with her poor dog, Sadie. Evidently she saw something or is aware of what happened because she’s going ballistic. She’s sitting in the middle of the street and she’s really upset, howling, and it’s the most eerie, desolate sound I’ve ever heard and she ... she won’t let us approach her, not even Sara. When I tried, she showed her teeth and made really angry faces at me. Can you please give us a call? We’re at the Baker residence.”

The phone rang back almost immediately. “Ms. Byron? This is the exchange for Sessions and Browning. An emergency call has been put through, and you should be receiving a call back from one of the principals directly. A word of caution, please do not approach the dog.”

The phone rang the moment she replaced the receiver. “Hello?”

“Ms. Byron, this is Jim Sessions. What can I do to help you?”

“Mostly come over here and comfort that poor dog. She’s just sitting in the middle of the road howling and she snarls when we try to approach her. She won’t even respond to Sara and it’s just breaking my heart.”

“We’re driving there as we speak. Have you called the police? How long has Mrs. Baker been gone?”

“We don’t know exactly. Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes ... maybe thirty, I’m not sure. The kids were playing with some sparklers down in the back yard and Candace stayed nearby in case, y’know, and I came up to the house. I had to use the restroom and when I opened the door to the kitchen, that dog

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knocked me down on the patio ... ran right over the top of me, literally. She never really saw me. I landed on my can and just lay there a minute, gathering myself. She ran across the veranda, jumped down onto the lawn like a streak and disappeared into the woods. A little while later the kids came up, asking where Candace was. Well, she sure wasn't in the house, not the way the dog left. We got Sadie back inside the property once, but then she ran off again and now she's back on the road. I don't know what to do."

The dark blue SUV arrived first. Rudy hopped out of the car and called to the dog. Whimpering as though making excuses for something, Sadie charged. She hit him in the stomach and if he hadn't seen it coming, he'd have been flat on his back. He spread his feet, bent forward from the knee and hip and embraced her as she rose on her hind legs and hugged him.

Quick, sharp, angry sounds erupted from her throat, followed by a variety of growls, teeth snaps and one unearthly shriek.

"Oh, you poor little girl," he said as he watched her whirl in circles, trying to tell him something. "Ah, God, come here." He sat on the road while Sadie crawled all over him, just like when she was a puppy and wanted to play, only this time there was no play. When she couldn't get him to do what she wanted, she grabbed hold of the front of his shirt and jerked several times, tearing the fabric and popping two buttons.

"Okay, Sadie, that's it." He rose, stroked her head twice, pulled a short chain from his pocket and snapped it to her collar. "You need to go home and unwind."

The reluctant dog accompanied Rudy to the SUV and hopped into the back compartment. Ears back, eyes closed to slits, she looked over his shoulder, raised her muzzle again and howled.

Rudy pulled his cell out of his pocket and called Jim, telling him of the dog's actions. He hopped behind the wheel of

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the Suburban, hung a u-turn and drove down the road out of sight. Sadie howled all the way back to the training facility.

\* \* \*

“Jane, I’m so scared. That bad man got mommy, I just know he did. What’s he going to do with her? I want to talk with my daddy. I have the number ... can I call him?”

“Of course, Sara. When you’re done, let me talk to him for a minute, okay?”

Sara nodded as she hurried to the mud room and got her cell out of her My Little Pony purse hanging from the doorknob. She shook her head, lips trembling as she spoke. She put the cell back into the purse and turned to Jane. “I got voice mail. I told him to call home, but he’s on the way to Europe, so we might not hear from him for hours.” She began to cry again, shoulders shaking. “Where’s my mommy?”

\* \* \*

Another blue SUV stopped at the gates of the Baker estate. Jim reached for the call button.

“Hello?”

“It’s Jim Sessions here.”

The gates swung open and they drove down the drive to the front of the house. Before they could get out, Sara ran to them, face contorted in tears.

“Did you see Sadie? Now she’s gone, too. She’s not on the road any more. I called and called but she’s not there.”

“Rudy came and got her, Sara. It’s alright. He took her back to the farm so she could relax. She’s very upset right now.” He pulled his briefcase from the back compartment and opened the door.

Tony hopped out, eyes bright, nostrils twitching. He whined lightly under his breath and stared at Jim.

## COLD FUSION

Lenny approached Jane, hand outstretched. “Mrs. Byron? I’m Lenny Browning, and my partner, Jim Sessions.”

“Call me Jane, please. Let’s go around back and I’ll show you what little I know.” She turned and called over her shoulder, “Sara, can you go turn on all the outside lights and then run down to where you last saw your mom? I can’t walk that far.”

Jane led the way to the veranda, steps short, right leg dragging a bit.

“Are you okay?” Lenny asked.

“That poor dog. She knocked me for a loop. I’d just opened the kitchen door and she charged right over me. No doubt if I hadn’t opened it she’d have jumped right through the glass.”

“She must have been pretty agitated to do something like that,” Jim said.

“Well, *agitated* is one word. I think *frantic* would be better suited to her actions. She was absolutely hysterical.”

Floodlights in the trees as well as under the shrubbery cast eerie light around the yard. Jane remained on the patio while the kids led the way down to the lawn.

Tony sniffed the air from time to time and looked quizzically at Jim as if to say, *don’t you smell that?* He whined again and followed them to the middle of the back yard where another, different smell came to him.

“Okay, it was right about there, huh, Sara? That’s where she was when I left her.” Jane stood above them on the veranda and glanced down at the girls for agreement.

“Yes, we had sparklers and you have to keep your distance, so we ran all around here. Mom stayed over there, kinda.” Sara pointed at a place fifteen or twenty feet away. “That’s where she stood.”

Jim and Lenny walked toward the spot and Jim nodded. “Not ten feet from the woods. If she didn’t even scream, it had to happen fast. So fast the kids didn’t see it. Of course, they were preoccupied and it was dark, so that doesn’t mean much, but

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you'd think they'd have heard something. It's all the silence out here ... there's no competing noise."

Peering around the fresh cut grass, Lenny squatted on his haunches, swinging his flashlight around. "In the morning I want to check this area out better, see if we can see any signs of struggle. It's so dark now and the underbrush is so thick, I can't see anything in particular."

He rose and cast a quick glance at Tony then nudged Jim. "What's he doing?"

"God, that's a new one on me. It looks like he's pointing." Jim approached Tony, flashlight swinging around the general area that concerned the dog. It took him a moment to see the wedge of sponge nestled in the lawn a good ten feet from the dog.

"Hey, buddy, you got any gloves? I left mine behind."

Lenny removed several from his pocket and handed two to Jim. He bent closer, then jerked back. "Chloroform." He snapped the gloves in place, reached inside his jacket and pulled out what looked like a glass baby food jar.

Jim shook his head, always amazed at the contents of his partner's pockets. Lenny chuckled, turned away a moment, drew a deep breath and held it. He scooped the sponge into the jar, capped it, and then exhaled. "That can be some bad shit. Hope he knows what he's doing. Too much could kill her."

Jim pursed his lips, eyes narrowed. "After all our efforts, the bastard got her anyway. Once the sun comes up, let's go over every inch of this place."

Lenny flashed his light around the grass, hoping to find more evidence of what happened to Candace. "How do you figure the dog got locked in the house? We made it clear that Sadie should stay with Candace at all times." He heaved a sigh and shrugged. "We need to call the cops if Jane hasn't done it already. They won't be able to do a damned thing out here until the sun comes up, but I want to get them this sponge so they can send it to the lab. It's still quite potent."

## *COLD FUSION*

“Let’s go back up to the house and talk with Jane for a minute. Then I’m for getting some shuteye and returning at sunup.”

Jane sat at the kitchen counter with Sara and Betsy, sipping hot chocolate. She nodded at the men as they came in the door.

“I just talked to the police, gave them a missing person’s report. Since there was no sign of foul play, they won’t be over until morning.” She glanced at the girls then back at Jim, intercepting a covert stare between the men. She shivered and paused a moment. “We planned to have a sleepover here tonight, but I’m wondering if it might not be best if I take the girls back to my house. Her dad’s in mid-flight to Europe and Sara can’t reach him. I know we’ll get to talk to him tomorrow, for sure, but right now ... would that be alright? We’ll be back first thing; seven sharp. I’ll have the gates open.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me. Please write your access code for the gate. We’ll be back early as well, possibly before you get here.”

Jane and the girls piled into the truck and proceeded up the driveway. Jim and Lenny followed them through the gate. It swung closed and locked behind them.

“Why didn’t you tell them we found the sponge?”

Jim shrugged. “I didn’t want to scare the kids any more than they already were.”

“I guess that makes sense. Can we swing by the Brentwood Station, let me give the sponge to the Watch Commander?”

“Sure, no sweat. It’s their jurisdiction, might as well make it easy.” Jim glanced over at Lenny, a smile quirking his lips. “Ya missing the old home turf?”

“Yeah, like a bad rash. The sponge should make a difference right off the bat as to how they handle this. We get a call like Jane’s that an adult takes off with no violence and no notes and we don’t put it on top of the list. Those folks have a

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way of showing up in places they don't want to be found and then we have a harassment problem. On the other hand, now we have evidence of violence and a kidnapping, not a missing adult. We gotta set them on the right track."

"What're ya gonna do if you see Captain Carpelli?" he asked, referring to Lenny's nemesis.

"Grin at him," Lenny replied as they pulled to a stop in front of the precinct door. "It's not likely he'll be here at this hour so I won't be long."

Lenny ran up the steps and into the lobby, returning in less than five minutes.

"Man, that got some action. They're all fired up now. It's going to be a busy morning at the Baker estate."

Jim glanced at him as they pulled away from the curb. "Are you going to bring Cricket tomorrow? It's obvious they left in a car, but it might tell us something if we know where they parked."

"Oh, yeah, this is perfect for her. I have to bring Terry with me as well. I promised I'd take her into town for lunch. We have reservations at Big Sur Bistro at one. I think she's tired of Ella's place." He chuckled. "Imagine that, she wants a change of scene."

"Ha. More likely she's on a fact-finding spy expedition for Ella. Ever since they won that award last month, I mean, they're rabid. I took Ella up to Le Belle last Sunday for a nice, romantic brunch and there she was, walking around the serving tables and giving a running commentary, just talking away into this little tape recorder about the food and presentation. She could hardly wait to get home and share her findings with Chef. Talk about workaholics."

Lenny patted his stomach. "Yeah, life's rough."

\* \* \*

Good to her word, Jane had the gates open by seven, but the cops beat her to the estate by more than an hour. Following

## *COLD FUSION*

Lenny's information and utilizing his gate code, they'd searched the area where Candace was last seen, even though it was still dark. They turned up nothing more and returned to the precinct to await results from the sponge.

One lone police cruiser remained parked in the driveway while two uniformed cops prowled around the property with Jane, about to search the woods.

Jim stopped the SUV behind the cruiser, opened the door and let Tony out. The moment the dog hit the ground, he turned toward the far side of the property, his muzzle raised. He caught the smell again, stronger this time. Whining softly, he drew deep breaths, and turning on his heels, barked at Jim several times and darted into the bushes. It wasn't long before he found the source of the odor. He barked in sharp, staccato bursts, calling attention to his find.

"Oh, shit." Jim took one look at what was left of Tom's face and turned away. He made his way back to the driveway where another patrol car rolled to a stop, two new cops talking into their radio. "We have a new problem, gentlemen. I just discovered a dead body and I'm pretty sure it's our stalker."

"You found a what?"

"A dead body. My dog found it, actually. Follow me and I'll show you."

"What stalker and who are you?"

Jim handed the younger cop a business card. "We've been working this case for over two weeks. The missing woman has been stalked by a man whose description matches the deceased. I figured at first that he kidnapped her, but obviously I'm wrong. He's been dead longer than she's been gone."

The cops followed Jim as he led the way back across the lawn toward the bushes. He called the dog to his side and pointed deeper in the shrubbery. Both cops stepped closer to the body, took one look and stepped back.

"Holy shit," said the younger one, face the color of old cheese. "What a mess."

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The other cop pulled his walkie-talkie off his shoulder and called for backup, including someone from forensics and the ME's office.

Jim saw the red Jag crest the top of the drive and turned to the officer nearest him. "My partner just arrived and he has a dog with him that can track. We're going to see if she can find out where they parked before they took Candace."

"I'll go with you," the younger cop said with a grimace and a glance over his shoulder.

The other cop nodded. "I'll wait here for the ME to check in."

Cricket sat in the back seat of the Jag, looking around the estate with interest. She'd caught the smell of death as they drove in. Her stubby tail made small circles as she saw Tony. She jumped out of the car at Lenny's signal and gave Tony a nose.

"Oh, man," Jim said, "you are not gonna frickin' believe this. We just found the body of what I'm sure was the stalker. They shot him execution-style, two to the forehead."

"Son of a bitch. Who shot ... you're sure it's our stalker?"

"From Candace's description, as well as the composite sketch the artist did, I'd say 90%."

"Well, if that's our stalker, and you're pretty sure it is, then who the hell snatched her? We don't have dual stalkers. Not a chance, my friend. They don't work that way at all. Stalkers are loners, we know that for sure. So, if this dude *is* the stalker, what the hell's going on ... who's got her?"

"Has anyone heard from Arnie? I mean, this 'going to Europe' excuse is wearing a bit thin." Jim glanced at Lenny, an odd expression on his face. "You know, I have no numbers for him but his cell and the house. I don't have any idea where he works, what he does. We need to get some background on this guy."

## *COLD FUSION*

Lenny nodded. "Jane is the best one to ask. Let's see what she knows."

Jim waved as they came across the lawn. "Jane, can we talk with you a minute?"

"Of course, Jim. What's up?"

"We just found the body of what we're pretty sure is the man who stalked Candace. Now, if that's him, our stalker is dead which means someone else got her. Where's Arnie?"

The color drained from her face, leaving her expression pinched, lips quivering. "You just found a body? Here? Dear God, here on the property? Then where in the world is Candace?" Jane lapsed into thought for a moment and then nodded in response to the question. "Arnie's in Europe. At least, that's what he told Candace, although she didn't believe him. He's trying to put together funding for some super top secret project he's working on. He needs money for grants or something to get a project he's working on off the ground."

"Do you know what he does?"

"He's a nuclear engineer, a physicist; he works for Endyme, but other than that, not much. His work is super top secret. Even Candace complains that she doesn't know what he does when he leaves for work."

"You have the names of any co-workers, people who work with him?"

"Dan Knoff is his assistant. He's the only one I know of. Candace mentioned him once or twice, but I've never met him."

"No one else? Where's Endyme, do you know?"

"It's somewhere in town but I don't know where."

"We have to know, Jane." Jim stared at her.

She shrugged.

"You did check the house, right?"

Jane nodded several times. "After I called you, the girls checked the barn and every room in the house. She's gone, Mr. Sessions. That's the only thing I know for sure. That and the behavior of the dog."

## GAYLE FARMER

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Lenny stood by the edge of the veranda holding a deep blue sweater. He gave Cricket a command and offered it to her to smell. The Doberman sniffed several times in quick succession then held her breath, her mouth slightly open as though tasting the aroma. She gave a light whine and stared up at Lenny, topaz eyes wide with interest. He reached for her, stroked the dark chestnut head once and removed her collar. "Go find."

Cricket hurried down the steps, nose just above the ground. She trotted along the path and onto the lawn where she began coursing, zigzagging, finally making her way to the spot where Sara last saw her mother.

The dog stopped, cast about snuffling, and bounced into the woods. She stopped about four feet in, cast about again in ever widening circles and headed for the perimeter fence. Another hesitation, a recast and she darted through the formerly unseen hole in the chain link.

The dog sat on the other side of the fence, waiting for Lenny to catch up. She gave a short sharp bark and stared at him, indicating that she had lost the track.

Jim took one look at the dog and shook his head. "I bet once they could stand upright they carried Candace the rest of the way. Send her out again and see what she comes up with. I'm going up the hill next to the fence here. No doubt it's the same trail they took."

Lenny snapped his fingers, made a fist with his right hand, extended his index finger and pointed in a sweeping motion. "Go find."

Cricket began to course the area much as she had earlier. The rough underbrush inhibited her flow, and several times she had to jump over the trunks of large fallen trees, dodging huge clumps of landscape debris.

The men made their way to the top of the hill and the clearing near the road. The dog picked up speed as she extended

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her gait. Red coat aglow in the morning sun, she moved at a quick trot which came to an abrupt halt. She barked once and sat, staring at Lenny as he and Jim approached her, Tony right on their heels.

“Bingo. This is where they parked. They carried her up the hill, probably set her feet on the ground long enough to open the car door and that was it. Gone.”

Lenny and Jim studied the area, shaking their heads in disgust. The hard ground yielded little in the way of tracks but it did offer two interesting oddities. Jim bent down and pointed at a key ring. Lenny handed him a pair of gloves, pulling on a pair as well. Bagging the key ring, they straightened, their eyes searching for anything else strange or out of the ordinary.

The brown wallet might have gone unnoticed, stuck under a bush as it was, but Tony saw it. He hurried to the site, confirmed the familiar scent, then looked over his shoulder and whined at Jim.

Lenny opened the wallet, glanced at the driver’s license photo and nodded. “Check that out. Our stalker, maybe?”

“Oh, yeah. Tom Harris, dob 5-2-70, 5’11”, 170, brown and brown. Everything fits so I think we have a match. I figure these are his keys, too. So if he parked here, where’s his car?”

Jim closed his eyes a moment then shrugged again. “It’s beginning to sound like the stalker bit was a ruse, because this guy obviously had a partner, someone who killed him and then bagged Candace and drove off with her. It’s looking to me like his partner did it. As for motive, who knows? Maybe they fought about the plan or maybe the money? Or maybe one of them got greedy. Isolated like this, if they knew Arnie would be out of town, she’d look like an easy kidnap target. One glance at the place tells you there’s big bucks available.”

Lenny shook his head. “I don’t know, Jim. If they wanted to kidnap her, why would he call attention to himself like he did at the store and the library? Why scare her, alert her? That doesn’t make any sense and I stand by my first comment which is stalkers do not pair up. At least none I’ve ever heard of.”

## GAYLE FARMER

The sound of voices interrupted their discourse. A familiar face led the way, two uniformed cops walking a respectful two steps behind.

The smile on Lenny's face spread as the men approached. "Good morning, Detective Riley. How's trix?"

A smile of equal size spread across the younger man's face. "I can't complain, Lenny. How's by you?"

The handshake was hearty and warm as Lenny introduced his former partner to Jim.

Lenny clapped him on the arm and said, "A well-deserved promotion, my friend. Congratulations." Lenny smiled at his former protégé and repeated the oft-spoken words. "So, what do ya figure, Pete?"

In a heartbeat, everything changed. Detective Riley nodded at the baggie in Jim's hand and extended his. "What's that?"

"Tony just found it over there under that shrub." Jim handed him the baggie and pointed to his right. "We also found a set of keys and we're pretty sure they belong to the dead guy in the bushes, but there's no sign of another car, at least not here."

Lenny handed Riley the other baggie. "Guess they figured it might get rough and they each wanted to be able to drive away."

The detective glanced around the area. "Well, having keys on him doesn't necessarily mean they both drove. You see anything else? Tire tracks, maybe discarded cigarette butts, anything?"

Lenny shook his head. "Ground's hard as a rock. Nothing to show where they even parked except for where the dog signaled. Clean other than that; there's nothing else."

Detective Riley pursed his lips and turned to the cops behind him. "Scout this area real good. I doubt the dog missed anything, but let's double check just to be sure. When you're finished, come back to the house."

Jim, Lenny and Detective Riley walked back down the road to the driveway.

## COLD FUSION

“You got anything to share, Pete?” Lenny glanced at the detective. “You can trust us.”

“We found a handgun on the victim. Other than that, he’s clean.” He rattled the bag with the wallet. “This should fill in the blanks nicely.” They turned onto the driveway, chatting.

Pete glanced from Jim to Lenny. “I never heard of a stalker having a partner, so I’m having a hard time connecting the dots here. If this is the stalker, what’s his name ... Tom Harris, and that’s safe to assume, who killed him and why? Are we to take for granted that whoever killed Harris then snatched Mrs. Baker? I guess that makes some sense, but the rest of it? We have a stalker and a kidnapper working together on the same gig? Working the same gig but *not* together? Totally weird to say the least. What’s your take on this, Lenny?”

“Bizarro, for sure. Either of those ideas would be firsts in my book.”

They stopped next to the Koi pond, watching the colorful fish swim to the edges and beg for food.

Jim leaned closer to the pond, intrigued by such friendly creatures. He straightened, turning to Pete. “We agree with your take on the stalker. They’re loners. So who the hell killed Harris? And why? Other than questions, we don’t have much to share.”

“How’d you guys get involved in this case?”

“Two weeks ago, Arnie Baker notified us that his wife had a stalker. They came out to the farm, bought a guard dog for Candace and came back here. Arnie has some mysterious meetings going on in Europe and we’ve yet to make contact. Anyway, Candace agreed to remain on the estate until he returned, just to be sure. We got the call late last night from Jane Byron, she’s a family friend, that Candace disappeared. We found the sponge, which you now have, but other than that, you know what we know.”

“Which ain’t diddly.”

“Kinda like.”

## *Chapter 8*

Arnie continued to respond to a variety of queries as the committee members read the report. Their interests revolved mostly around the time frame involved in retrofitting industrial and manufacturing projects.

The particulars of those endeavors were not in his field of expertise and he often demurred with a wave of his hand, referring questions regarding specific procedures, including reconfiguring cars, planes and eventually the space shuttle, to the appropriate engineers.

Questions flew along with doubts. How could existing technology be converted? Would engines be modified or would they have to be completely reconstructed? What would be the impact on private utilities? Would the trickle-down effect show in the pocket of the citizen?

The meeting, scheduled for one hour of questions, eased into three as the members sought answers and developed strategies in response to the questions they anticipated from the men in their organizations with the deep pockets.

They would have to counter the doubts, parry the qualms and uncertainties those men would surely have when asked to contribute countless millions of dollars required to make the project a success.

Myra Schoenberg, a powerful representative of an Israeli consortium, raised her hand as she closed the report. "Dr. Baker, it is my distinct pleasure to tell you I came here authorized to

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offer our unconditional assistance and an immediate credit line for fifty million dollars. It is a no-strings offering to be used where you feel it is most needed. There is more where that came from and Israel is determined to aid you in the success of this project.” Glittering black eyes darted around the room as though the gauntlet had been laid down. Indeed, it had.

“Thank you, Dr. Schoenberg. We offer our sincerest gratitude and a promise as well. We *will* live up to your expectations. You have my personal guarantee.”

Gravely she nodded, a slight smile on her lips. “That is good enough for us.”

The commitments escalated, often exceeding the original fifty million pledge. The enthusiasm in the room mounted as the scope and future possibilities expanded before them. Finally the meeting ended.

\* \* \*

“Can you believe this, Arnie?” Dan tapped the pile of papers before him, fingernails making clicking sounds. “I knew we’d get support, but this is phenomenal. Where does all the money come from?”

“Billionaires with vested interests. When we come home with this kind of support, we’ll be funded for the rest of the project. I’m so excited I can’t stand it.” He slipped the remaining promissory notes into his briefcase and snapped the locks. Let’s go get a bite to eat. I have a couple of things I need to discuss with you.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’m starved.”

\* \* \*

Like all big cities, Washington had its share of outstanding restaurants tucked away into side streets or unassuming basement locations.

## GAYLE FARMER

One such was Lucien's. The red carpeted steps led down to a well-known legend and hinted at something special to come. Tasteful and authentic Italian décor featured dark woods, lots of red velvet and violins. Paintings copied from the masters hung on the walls and flickering candles added to the romantic atmosphere.

In the kitchen reigned one of the most renowned chefs of all time. His international reputation, touted around town through several administrations, had astounded both conservative and liberal palates for thirty years.

The front dining room, small and intimate with accommodations for only forty diners at one time, had a waiting list, but Maria recognized Dr. Baker and his associate. She nodded and led them down the hall to another door marked *Private, Members Only*, opened it and allowed them to enter. The door closed behind them with a swish.

The large secluded room, reserved for VIPs, political types and well-known industrialists promised privacy for each diner. The tables were spaced a good distance apart and in some cases isolated by tall, leafy trees and potted plants. Privacy and seclusion encouraged guests to share secrets and often hosted rendezvous and clandestine trysts. Violin music performed the twofold duty of providing a pleasing background and cloaking conversation.

“Any particular table, Dr. Baker?”

“Over there in the corner would be just great, Maria. Two martinis on the rocks and keep them coming. We're celebrating.” He pressed a bill into her hand and chuckled. She offered him a pretty smile with the menus and left.

“I knew we'd win them over,” Arnie said as they picked up their menus. “I just never thought the amount of immediate contributions would be so high. I already put a call in to Graham. He'll be thrilled. I would imagine the program will move into high gear as of Monday.” He laughed with delight. “I can't wait to see the look on Candace's face.”

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"I can drink to that, for sure," Dan said, accepting his martini from the waiter. "Betty is really getting tired of the secrecy. How's Candace taking it?"

"Puts a strain on, for sure. At last, after all this time, I can tell her what's going to be public knowledge fairly soon. She tries not to say much, but I know she's curious. Good thing our marriages are solid. I don't know about Betty, but Candace doesn't believe I'm in Europe any more than I'm on the moon." They both chuckled at the irony of his statement.

They were halfway through their steaks when Arnie's cell phone vibrated. He glanced at the screen out of habit, tempted to ignore the call. Only Candace, Sara and Jane knew this personal number and the caller had an id block. But then there was Jim Sessions, as well. His eyes widened as he also noticed three missed voice mails.

"Hello?"

"Dr. Baker, listen closely if you ever want to see your wife again."

\* \* \*

Detective Riley and one of the uniformed officers stood in the driveway of the Baker estate.

"We've concluded the preliminary search of the house, sir. Nothing out of the ordinary, no signs of forced entry or a struggle. We found several strands of blonde hair clinging to the hole in the fence where they escaped. Tentatively identified as belonging to Mrs. Baker. We'll get them down to forensics right away. Other than that, cleanest snatch I've ever worked. Very slight roughing up in the woods and again by the fence, but no shoe prints, no scraps of material. The underbrush has to be five inches thick."

The cop flipped his notebook closed and nodded at Detective Riley. "That's about it. You know we got a handgun off the deceased, just a little .22, loaded and lethal enough at close range. Nothing else on the body."

GAYLE FARMER

“Okay, head on back to the station. I’ll be right behind you.”

\* \* \*

Clapton laid down some slow, lazy, unplugged tracks as they enjoyed the last of their prime rib dinner. Jim finished his highball, raised the glass to Al and pulled Ella to him, nuzzling her neck.

After the events of the day, a quiet evening like this sounded very appealing. Sleepy now, he settled deeper into the cushioned bench and listened as Terry told Ella in minute detail about her lunch at Big Sur Bistro.

“The chowder was excellent, light on the potatoes, heavy on the seafood. I decided to get the cheapest, least appetizing thing on the menu, just to see what they’d do with it. Twenty-eight bucks for calamari, if you can believe it, but girl, it was to die for. They dipped these nice tender rings in some sort of egg white batter and then deep fried them; very light and crunchy. They served a really nice sized portion on greens tossed with a balsamic dressing, flanked with a ramekin of pomegranate seeds, and slices of pickled mango. You could rub it in your hair it was so good, and a bastardized version of Wasabi dressing ... sweet but still hot. Man, it was outstanding.” She swallowed convulsively and giggled. “Absolutely exquisite presentation....”

Jim caught Lenny’s attention, beetled his eyebrows and grinned. “Told ya that’s what she was up to. Can’t fool me. I know them too well.”

Bright green eyes drooped now, hooded with sleep as he lost himself in the slow easy beat of the music. He grimaced when his cell rang and pulled it from his pocket. His eyes flew open as he recognized the number he’d been waiting for. He sat upright in the booth. “Arnie? Do....”

He jerked the phone away from his ear as static crackled and hummed. Through it all came the frantic tones of Arnie’s

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voice. “Jim, Candace has been kidnapped! I just got a call ... I can’t talk over an unsecured line. Where are you?”

“I’m in Hollywood, at the restaurant. Where are you?”

“I’m just about to land at LAX. Is there any chance we can meet tonight? I know it’s late, but I have terrible news and I don’t know what to do. I’m just ... they told me they’ll kill her if I involve the police.” His voice broke and a sob escaped his mouth.

“I’ll be there. What gate will you come in at?”

“I don’t want anyone to know about you, that you’re working for me. It’s of the utmost importance. I have a car. Can I meet you at that restaurant, whatever it is? Where is it?”

Jim gave him directions, adding that the lights would be off and the parking lot dark. Unless he already had a tail, no one would see him.

“Call me when you get here and I’ll open the back door for you.”

\* \* \*

It wasn’t long before three quick taps sounded on the metal security door.

Jim opened it just wide enough for the man to ease inside. He closed the screen then stood there, peering through the crack. No cars drove by, no figures moved about in the shadows.

He turned to Arnie, put his finger to his lips, made a quick twirling motion with his hand and then let Tony out for a speedy check of the parking lot. The dog came back moments later, a satisfied expression on his face. The door closed, the deadbolt clicked and moments later, the iron security shutters rolled down over the front and back doors. *ELLA’S* was secure from all but a tank.

“Let’s go in the lounge, Arnie. You look like you could use a drink.”

Arnie nodded, lips pinched blue at the edges. “Tanqueray on the rocks if you have it.” His teeth chattered a

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moment before he clenched his jaw, but his hands still trembled. He glanced around the empty lounge, finally seeing Lenny at a back booth, alone. The girls had left after Arnie's call, aware of the coming need for privacy.

Another bottle joined those already congregating on the table. Jim poured a generous helping of gin over the ice, pushed the glass toward Arnie and then launched into a spate of questions.

Arnie raised his hand, palm open and shook his head. "I wasn't in Europe. I was at a meeting in Washington, D.C. When I leave here I'm going home. My daughter needs me. She must be terrified. I'll notify the cops from there. It would be normal to have them show up at the house, considering ... Candace. Oh, dear Lord, please." His hands shook and his breath came in quick, shallow breaths. He downed his drink in a quick series of convulsive swallows.

Jim leaned forward, voice pitched low. "Steady, man, you can't fall apart on us at this point in the game. Too much is at stake. The longer it takes to find her the less success, historically, anyway, that we're likely to have. Who do you work for, Arnie?"

"I'm a project coordinator at Endyme Corp. We ... I'm working on a top secret mission that will change the world as we know it."

"Like how? Weapons? Bombs?"

"I can't tell you!" His voice rose to a low wail, eyes glazed with tears. "I would if I could, you have to know that."

"This is not the time to get all squirmy on us, Arnie. What have you heard from the kidnappers? What do they want? We can't help you if you won't be straight with us." Lenny leaned even closer to the man, blue eyes drilling into his face.

"I'm not allowed to discuss it. It's a top secret national security issue. To give it to you simply, in essence, either I betray my country or sign my wife's death warrant."

Jim and Lenny stared at each other a moment. In unison they returned their gaze to Arnie.

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To all questions Arnie shook his head. "I'm working on a top secret project that cannot become public knowledge until the time is right. The information is strictly on a need to know basis and all our reports are **EYES ONLY**. It's that heavily classified. It's so heavily classified, in fact, that I can't even tell my poor wife where I really am, and now she's paying for it." He reached for the bottle and poured himself another. "Oh, God, please, please, don't let them hurt her."

"Then what *can* you tell us?" Lenny shot a swift glance at Jim. "We don't have security clearance but we give you our word that everything you tell us will be held in strictest confidence. We're not a couple of lame gumshoes. I'm a former LA homicide detective and Jim's got more than a decade in highly sensitive private investigation matters. We aren't going to tell anyone else."

"I know that, but it doesn't matter. Neither you nor your patriotism are in question. Besides, everything is so highly technical, I could tell you all about the project and it wouldn't mean a thing. In the wrong hands, though, it would mean the toppling of the balance of power in the world forever. There isn't a modern government in existence that wouldn't kill for it, our own included."

"What do you mean, our own included? What are you talking about? Isn't it already ours?" Lenny leaned forward, eyes boring into Arnie's. "Don't you work for us, for the United States?"

"Yes, of course, it's *ours*, in the sense that Endyme is a privately owned, privately funded American company and I, an American scientist, developed it. We're a private entity, not an arm of the government and we'd do battle to keep it that way and offer no regrets. Considering the multiple millions and years of work it took us to get here, especially when the prize is within reach, who could blame us?"

"Looks to me like someone wants to ace you out of the equation," Lenny said.

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“Exactly right and they would if they could. Only thing is, they can’t finish the formula without me, at least not yet.”

“So it’s not finished? How far are you from completion?”

“That depends on a lot of different things, including a huge slice of luck.”

“Evasion gets us nowhere, Arnie. I think it’s time for you to level with us. What secret? What are you working on?” Exasperated, Lenny drummed his fingers on the table while his eyes drilled into Arnie’s, demanding a response. “Your wife’s life is at stake here and I don’t like playing cat and mouse.”

Jim remembered those eyes from days long gone by and shuddered at the memories.

A variety of emotions raged across Arnie’s face as he swallowed convulsively, lips trembling, hands clenching and unclenching. Finally he capitulated. Eyes rolling, he said, “Cold fusion. Ever heard of it? The end of energy dependence on fossil fuel for the entire world, not just us. The costs will be so reasonable that western countries will virtually give it to the third-world nations just to eliminate the carbons and poisons entering the atmosphere. It would be well worthwhile for all concerned. The end of pollution is a literal footstep away.

“The price of oil will drop below ten dollars a barrel, a fair and equitable price for costs to produce, but effectively destroying the lifestyle of the reigning Middle East despots and their corrupt governments. The days of stables full of multi-million dollar race horses and personal yachts the size of aircraft carriers will end with a crash. South American countries like Venezuela will lose their strangleholds, reduced to nonentities rather than forces to be reckoned with. The change will be profound, especially in Russia, who looks at their newly discovered oil riches as a way to resurrect the old Soviet Union.”

Arnie paused to let the info sink in. “We’ll continue to require gasoline for autos for the near future, perhaps as long as a decade, but no longer. Not all engines can be reconfigured and the replacement burden may be too high for the average family

## COLD FUSION

at first. We'll have some work to do, reducing the size of the reactors for personal use, but in a relatively short time, the changeover will be complete. We've already cut the size in half for three times the output. It's like anything else. Remember the early computers? They used to fill a room. The biggest and quickest changeover will be industrial energy for utilities. The impact will cripple big oil companies, here and abroad."

"Reactors? You're building reactors?"

"No, Jim, not my group. Endyme has another facility in Omaha that specializes in stuff like that. They're making great strides, from what I hear. They may be ready for us before we're ready for them. My group is working on the He-3 formula."

Silent, they reviewed the ramification of his words, including the effect and outcome on the world at large.

"That is gonna piss off a whole lot of people," Jim said, voice thoughtful. "No more Gucci."

Arnie snorted. "Gucci is the least of it. Wars have been fought for far less reasons and I'm afraid that is exactly what will happen if word gets out before we're ready." He took a deep raggedy breath, eyes tortured. "The man who has Candace spoke with a Russian accent. As you know, they recently discovered huge oil reserves which they hope to use to wrest the balance of power away from the United States. The Russians are the only other country beside ours with an operable space shuttle."

Lenny did a double-take, jaw slack. He slid a look at Jim then back at Arnie and shrugged. "What's He-3 and what does the space shuttle have to do with it?"

"He-3 is what will power the reactors and the only place we can get it is on the moon."

"But ... but can the shuttle even go to the moon?"

"With some adjustments, yes. Considering the value of the operation, the motivation is there. If the Russians had the formula, there would be nothing to stop them from going to the moon first, setting up mining facilities and staking their claim. It would not be a cold war this time. It would be all out, no holds barred."

## *Chapter 9*

The white Crown Victoria rolled down the driveway, stopping next to the front path leading to the house. Detective Pete Riley, briefcase in hand, strode along the path that wound its way through the koi ponds.

The front door opened before he could knock. A middle aged woman in a starched black uniform nodded. "Follow me, Detective Riley. Dr. Baker is waiting for you in the study." Mrs. Hodges led the way down a long hall. She opened a door, announced him and left.

Arnie Baker paced before a cold fireplace, brow furrowed with fear. He strode over to the detective, hand outstretched, nodded at the coffee service and poured them each a cup.

"Black's fine, Dr. Baker. Have you had further contact with the kidnappers, heard anything from your wife?" Riley took several sips, placed the cup and saucer on the table and opened his briefcase.

"Nothing since the call last night. If I believed them, she's already gone. They told me they'd kill her if I involved the police."

"If they're keeping any kind of tabs on the house, they know the police were involved before you even knew Mrs. Baker had been kidnapped. I wouldn't worry on that regard. Did they tell you what they want?"

"Not yet, but I already know. They want my formula."

## COLD FUSION

“What formula?”

“I’m a nuclear engineer, a physicist.” Arnie fidgeted, refusing to meet Detective Riley’s eye. “I’m not at liberty to tell you anything, sir. Just accept that, can you?”

“No, of course I can’t. I believe these people who have your wife will kill her. I can’t conduct any kind of investigation if I don’t have all the facts.”

Arnie drew a deep breath and sighed. “I’m sorry, I just can’t tell you. I could end up in jail for the rest of my life.”

Riley leaned forward then and glared at Arnie. “Give me a frickin’ break, would ya? This isn’t a golf game or a night out with the boys. We’re trying to save your wife’s life. I swear to you, I won’t even tell my Captain. I’ll keep it strictly confidential, I promise, but you have to tell me what this is about.”

Arnie stared at the young detective, lower lip bobbing as he tried to decide whether to trust him. Finally, realizing there was no other choice, he nodded. “I’m working on a formula that will enable us to use Helium-3 for a universal energy source. He-3 is virtually inexhaustible and will provide inexpensive energy to run engines in everything from cars to planes, heavy industry, heating and cooling systems, anything.”

“And they want it? Who are *they*, Dr. Baker?”

A bubble of hysteria escaped with his chuckle. “The Russians.”

“The Russians? As in the Russian government?”

“I would assume so, although it could be a consortium of some kind. Whoever it is, that’s what they want. Otherwise, if it’s a simple kidnapping for ransom, why not just name an amount and let me pay them. We’d already have Candace back. It would be over by now.”

Arnie finished his cup in a series of swallows. He refilled it, raising the pot to Detective Riley.

He shook his head. “Thanks, I’m fine. We’re running blind on this case, Dr. Baker. The hairs we found hanging on the chain link proved to be a match with your wife so we know they

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took her out through the hole in the fence. Other than that, there is no physical evidence except for a bit of scuffling in the leaves.

“The underbrush is so thick we don’t even have a shoe print. The dog Jim Sessions used alerted on an area on the property above you, fairly near the road. We figure that’s where they parked, but only because of the dog’s reaction. The ground is hard as concrete and covered with dead leaves. No tire tracks, no footprints, no discarded cigarette butts or candy wrappers. There’s nothing, not a clue.”

“What do we do next, Detective?”

“We wait. Did he call your cell or your home phone?”

“Cell. I was still in Washington, having a late supper with my colleague and fellow scientist, Dan Knoff, when it came in.”

“Did you tell him what the call was about?”

“God, no. I told him it was a family emergency and that I had to leave immediately, nothing more. Like I said earlier, they warned me they’d kill her if I involved anyone else.”

The unexpected and strident tones of his cell rang, causing both men to start. Arnie splashed coffee into his saucer and placed it on the table with an exasperated expletive.

“Hello?” He paused a moment before hitting the button that activated the speaker phone. Shifting the cell away from his mouth so the detective could hear the caller, he said, “I want to speak to my wife.”

“She would like to speak to you as well. Unfortunately, we have more pressing business. We want the formula you are working on for He-3 conversion.”

“I can’t, it’s not finished.”

Frantic eyes searched Detective Riley’s face, looking for help where there was none. His hands quivered.

The caller lapsed into Russian, speaking with those close to him. His voice took on a sinister tone. “We are not going to play games with you, Dr. Baker. How long will it take you to finish the formula?”

## COLD FUSION

"I can only estimate ... perhaps as quickly as three weeks but three months is more likely."

"That is bull shit! You held meeting last night touting program and collecting millions in support."

Arnie's mouth dropped open like a hooked fish. Startled, he stared at Riley before turning his attention back to the caller. "How in the world could you possibly know about that meeting?"

"We have ways. I will call back with further instructions. A word of caution, Dr. Baker. Do not involve anyone else in this situation or we will kill your wife. But before we kill her, we will all *enjoy* her in a variety of ways. I hope you realize the seriousness of the situation, for her sake." The line disconnected.

"Wait! How ... what the hell is going on here? Son of a bitch, I can't...."

Just then a knock on the door interrupted their conversation. Mrs. Hodges popped her head inside. "Dr. Baker, Mrs. Byron is here. She would like to speak to you and the detective. Shall I ask her to reschedule, or...."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hodges, please show her in."

Jane came in the door, face haggard, and embraced Arnie. "Are you alright? I sent Sara down to the barn to check on the horses. She doesn't know you're here, but she'll be back in a minute. Is there anything I can do?"

Arnie patted her back in response, nodded and moved away. "Jane, I can't thank you enough for caring for Sara. I'm in your debt. How's she taking this?"

"About as well as can be expected. She and Betsy stayed awake most of the night. I heard them talking. They're both scared to death, frankly. I am, too. Who got her? They found the stalker in the bushes, shot dead, and yet someone still kidnapped her." Jane's voice began to climb, stopping abruptly as she saw the expression on Arnie's face.

"Body in the bushes?" He turned to Detective Riley, incredulous eyes bulged wide. "What ... whose body? Who was

## GAYLE FARMER

the stalker? Is he Russian?" He threw his arms wide, voice quivering, on the edge of a meltdown. "Is there anything else I don't know yet?"

Detective Riley shrugged. "I didn't have time to tell you, but Mrs. Byron is correct. We found the body of a man, Tom Harris, on the western side of your estate, near the perimeter of the fence. He fits the description your wife and daughter gave to the police artist. We're certain he is the man who stalked Mrs. Baker. We found his wallet and a set of keys near where he and his partner parked the getaway car."

"Partner? So you're saying there were two of them? Two men kidnapped Candace?"

"More likely three. Whatever the reason, they shot Harris on the west side of your property, midway down, near a large oleander. The body was in plain sight for anyone who might have walked by. They made no real attempt to cover it up, although considering where it was in relation to the house or the barn, the chances were slim of anyone just finding it unless it would be the gardeners."

"So you're saying that originally, *three* stalkers were after my wife and two got together and shot the other? That sounds a bit farfetched to me, Detective."

"I know, it's weird, but that's what we figure. Of course, it's possible that one man, a very strong man, grabbed her, stuffed her through the fence and then carried her up that hill by himself, but it's not likely." Riley glanced from Arnie to Jane. "Do you know who owns the property above you where they parked the car? I'd like to talk with them, see if they know anything."

"There's nothing to know. The acreage is for sale, has been for almost a year. You'll have to get the name and number of the realtor off the sign. I can't remember which office, but it's one of the big local ones."

"It's for sale?"

"Sure. Didn't you see the sign? You can contact the owner through the realtor."

## COLD FUSION

“There’s no sign on that property. You mean a regular ‘For Sale’ sign like the kind you stick in the ground?”

“Exactly. And I’m sorry to contradict you, Detective, but there is a sign. I saw it when I brought the mare back on Saturday afternoon. I usually don’t get to see it, just driving a car in, but with the length of the truck plus the trailer, you have to swing wide to avoid the pillars. We see it every time we go for a trail ride. We go out the back gate, circle around down by the bottom of the hill and come back past it on the road.”

“Well, I’ll go up and check again, but it wasn’t there when we came out Sunday morning.”

Detective Riley rose, nodding at Arnie and Jane. “Can you show me where it was?”

Jane gave him a quick eyebrow flick and preceded him out the door. “Absolutely. Follow me.”

They walked up the driveway and turned right. As Jane crested the hill, she stopped short so fast both men almost collided with her. She moved to the edge of the road, eyes searching the ground.

“Well I’ll be damned, you’re right. There’s no sign here now, but look.” She pointed at the ground where holes the approximate width and depth necessary for a sign now stood empty. “That’s where it was. Looks like the property was sold. On Saturday, maybe?”

Arnie glanced from Jane to the holes, a perplexed expression on his face. “What the hell is going on? That sign’s been there for over a year and now, all of a sudden, it’s gone?”

Detective Riley already had his cell phone out of his pocket.

\* \* \*

The unmarked car pulled into an open parking place across the street from Bel Air Realty. Riley got out of the car, jaywalked across the quiet road and entered the elegant office foyer.

## GAYLE FARMER

Chrome, art deco décor and lots of free-form sculpture made the room look more like an art gallery than a real estate office. Recessed in the ceiling were two video surveillance cameras that covered the entire room.

The detective approached the reception desk where a beautiful girl in her late teens manned the phones. Her name tag read Kimberly Asher. She flashed him a brilliant smile full of small white teeth. "Hi, I'm Kimmie. May I help you?"

Riley grinned in spite of himself, wondering how she managed to string that many words together without using *like*. He handed her his business card and flashed his badge. "I'm Detective Riley, LAPD. I need to know who is handling the sale of the property at 29877 Via Verde."

"One moment, sir." She consulted a file and nodded. "That would be Ms. Malone. Let me see if she's free."

A quick phone call verified her availability. Kimmie rose, nodded at the detective and smiled. "Come with me, please."

He followed her down the thickly carpeted hall and stopped before a door. She knocked, opened it wide and grinned again.

A petite, well-dressed woman in her fifties got to her feet and came around the desk, hand extended. "Good morning, Detective. I'm Melissa Malone, can I help you?" She shook his hand, then indicated a chair in front of her desk. "Please."

"I'm here about a property you have for sale on Via Verde. I'm wondering what you can tell me about it. I understand it sold on Saturday."

"It did, but it's back on the market. The buyers called several hours after the initial purchase and said they changed their minds and no longer wanted the property. They sent a messenger service to the office yesterday to pick up their deposit check."

"What can you tell me about them? Their names, anything unusual?"

## COLD FUSION

“Well, they said they came from Russia. I know that much, although not where. They said they owned several art dealerships in the LA area and wanted to build a house close enough to downtown for an easy commute, but with lots of quiet and privacy.”

Melissa opened a drawer, pulled out a thin folder and extracted the single paper inside. She slid it across her desk to the detective. “This is the copy of the cancelled bill of sale.”

“What did they look like, did they say anything unusual, act strange?”

“No, they were just like anyone else, but for some bizarre reason they wanted me to think they were a gay couple. It was really strange, y’know, because I don’t think they were. But like, I could care, y’know? Whatever. They looked like regular guys. One was about 5’10’ or so, the other taller, maybe six feet, ordinary builds. Absolutely two of the most unremarkable men I’ve ever seen, could disappear in a crowd of none.”

Riley withdrew a notepad and pen. “Please give me a name and description. What did they wear? How did they behave? Were they nervous?”

She raised a hand and flashed brilliant white teeth at him. “Whoa, Detective. Like I said, I met them once and it wasn’t even like a house, y’know, where you can discuss flooring or appliances? What do you talk about when it comes to acreage?” She shrugged her expensively clad shoulders and grinned.

“Anything you can tell me will help. Where did you meet them, here? I noticed three security cameras in your foyer. Is there a picture of them on your security tape?”

“I’m sorry but no, they never came here. I met them at the property ... well, at the bottom of the road, to be precise. They had a very distinctive car, as do I. We identified ourselves and drove up the hill. I took them for a quick walk-through of the property, they gave me a check, I pulled the sign and left. Not much else.”

Riley drew a mental breath. “Okay, name number one?”

GAYLE FARMER

“Sergie Walacovich.” She pulled the file back and peered at the cancelled bill of sale, struggling with the pronunciation. “Younger of the two, quite plain. Hair and eyes brown, very bland. Guy was very pale, certainly not what you’d think of as a native Angelino.” She chuckled, beetling her eyebrows at Riley.

He maintained a stony silence, refusing to play.

She got back down to business. “Dark business suit on a Saturday, if you can imagine, but at least no tie ... loafers, I think. The other guy, I’m gonna blow this one, Aleki Davidovski ... the taller one, more built, but not at all what you’d call, y’know, like buffed out. The other guy was just skinny by comparison, I guess. This one wore a suit *and* tie and dark shades. I couldn’t see his eyes. Should have smelled a rat there and then.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Obvious phonies and I should have seen it a mile off.” She grinned again, eyes bold and inviting. “They referred to the PCH as Highway 1.” Light, musical notes rippled up her throat. “Like, yeah, sure.”

“Did they give any excuse for not wanting the place?”

“Nothing real. I told him right off the bat the area was mostly small horse properties with riding trails, stuff like that. They said they didn’t like being around the smell of horses and worried about flies.” She stared at Riley, large blue eyes fixed on his. “Believe me, those horses don’t smell.”

“What did they drive? Do you remember the license number?”

“A big Lincoln sedan. Blacked out windows; looked like a tank. Or a mafia staff car.” Again she chortled, gazing at the detective.

“I’m investigating a potential murder case, Ms. Malone. I’d appreciate it if you could stay on track.”

“Murder?” Her mouth formed a perfect O. Both eyes flew open wide. “Oh, well, I, I didn’t know what you were after,

## *COLD FUSION*

but I certainly ... well, please excuse the attempt at levity. What can I do to help?"

"Did they say anything to you about the property or the nearby neighbors? Mention any names ... ask questions?"

"No, sir, they did not. Nothing. Mostly they spoke in Russian, I guess that's what that was, and what little they said to me didn't matter."

"Were they alone? Did anyone else come around while you were showing the property? Did you see anyone else?"

"No, sir. It's very quiet up there. We'd have noticed anyone else hanging around."

"Is there anything you can think of that might help us find these men?"

"No, sir, I'm sorry. I wish I had something to offer but I don't."

\* \* \*

Sergeant Eddie Collins leapt to his feet, smiling wide when he saw his buddy enter the squad room. Waving a manila folder above his head, he trailed Pete down the hall to his cube, chattering.

Riley slanted a glance at him and shook his head. "For God's sake, Eddie. Give me a minute to get in the door, would ya?"

"This is good, Pete, very good. That Tom Harris was a freakin' loony, man. We got the report back right around the time you left. Shortly after that, this call comes in from CDF. Seems they're up in the local hills, trimming the fire roads and guess what they found? Harris owned an old van and they discovered it parked in the woods across the street from the Baker place. Can ya believe that? Couldn't see it from the road, but anyway, it's been impounded ... on the way to the bone yard as we speak."

Eyes alight, he waited, staring at the detective. Finally, "Ask me what we found. Go ahead, ask."

## GAYLE FARMER

Riley sighed, raised his head slowly and made eye contact with his assistant. “What did you find, Eddie? I can’t wait to hear.”

“We found a diary in the van along with sketches of the missing woman. Also bunches of photos of women that look enough like Candace Baker to give ya the creeps and they are not all of the same gal, not by a long shot. At least half of them are, like, twenty years old at least. This guy was a certified nutcase ... killed his mother and sister when he was fifteen.”

## *Chapter 10*

**P**inetop Sanitarium for the Criminally Insane, swathed as it was in graceful, towering trees and wide green lawns, looked nothing like what it was, at least not at a casual first glance. Flower gardens bloomed with colorful blossoms and the sweet scent of Elysium floated on the air.

However, on closer inspection, one saw that the tall chain link fences were topped with glittering strands of razor wire, bent inward for a length of about two feet and thus ensuring that those sentenced to the maximum security mental facility stayed inside. Sheer red brick walls, covered with dark green ivy and dotted with small, barred windows completed the desolate and eerie resemblance to the Bedlam of old English folklore.

The furnishings, strictly functional chrome and plastic-covered sofas and chairs were drilled into the concrete floors with iron rods and made immovable. They lined the waiting room, interspersed periodically by tables skewered to the walls with angle irons and bearing piles of ancient magazines.

Hospital superintendent, Sister Mary Agnes, rose as he entered her office and extended her hand to Detective Riley, nodding at the chair in front of her desk.

“Please have a seat, Detective. I understand you’re here regarding Tom Harris and his recent demise.”

“Yes, Sister, I am. Are you aware of the manner of his death?”

GAYLE FARMER

The nun shook her head slightly, causing the straight black veil that shrouded her head to ripple. “No, sir, I must say I am not. How did it happen?”

“Harris was murdered, shot to death in what we think was a botched attempt at kidnapping.”

She swallowed several times and nodded. “May God have mercy on his soul. He was a very troubled young man.” Eyes the color of a bright blue summer sky sought his and then glanced away. She pursed pale lips and sighed

“Please tell me everything you can about his case. We’re trying to find the woman he was stalking, and whatever information you can give me will help.”

“Woman he was stalking? Well, he’s no longer after anyone, so I don’t understand what you mean by that.”

“We have good reason to believe he was following a woman named Candace Baker. Sometime early on Saturday afternoon, someone him shot and left his body in the bushes of her estate. She did not disappear until late in the evening, several hours after his estimated time of death so obviously .... We’re trying to see if there’s any connection between him and her disappearance.”

Detective Riley stared at the woman, watching her expressions, her demeanor and the way she used her hands.

She raised an index finger and hit the button on her phone. Shortly came a knock on the door.

“Yes, Sister?”

“Would you please make a copy of this file as quickly as possible and bring it back to me?”

The young girl in her early twenties nodded, took the file and left.

Sister Mary Agnes returned her attention to Detective Riley. “I remember him vividly. I’d only been here about a year myself. He was sixteen, or so, plain, a bit on the thin side, but not malnourished, and mid-height, a smidgen under six feet, I guess. Just finished his last growth spurt. Extremely introverted. Anyway, he’d been convicted of killing his mother in a fit of

## COLD FUSION

anger.” She shook her head again and pursed her lips. “He killed his sister, too.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, pinching the bridge of her nose and then looked up at Riley, a blush tinting her cheeks.

“I’m sorry. I’m just refreshing my memory. Tom’s parents did not get along and when she decided to leave the home and get a divorce, she only took Anne, the little girl. She abandoned Tom, left him to stay with his father, a sadistic and abusive monster of a man. When she left, the father turned his sexual attentions on the son, often beating him and blaming him for the mother leaving.

“He convinced Tom that she went away because of him and his behavior, that she didn’t love *him*. Sad to say, there must have been more than a kernel of truth to that statement. The truer it might have been, the more destructive the effect on the boy’s psyche. Imagine telling that to a child already devastated by abandonment issues and struggling to find a way to come to terms with the inexplicable? Why did his mother take his sister, but reject him, leave him behind? A difficult enough thing to deal with had the father been devoted to the son, but with a man she knew to be psychotic? How could she do that if she loved him? It was a question he asked himself and everyone else ... the theme of every session we ever had was *why?*”

There was another knock on the door. The girl placed two folders on the desk and left again.

Sister Mary Agnes picked up one of the files and handed it to Detective Riley. “Poor Tom believed him, of course, because children always blame themselves for everything. I can remember more than one session with him that had me seriously reconsidering my vocation. I was one of the few people he would open up to. Gave me the creeps in retrospect when I realized he only talked with me because I reminded him of his mother somehow. I didn’t know about that at the time. For whatever reason, there were no photos in his file until several years after he’d been confined.” The nun continued to flip through the thick folder.

## GAYLE FARMER

Detective Riley scanned his file, leaving the deep investigation for later, and then leaned toward her, one arm on her desk. “How did he kill them? I’m sure it’s all in the file, but I’d rather hear it from you.”

“The mother he shot. The sister he ....” Sister Mary Agnes bowed her head and sighed. Splotches of red mottled both cheeks. “He strangled her while he raped her.” She closed her eyes as well as the file and sighed again, deep and profound. “Anne was nine.”

Detective Riley pursed his lips and shook his head. He gave the woman a moment to compose herself and then resumed questioning. “Who else worked with Harris? Were you his only therapist or were there others?”

“Dr. Whey was administrator at the time. He assessed Tom’s progress on a monthly basis and made recommendations regarding medication or session content. Tom also worked with Dr. March. She left about five years ago, well before they released him. I worked with him right up until the day of his discharge, something which I opposed in the strongest terms.”

“How so?”

“Well, Detective, for one thing, I never felt confident that he’d come to grips with killing his mother. I mean, in his mind he knew she was dead, knew he’d killed her and Anne as well, but in his heart ... I was never convinced he accepted the facts.”

“I don’t understand what you mean, Sister. What couldn’t he accept?”

“He had no problem at all accepting that Anne was dead. He’d come to terms with that, could talk about raping her, even strangling her. There were times, I suppose, when he showed some remorse. On occasion he even expressed sorrow when we talked about her, but it was always very abstract, as though he talked about something that really had nothing to do with him. Like the way someone reacts to a newspaper story about an atrocity that occurred in another part of the world.

## COLD FUSION

“I always knew that what little contrition he showed was contrived. Tom felt infinitely sorrier for himself than he ever did for the sister he murdered. He was blindly jealous of Anne, for one thing. He viewed her as a direct threat, an obstacle blocking his way to a normal relationship with his mother. In his mind, it was Anne who stole his mother away. His hatred of her was positively frightening. Even after years had passed, he never lost the loathing. He lived off it, fed off it.”

Sister Mary Agnes rose from her chair and walked to the window, silently fingering the rosary around her neck. She cleared her throat in obvious distress and blew her nose in a hankie. When she resumed her seat, her eyes were red-rimmed with unshed tears. “It was a different thing with his mother, perhaps because he shot her. It was a far more removed act than rape and strangulation, which is about as up close and personal as it gets. Court documents and police records show that he broke into their house and killed Mrs. Harris first. He stayed with the body for several hours, waiting for Anne to get home from school. Then he got her, killed her right next to the corpse of their mother. Incredible.”

Riley sat back and heaved a sigh. “I don’t understand what you mean by not accepting her death. Can you explain that a bit for me?”

“There always seemed to be this shadow of wondering, this belief in the chance that *maybe, just maybe, she wasn’t really dead* ... a classic case of denial. I was overruled.”

“Really dead? How could he have sat by her body for hours and not known she was really dead?”

“Detective, you’re judging his actions, his thoughts, by those of a normal person. Tom Harris was clinically insane. His touch with reality was tenuous under the best of circumstances. Half the time he didn’t know where he was, what might be happening around him and he didn’t care. He should never have been released into the general population. He had no way to comprehend life as we think of it.”

## GAYLE FARMER

“That’s too bad. Cost him his life. Why was your input as his chief psychiatrist and counselor discounted by your staff? Who overruled you?”

“It wasn’t staff, Detective. We all felt he was unfit to live in society. Mostly it happened due to budget concerns. Our prisons are jam packed and so are facilities like this. After fifteen years of model behavior and consistent positive test scores, some authorities interpreted his condition as borderline normal. They felt his progress indicated he’d recovered his grip on reality sufficiently to function in a halfway house, so he made the cut. When a patient seems able to function in a supervised living situation, we are most anxious to have them do that. In his case, he was not ready.”

\* \* \*

Lenny pored over the notes they’d taken while interviewing Andy and Sara Baker. Deep in thought when the phone rang, he started, grabbing the instrument like an enemy. “Hello?” He leaned back in his chair and gritted his teeth.

“Hey, boss, I catch you at a bad time?”

A grin spread across his face. “Pete! Always glad to hear from you, dude. What’s up?”

“Well, I’ve got something I want to chat with you and Jim about. Can I meet you at *ELLA’S* for lunch? I have a yen for one of those meatball sandwiches you used to rave about. Noon?”

“You got it, see ya then.”

Lenny, Jim and Pete gathered around a table in the lounge, deep in meatball sandwiches and conversation.

“How’s the investigation going, Pete? Found anything we can sink our teeth into yet?”

“Nope, not a damned thing. The realtor had nothing, really. She figured them for Russian, but I doubt if she could differentiate between Polish or Czechoslovakian or Hungarian,

## COLD FUSION

but we at least have an area and corroborating information. They sent a messenger over to pick up the check, so there's no chance for us to recover prints or an ID verification, and they met Ms. Malone at the property, so there's no picture of them. She says they're super plain, brown and brown, one a bit under, one a bit over six feet but she couldn't be sure. Average builds."

Lenny made eye contact with Jim and took a huge bite of sandwich. He blinked. Jim also took a bite and silence reigned.

Shrugging, Pete continued. "Also, this is on the QT and all, but I had a rather illuminating conversation today with a Sister Mary Agnes at the Pinetop Sanitarium where he'd been remanded."

Lenny nodded vigorously at Pete and mumbled something around his sandwich.

"Well, she treated Harris from the time they took custody of him at the ripe old age of sixteen. Saw him on a daily basis it seems, right up until the day they let him go. Very complicated case, but to cut to the chase, she voted against releasing him. It was her opinion that he couldn't cope with the outside world, not even in an assisted living situation. Looks like she had him nailed."

Mouth suddenly free, Lenny lifted the empty pitcher, drained it and grinned at Al, who brought a replacement and fresh, frozen mugs. "Where was that halfway house, Pete?"

"A private place off La Cienega in Inglewood. We sent a beat cop by to take a statement, but no one seemed willing to talk." Blue eyes dancing, he glanced at Lenny, waiting.

"Well," Jim said, treading lightly on unfamiliar waters. "We could talk with them, y'know, like representing Arnie instead of the state?" He rolled his eyes at Lenny then back to Pete. "They might be more comfortable chatting with us and there might be a reward we could offer for information, y'know. Not a fortune, but something that might spark a memory or three?"

## GAYLE FARMER

Pete chuckled at Jim and turned to his former mentor and longtime friend, a smirk on his lips. “You got the tape recorder goin’, boss?”

Lenny laughed and pulled it out of his pocket, shrugging at Jim. “What can I say? I trained him up good.” The blue gray gaze returned to Pete. “You know you can work with us, trust us on this? No fear. We won’t overstep and we’ll clue you in to anything we find.”

“I know that, and I’d just love to engage in the good cop/bad cop game with you, but I have a shit-load of stuff on my plate and I actually need your help.”

Pete pulled a page off his notebook and pushed it toward Lenny. “That’s the name and address of the sanitarium as well as his most recent residence in Inglewood. I think they’re dead ends and nothing I can expect to gain that’s worth the people’s time and manpower. You might get lucky.”

He rose with a grin and stretched like a satisfied cat. “It’s always so much fun playing with you guys. I promise to keep you up to speed if we find anything you need to know. Do the same, huh?” Pete threw a couple of bills on the table, waved to Al, and turned to go. He paused at the door, waved again, and walked out the door.

Lenny pushed his shoulders back into the booth and chuckled. “He’s the only part of that job I miss. Great kid, smart, super insights and as honest as they come.”

“Do you think he’ll work with us? Give us a fair shake?”

“Much as he can, for sure. First thing tomorrow, let’s go see about this halfway house Harris used to live in. Then I want to go see Arnie again.”

\* \* \*

Tall, dusty old California oak trees threw shade on the street and caused bare spots on the weedy lawns. Most of the houses, encircled with high, wrought iron fences, looked as appealing as Alcatraz.

## COLD FUSION

The numbers on the side of the rundown old building matched the address listed as the last known residence of Tom Harris.

Jim parked the van and rolled his eyes at Lenny. “Doesn’t this look inviting?”

“It’s a halfway house. Can’t expect Brentwood.” Lenny snickered and glanced around.

Mariachi music and the sweet, skunky smell of marijuana wafted on the air. Sullen-faced men lazed around on porches or leaned against car fenders, smoking, drinking beer and sizing up the newcomers.

Jim stepped out of the Suburban and snapped his fingers. A sleek black shape glided out of the car and stood next to Jim, ears up, eyes alight. Although Jim hadn’t said a word, a ridge of fur rose on the great dog’s back. Ears working faster now, he gazed from one group of men to another.

Jim escorted Tony to the closest tree and murmured something. The dog stared at the closest group of men, ears now at rigid attention. Never shifting his glance, he raised his leg and peed on the ancient palm. Gaze unwavering, Tony lifted his lips and scraped the bare ground with stiff hind legs, three times, fast.

Lenny took a quick look at the expressions on the men’s faces and undid the button of his jacket. “Shit, man, he’s about as subtle as a freakin’ tank. There are neighborhoods where that would be a declaration of war. We’ll be lucky if we aren’t shot.”

Jim chuckled. “Nah, *mano y mano* ... they respect that.”

Dubious, Lenny glanced around from under his eyelashes. “If you say so.”

Finished with his business, Tony hopped back inside the van and sat behind the wheel like Scooby-Doo, positively smiling.

“Guard,” Jim said.

Tony tossed him a withering look as if to say, *no kidding*.

Jim and Lenny crossed the street and rang the buzzer located next to the gate. An electronic click opened the gate

## GAYLE FARMER

which snapped closed behind them with a resounding snap. The front door opened as they approached and a deep voice said, “Is that Sessions and Browning?”

Jim handed him a business card and nodded.

The door opened wider. “I’m Sam Grable. Hope ya don’t have nuthin’ in that van ya value. The boys’ll strip it before we get the door closed.”

Jim glanced over his shoulder. “I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Your wheels.” The man shrugged and led them into a living room decorated in several shades of beige. A round table dominated one corner of the room, chrome and vinyl chairs around it. The pictures were nailed to the wall, as was the TV, encased in a steel cage.

“We’re looking for information about Tom Harris. You know he was murdered a couple of days ago?”

“Yessir, I watched that story on the evenin’ news. What in particular are ya lookin’ for?”

“Mostly anything about him that might help us find this woman.” He slid a picture of Candace Baker toward the man, hoping for a connection and he got it.

“Holy shit, man, isn’t this a picture of his mother?” Sam bent closer to the photo, then leaned back and rubbed his chin. “Whoa, that’s somethin’ else.”

“What,” Jim asked. “What’s something else?”

“Well, after a good close look an’ all, I can see it’s not, but for a minute there, man, it looked like her fo’ sure.”

Jim shot a glance at Lenny and raised his eyebrows. “Tell us what you know about his mother, Sam. Anything you can give us will help.”

Sam scratched his head and shrugged. “I been the den mother here for more’n fifteen years. I seen all kinds, lemme tell ya, but this here guy ... downright scary. Always kept ta himself, never joined in much ‘cept for gettin’ him somethin’ to eat. Dude never missed a meal, but still skinny, y’know?”

“Did he have any friends? Anyone he confided in?”

## COLD FUSION

“Here? Nope. Like I said, he never got involved with no one here at the house. He went to his scheduled psych sessions, worked every day, got him a van after about six months. Paid cash, I remember. He was proud of that. He never bought nuthin’ he didn’t have ’ta. Never got involved with no one here, but he had friends outside. He had to. Sometimes he didn’t come home until late. Real late. But he never caused no trouble, so we just, kinda, y’know, let him come and go. Never was no problem. Just really, really weird.”

“Do you still have his belongings?”

“The cops tossed his room, took most everythin’ including his photos. Clothes, too, y’know? Picked the place clean. Y’after anythin’ in particular?”

“No, just whatever you might be able to share. You never heard him talk about Candace Baker, or a woman he liked, nothing like that?”

“Nope. Like I said, he played things close to the vest.”

They talked a bit longer, but when it became obvious Sam had nothing more to say, they rose and walked to the door.

“Thank you for your time,” Lenny said. “We appreciate your cooperation. You have our card. If something jogs your memory, no matter how little it might seem to you, give us a call. We’re always appreciative of a good word.” He extended his hand toward Sam and pressed a twenty into his palm. “It’s never too late. If you remember something, give me a call.”

Sam glanced at his hand and nodded. “Count on it. I’ll see what I can get outa the other guys here, but I don’t ‘spect much.”

They let themselves out the gate and crossed the street.

The audience had swelled to include women and children. Even those who’d never seen a real Doberman before regaled their immediate neighbors with exploits of derring-do, ala the Daring Dobermans of TV fame.

The men amused each other with heroic stories of others who had vanquished such an enemy. Derisive chuckles and sharp elbows applied to unprotected ribs opened the way to an almost

GAYLE FARMER

carnival atmosphere. One little boy filled his water pistol and advanced toward the van, making appropriate shooting noises. Two women grabbed him, cuffing his ears and scolding him in shrill Spanish.

“God, lets get out of here before they break out the banjos.”

Jim put the SUV in gear and pulled away from the curb.

Dejection filled the faces of the gathering crowd. The show had hit the road.

## *Chapter 11*

Arnie paced back and forth across the kitchen like a caged tiger. His mind raged between fury at the men who held his wife captive and abject terror for Candace's safety. His stomach roiled at the thought of what she might be enduring and he almost jumped out of his skin when the house phone finally rang.

For almost three hours he'd waited for the men who held Candace to contact him. They'd called last night and agreed to make a switch. He would take his wife's place as kidnap victim and continue working on his formula while in their custody. CD copies of all his files, as well as tapes of their latest experiments, filled his briefcase.

"Hello?"

"Listen very closely, Dr. Baker. There is phone booth at beginning of Santa Monica pier. We will meet you there in forty-five minutes. You will come alone, and if you try anything, anything at all, your wife will be shot."

"I want to talk with Candace and I won't meet you unless I do. I want the assurance that she's alive and unhurt."

"She will be neither of those things if you defy us. Forty-five minutes, doctor, get moving." The line went dead.

"Son of a bitch!" Arnie hurled the cordless phone across the room, taking small satisfaction in seeing the faceplate fly off the handset as it hit the wall.

## GAYLE FARMER

He grabbed his briefcase and hurried across the room to the garage. He flipped the automatic door switch and glanced at the cars. His Mercedes handled like a tank. If he had to do some fancy driving, that was not the car to pick. The Escalade was even worse. Candace's little BMW was the best bet if he had to outrun the kidnappers. He had no idea what waited ahead for him, but he wanted to be prepared and the little car was the best choice.

Arnie slid behind the wheel, turned the key in the ignition and backed out of the garage. The little sports car took some getting used to after the big sedan. It turned on a dime, for one thing, and the acceleration was exceptional. Feeling a dash of confidence, he pulled his cell from his pocket and dialed.

"Jim, I just heard from them. I have forty-five minutes to get to the Santa Monica pier. Evidently there's a phone booth ... yes, on the corner. That's where they'll pick me up."

He paused, listening. "Thank God you're so close. Okay, keep an eye out for me. I'm driving Candace's little Beemer. I figured if we have to outrun them, it's the best choice. What should I do if she's not with them?"

\* \* \*

For a quiet cul-de-sac at the top of a dead-end street, the area had seen a lot of recent action. The *For Sale* sign was back in the ground and a black Lincoln lurked at the edge of the road, partially obscured by the oleander hedges. The occupants waited, patient, unhurried. They knew he was in the house and when he came out, they would follow.

\* \* \*

Jim turned to Lenny and shook his head. "Well, it's show time. They just called Arnie and want him to go to the Santa Monica pier and wait for them at a phone booth."

## COLD FUSION

Both men rose just as the girls walked in the door. “About face, ladies, we’re on the road again.”

Jim brought Terry and Ella up to speed on their plan. “Arnie’s meeting them at the pier. Chances are good that they’ll head for the freeway. We’re going to do a tag team tail. We’ll follow them first, leave a couple of car lengths and you follow us, same distance. Lenny and I’ll get off at a good exit, let you get ahead of us, then tail you. That way they won’t spot us. You do the same thing until we get onto side roads or whatever. Most important thing is not to be spotted, so when he gets off the freeway, let us get ahead of you.”

He glanced down at the red Jag and chuckled. “Not exactly the car one would expect to use on a tail, which actually is pretty good. Two gorgeous women in a gorgeous car. They’ll never make you.”

Ella waved her phone at Jim and grinned. “Once they pick him up, let’s make contact and talk it through as it goes down. Sound good?”

“You bet.” Jim opened the back door of the Suburban for Tony and Cricket, fastened their collars to the side leashes and cast a wry glance in the back seat of the Jag.

“Amy? I don’t imagine you’d care to join the other kids?”

Ears laced to her head, Amy stared into space, refusing to look at him.

“She *has* to stay with us. She’s our guard doggie, aren’t you, Ames?”

The dog shot a smug glance at Jim and grinned at Ella, tail gyrating her hips, well aware what ‘stay’ meant.

They made the trip to the pier in fifteen minutes and parked across from the phone booth on different sides and opposite ends of the avenue, waiting for Arnie to show up.

“How weird that the street is almost empty. Ya gotta wonder what’s going on around town. Usually you have to circle the block a couple of times.”

## GAYLE FARMER

Terry nodded in agreement. "It's still fairly early, I guess. Anything interesting going on over there?"

Ella glanced around the area and then shrugged at Terry as she talked into her cell. "You see anything, Jim?"

He shook his head, staring into his rearview mirror. "Not much. Time to check out the cars. Anyone near you that might fill the bill?"

"There's a couple of possibilities, actually." Ella shifted in her seat and nodded. "Behind us about four or five cars, there's a big Lincoln, a black one. Should be just about across from you, actually. Some dude's sitting in the passenger seat, smoking. Has a black suit on, at least a sport jacket. I can't see the driver. Then there's a silver gray Mercedes up the street from us. Two guys in it, just looking around. Plus, there's another car up front there. See it, maybe two or three slots ahead of the Mercedes? Maroon, can't tell what else it is besides big. Maybe a Lexus?" She leaned forward, trying to see the car.

Terry glanced across the street and tapped Ella's arm. "There's a good-sized Honda across the street, maybe four cars behind the guys, El. Don't they look like good candidates?"

Ella nodded. "Jim, do you see a big Honda with blacked out windows a couple of slots behind you? Oh, and a blue Mustang just parked behind them, but it's probably too small, huh? Never mind. That's a couple and they just got out of the car."

"Yeah, the guys in the Honda are a good bet. It looks like all the action is on your side. Nothing around us but that Honda, a bunch of little sports cars and a Hummer. Don't see that as a good choice ... okay, Arnie just pulled in behind us, about three cars back."

Arnie hopped out of the little car and strode down the street, cell in one hand, briefcase in the other. He walked right by Jim without a glance.

## *COLD FUSION*

Ella turned in time to see Arnie cross the street and approach the occupied phone booth. A large black Chrysler pulled into the last empty parking spot and blocked their view.

As Arnie came abreast of the phone booth, the doors opened, a man stepped out, made eye contact with him and nodded. "I have gun in my pocket, Dr. Baker. Please turn around and go back to street."

"Where's Candace? Where's my wife?"

The man nodded, moving close to Arnie, a hand in his jacket pocket. "She's safe for the moment. It's up to you if she stays that way. Now cross street and get into gray Mercedes."

Arnie hesitated and the man jabbed the gun into his ribs. "I'll kill you where you stand and then I'll kill your wife, slowly. Get in freakin' car."

Ella saw them cross the road and approach the gray Mercedes. "You catching this, Jim?"

"You bet. Be cool and sit tight. Okay, he's in the car. You follow them right away. No need to hide until we get to the freeway."

Terry pulled into the street behind the gray Mercedes and slammed on her brakes as the sound of screeching tires to her left warned her of an imminent collision. She looked over her shoulder at the huge Lincoln that virtually sat on her trunk.

She wrinkled her face in embarrassment, held both hands up in front of her in the age-old gesture of apology and shrugged.

The irritated driver and his passenger kept waving her to go ahead.

"Shit," Terry said as she continued down the road. "That's just what we need. A car wreck on a stakeout."

Ella gritted her teeth and nodded for Terry to drive on. "Hey, Jim, see that maroon Chrysler right ahead of us? It was parked in the slot behind the Mercedes. Don't you think it's strange? They just sat there, must have been at least fifteen minutes, but when the Mercedes moved, they're all like hot to

## GAYLE FARMER

trot, just like that Lincoln. They're still right behind us, y'know. Wonder who they are."

"Not a clue, hon. Just maintain your cool, okay? We'll be right behind you."

They stopped at the light at the PCH and stared, open-mouthed as their plans blew up in their faces. Instead of turning left and taking the 10 Freeway back into town as anticipated, the Mercedes turned right onto the two lane coast highway, the maroon Chrysler right behind it.

\* \* \*

"Oh, shit, now what do we do? He's going the wrong way, Jim. What should we do?"

"Just continue as you're doing. We'll be right behind you." Jim made a quick move at the bottom of the street, scooted around the corner and accelerated toward the traffic signal on the PCH. He pulled up to the bumper of the car ahead, ensuring he'd make it through the next turn of the light. The heavy traffic on Santa Monica crawled along at its usual slow pace, fraying tempers.

Several cars ahead, he watched the Jag pick up a bit of speed as it accessed the PCH and followed the Mercedes.

"Ella, give me a minute to talk with Lenny. Be right back." He turned slightly and shrugged. "Where do you think they're going? No freeway in this direction."

"Well, you figure they'd want some privacy, huh? Maybe Malibu? Lots of mountainous areas, private gated estates on the cliffs above the ocean *and* on the beach." Lenny shook his head. "Also makes it pretty damned difficult to conduct any kind of surveillance. We'll just have to see. One thing for sure, this changes all our plans. The only thing we can do now is follow."

He glanced ahead at the Lincoln, five cars in front of them. Right behind the Mercedes was the Chrysler with the Jag several cars back. He looked at Jim and nodded at the cars.

## *COLD FUSION*

“We have a regular parade here. Both the Chrysler and that Lincoln parked near the girls during our stakeout. I don’t think it’s a coincidence. They look like official cars to me, undercover guys, maybe the FBI? They’re not tourists, that’s for damned sure.”

Jim made a face, pursed his lips and picked up his cell. “Just follow them, Ella. Keep back enough that they don’t spot you. If I get a chance to pass, let me get in front of you. No matter what else, don’t get yourself trapped. And if he turns left toward the ocean, just drive on by.”

He looked into his rearview mirror at the cars flanking him. His chances of getting out of the right lane, passing five cars and resuming the right lane ahead of Ella were slim at best. With side roads branching off at increasing frequency, the Mercedes might turn, and he would be unable to stay with Ella and he couldn’t let that happen.

“Good choice,” Lenny said, interpreting his body language. “You’d have a hell of a time getting back in this lane. They’re fine so far. Let’s just go with the flow.”

It was a typical summer day in Southern California as tourists gaped at the legendary Pacific Coast Highway, State Route #1, known affectionately by locals from San Diego to San Francisco as the PCH.

Rental cars filled with sightseers drifted perilously outside their lanes, swerving here and there and menacing the other travelers in their vicinity. Road warriors from around the world hung out of windows or popped up from sunroofs, cameras in hand, snapping pictures of surfers riding waves, huge houses hanging off cliffs and lines of fabulous cars most people only saw in the movies or on TV.

Outraged natives shook their heads and sometimes their fists and muttered under their breath.

“This is going to be a real bitch if he turns off onto some private road to the beach,” Lenny said.

## GAYLE FARMER

“I know. What the hell, you think ... shit, he’s slowing down. Okay, right blinker, good. He’s going up into the hills.”

Jim picked up his cell. “Ella, when he starts up the hill, no matter where he turns, unless it’s a real street, you continue straight on. Don’t follow him onto any country lanes or private driveways. Let me know which way he goes if I get too far behind, then turn around somewhere and follow us in. Just ... okay, here we go.”

The gray Mercedes led the way up the rise; the line of cars behind it followed the winding road through the mountains. Areas of scorched earth, leftovers from the last wildfire, made black patches amid the fresh new growth.

They came to a four-way stop and the Mercedes turned right, rounded a bend and disappeared from sight. Terry inched her way up to the sign while Ella talked to Jim.

“They turned right at the stop and disappeared around the turn.”

“Okay, Ella. Go on up the road, turn around the first chance you get and come back down. Find some place you can pull over that’s near the stop sign and wait for me to get back to you. We’ll keep in touch, okay?” He placed the phone in his lap and glanced at Lenny. “Let’s hope this doesn’t turn out to be a dead end.”

Lenny chortled. “Well, we won’t be the only ones.” He nodded at the Chrysler as it also made the turn ahead of them and disappeared around the bend. Next in line, the Jag continued straight up the road and followed it to the left. The big Lincoln went next and followed the Mercedes out of sight.

Jim raised his eyebrows and nodded quickly. “Can you hop back there and unleash both dogs? If we’re heading into a problem, I’d rather they’re free to help us.”

Lenny crawled to the back of the SUV and removed their collars. “Okay, kids. Come with me.” He resumed his seat, ordering both dogs to lie down.

The road did not end abruptly as feared, but rather meandered up the hill in a series of switchback turns with

## *COLD FUSION*

driveways branching off on both sides. Huge mansions hid behind towering trees and tall hedges, most were guarded by gates much like the Baker estate.

Lenny nodded at the Chrysler. "He's been with us since the pier. Same with the Lincoln. Too much of a coincidence for me."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the big car turned left into a driveway and halted outside the gates. The window lowered and a hand reached for the touch pad. Jim passed by and gave it a cursory glance as they followed the twisting road. His attention focused on the gray Mercedes above them. It signaled its intent to turn right and the Lincoln passed by, continued up the road and disappeared around another turn.

Lenny raised both eyebrows and stared at Jim. "Well, I'll be damned. Guess it was just coincidence after all."

Jim turned into a driveway below, satisfied that the men holding Arnie could not see them, and picked up his cell. "Where are you, Ella?"

"We're parked a ways up from the stop sign. We can see every car that stops in any direction. What should we do?"

"Come up the street and check for a nice side road we could hide in, either direction, although on the left would be best. They just took Arnie into an estate right above us. We're parked below them on the same side."

Ella tapped Terry's arm and indicated that she should drive up the road. She continued to talk as they began the slow climb, noting short turnoffs into the woods, but nothing that Jim wanted.

Terry glanced around and gave a small shiver. "It's weird, but all of a sudden, after all that traffic and those cars all following the Mercedes, it's so quiet it's creepy."

Ella nodded in agreement. "Okay, there's one that looks promising, Jim. There's a lane or trail or something on the left side, plenty wide but it looks kinda rough. Terry's making faces at me. She's not anxious to get her car hung up on a rock."

## GAYLE FARMER

“Well, stop and look at it, check it out ... how deep does it go? Is there enough room for us to park there as well? Better still, just wait. Wait on the side of the road for me. We’ll go in first.”

\* \* \*

Jim backed out of the driveway and hurried down the road. He didn’t get very far but by the time he saw the Jag, he’d almost passed the girls who pointed frantically at a lane that appeared out of nowhere. He slammed on the brakes, throwing the SUV into a light skid; the tires took hold and he drove down the fire road until the trees shielded both cars from view.

“What do we do now?” Ella closed the car door and ran toward Jim and Lenny as they climbed out of the SUV.

“Lenny and I are going to check the driveway, see if we can figure out what’s going on. You and Terry go back down the hill to that first turnoff road. Park there and keep an eye on the cars that come back down. The GPS shows this road is a dead end, so eventually they’ll have to return the way they came in. Keep the phone on and let me know what’s happening. Be careful.”

Ella hopped into the car and they backed down the lane to the street and vanished around the turn.

Jim pulled his gun out of its holster, checked it once and put it back, his expression grim. “Ready?” He nodded at Lenny, then snapped his fingers at Tony and slapped his thigh twice.

Tony moved in close. The signal indicated that what started out to be a potential run in the woods had turned into work. A light ridge of fur rose along the length of his spine as he walked at Jim’s side, eyes watchful, ears perked.

Cricket walked with Lenny, hackles up as well, glancing at Tony from time to time and lifting her snout to smell the air.

## COLD FUSION

They crossed the road and began the quick walk up the driveway. Ahead, they heard voices followed by the slamming of car doors. An engine turned over.

Jim and Lenny darted into the woods, hitting the ground just moments before the gray Mercedes passed them as it headed for the road.

“Son of a bitch,” Lenny said. “What’ll we do?”

“We don’t know whether Arnie, or Candace for that matter, was in that car. I couldn’t see anything with the windows dark.”

“They could still be up there in whatever house is at the end of the driveway.” Lenny nodded up the hill and pulled his cell from his pocket. “Damn, no signal.”

Jim put his phone to his ear and shook his head, disgusted. “I lost contact with the girls. They’ll pick him up when he passes. Let’s run up and check out the house or cabin or whatever’s up there. Might get some idea what’s going on.”

They rose and hurried up the driveway, not sure what they’d find. The chalet looked like something out of a Joyce Kilmer poem. Birds chirped like mad, woodland critters played in the leaves, and a light wind sang through the trees.

Lenny scanned the woods for any signs of movement. The tranquility of a late summer afternoon reigned. “Makes ya want to hum ... *I think we’re alone now...*” He glanced at Jim, gave a light chuckle and pulled rubber gloves from his pocket.

Jim snapped his fingers at Tony, pounded his fist into his palm and made a circle. The dog disappeared around the side of the house.

Cricket remained attached to Lenny’s thigh.

They advanced on the cabin, took the two short steps up to the porch and peered in the lace-draped windows, unable to get a clear picture of the room.

Tony bounded up the steps and sat at Jim’s feet, indicating that nothing going on in back required attention. One thing they knew, they were alone. No ambush would catch them unawares.

## GAYLE FARMER

Jim took a handkerchief from his pocket, draped it over the knob to doubly protect any latent prints and tried the door. It opened with an obliging swish.

The cabin consisted of one enormous main area, partitioned by furniture to separate the dining room and kitchen from the living room. The huge fireplace, cold and empty as expected in the middle of summer, dominated one wall. To the left, a hallway led to the bedrooms.

“This is so strange. The place is immaculate. I’m not sure why, but they really cleaned up, didn’t they?” Jim bent over, picked up a corner of a burger wrapper from the trash and shrugged. He glanced around the kitchen, noticing more evidence of recent occupation. “They did some cooking here.”

Lenny nodded, ran his gloved fingertip along the edge of the burner and headed down the hall. Both bedrooms contained two queen beds, matching nightstands and lamps and plasma TVs on the wall; closed doors revealed large private bathrooms.

The coverlet on one bed, smudged with dirt and slightly rumpled, drew his attention. “Hey, Jim, I think this is where they kept Candace.”

He drew back the covers, exposing sheets that were wrinkled and soiled as well. “I guess they didn’t take the time to send out the laundry.” Lenny beckoned to Jim as he came in the room. “Looks like dirt off a shoe, maybe?” He pointed at the smudges and shrugged.

“I checked all the drawers in the kitchen. No personal papers, no old mail, no phone. No way to know if this is a rental or who owns it. Either way, we need to get back to....”

Just then his cell rang. “Hey, Ella.”

“The Mercedes came back down the hill a little bit ago. We’re tailing them. The windows are blacked out so we don’t know who’s in the car, but I assume it’s Arnie and Candace. We’re at the light, about to get on the PCH, heading back toward town.”

“The PCH? Why didn’t you call sooner?”

## COLD FUSION

"I tried to, but couldn't get any signal. This is the first time the call would go through."

"Okay, we're on the way," Jim said, making a twirling motion with his hands. He followed Lenny out the door at a trot, both dogs right behind them.

"What?" Lenny said, picking up a strong pace as they headed for the Suburban.

"They're tailing them. They're just getting on the PCH."

"Shit. They see Arnie ... anyone?"

"Nah. Windows are dark."

They increased their speed and by the time they reached the van, sweat poured down their faces.

Jim and Lenny scooted down the fire lane and onto the road. "This doesn't look good for the home team." He tore along the road, skidded through the stop sign and charged down the hill, grateful there were no cars ahead of them.

"It doesn't look good at all. Why did they move her, ya figure?" Lenny glanced at the traffic on the PCH and shook his head. "Where the hell are they going now? Every time they drive anywhere they have to know the chance of being spotted increases. Where could they be taking her ... them?"

Jim's phone rang again. "Ella, where are you now."

"We're heading back up toward town, and, whoa, they just pulled into the access road for the 405. What the heck is happening, where can they be going?"

The traffic changed considerably, both in volume and speed. Modest cars with lots of miles replaced the pricey vehicles of Santa Monica and the PCH. A little scratch here or there went unnoticed, as did faded paint and rusty fenders.

Terry had the steering wheel in a death grip as she stared from side to side. "Oh, God, tell Lenny to hurry up. We don't have any business being here, not even with Amy for backup. Ask him what he wants us to do."

GAYLE FARMER

Taggers had defaced overpasses, walls, street signs, anything they could reach with their vile messages of hate.

“Oh, Jim, you won’t frickin’ believe it. It looks like we’re heading into Compton, if you can imagine that.”

“*Compton?* Good God, girl, ya gotta be kidding me. Hold on a minute.”

Lenny tapped Jim’s arm and held up a finger. “You tell them they are not, absolutely *not* to stop that car let alone get out of it. Tell them to follow the Mercedes until it goes somewhere or stops and then to just drive by and circle the block or something. Most of all, shit, tell them to be careful.”

Eyes wide, Jim stared at the former LAPD detective. “Bad area, huh?”

“The worst, Jim. Even the cops don’t like to go in there, and they never go alone.”

“Shit.” He cleared his throat and drew a deep breath. “Okay, Ella, talk to me. Where are you now, honey?”

“Yeah, I was right. We just got off the 405 onto Rosecrans. Man, talk about the *hood*. The walls, the sidewalks, everything ... the whole place is like covered with graffiti. Okay, we’re stopped at the light over Inglewood.”

“Ella, I want you to follow them until they reach their destination, but then just circle around the block, continue to drive ... damn that car, you’ll have everybody and their brother watching you. I don’t care what happens, do not stop the car and for God’s sake, don’t even think about getting out. Lenny says you’re in a really bad area.”

“No shit. I kinda caught onto that when I saw all the graffiti. What should we do, just circle the block? Where are you?”

“We just got on the 405. I figure we’re ten minutes behind you.”

“God, what a neighborhood. Man, hurry up.”

“What’s Amy doing? Is she on alert?”

## COLD FUSION

The laugh, high and harsh, sounded more like an eerie shriek. “She’s sitting up tall in the back seat and snarling at everyone. Man, I don’t know what we’d do without her.”

“Both of you need to have your guns at the ready. Any chance they made you?”

“We already did that and nah, I don’t think so. We’ve kept three or four cars between us at all times. The traffic is fairly heavy and besides, two gals driving around, what’s to make of that?”

“Oh, right, two white gals driving around in a red Jag in Compton. Nope, you’re right. Who’d notice that?”

Her voice rose. “Well, shit, I can hardly help where they drove to! Oh, man, they just turned onto Condon. It’s a one-way street, all warehouses around here. Okay, they’ve turned into an alley ... they’re driving into a warehouse. Now the door is closing behind them. I got the address as 756 Condon. We’ll keep circling the block until you get here.”

“We’re only about ten minutes out. The freeway’s a breeze today. Okay, here comes the Rosecrans turnoff. What road are you on now?”

“We just made a left on W. 145<sup>th</sup>. It’s pretty quiet right now, not much foot traffic, only a couple of cars parked along the curbs. We’re going to wait here. If anyone approaches, we’ll leave, but this is the best place to wait. We’re in the wide open so at least no one can sneak up on us.”

“It won’t be long now. I see the Inglewood crossing right up ahead. Great, we made the light.”

Jim continued down the street, conscious of the pedestrians and what they might be doing.

“Okay, Ella, it’s coming up. We just turned on Condon. I see 756. The door is still closed, no other entrance visible from here, but you know there is one.”

They stopped at the bottom of the street, saw the girls and pulled into the empty slot three cars behind them.

Night settled in.

## *Chapter 12*

Single file, they wound their way through the woods, moving with speed and familiarity, except for Arnie, who stumbled often and verged on passing out. His mind whirled at such a pace he considered it a miracle he hadn't fainted from fear.

Arnie thought back to the ride to the chalet. The men in the Mercedes, all Russians from what he could make of the accents, had little to say past telling him to shut up. His demands finally scaled down to whiny requests regarding Candace which met with stony silence. Without warning, the man sitting next to him elbowed him in the mouth, splitting his lip wide open and loosening some teeth.

“Do not speak again unless spoken to.”

Arnie slumped into the back seat and turned his head to the blacked out window, deliberately dripping blood onto the upholstery. *DNA evidence*, he thought irrelevantly, and wondered if he would ever see his beloved Candace again. Tears filled his eyes and slid down his cheeks. A particularly large drop fell on the seat beside him. *Son of a bitch. If the cops don't see tears and blood, they're blind.*

With his left eye closed, he hoped to appear unconscious to his captors while with the other, he watched their progress down the PCH. He knew Malibu well and recognized the turnoff they took, and as they climbed the hill, he had a memory of an

## COLD FUSION

upcoming stop sign, the winding, hilly road ahead and the driveway they eventually turned into.

Two years ago, his assistant, Dan, gave a Labor Day barbecue for their fellow workers at the laboratory. It hadn't been all that long ago and he knew they were in the general neighborhood. When they turned at the stop sign, his pulse quickened in fear and disbelief.

*That's the most ridiculous thing you've ever thought. Dan? A traitor? Can't be.*

All questions left his mind as they pulled up to the familiar chalet. The men jumped out of the car, jerked Arnie's door open and grabbed his arm. They pulled him out of the seat, taking no notice of the bloody lip which continued to seep down his chin.

"Get up the steps and into the house, fast. We're in a hurry."

Sure he would at last see Candace and encouraged, Arnie hurried up the stairs and across the porch. He opened the door to disappointment. No Candace stood there waiting ... just two more men--a total now of five--surrounded him.

They spoke to each other in rapid Russian with much hand gesturing and waving, and judging by the tone, more than one obvious expletive. Something had them in a major uproar and their sense of urgency came across clear, even if their words did not.

*Good deal, something's wrong and that has to be a plus for me. Now where the hell is Candace?* He started to ask again, then licked his lip and thought better of it.

They spun him around and pushed, heading back across the porch and down the stairs. The original driver and the man in the phone booth got back in the Mercedes and said several more things to their compatriots before driving back down the driveway.

Arnie gazed around at the chalet and the area surrounding the front yard. Without a word, the men started off at a brisk pace and now, here they were, tromping down some

## GAYLE FARMER

obscure trail in the woods, headed who knew where or why. He did his best to familiarize himself with his surroundings, to remember in case it became important to know where he was.

They crossed the main road and continued down the street to a driveway whose gates stood conveniently open. One of the men stopped long enough to key in the code to close the gates while Arnie, flanked on either side, proceeded to the house at the bottom of the drive.

They hurried up the stairs and into the large foyer of the sprawling bi-level, closing the door behind them.

Two men stood by a large white marble fireplace. The hearth sported a huge asparagus fern for summer decoration; oxblood leather chairs flanked it and a large matching sofa emphasized the masculinity of the room. Deer heads with full antler racks graced the walls, a peculiar expression of betrayal in their eyes.

Shotguns and rifles lived behind what one could only presume were locked glass cabinets.

*A hunting lodge by any definition. Wonder where the hounds are.* Arnie again familiarized himself with the area. The formal dining room, really just part of the huge room, filled the remaining area of this section of the house. The kitchen had to be through the door at the bottom of the room. Historically, there should be a back door leading outside. He filed that away as well.

A hall to his right led to the other side of the house and what had to be bedrooms; the wrought iron railing guided the way to the lower level of the house, presently hidden from view.

Chin up, shoulders back, Arnie turned to one of the men, terse and confrontational.

“If you expect me to cooperate one moment longer, you’d better let me see my wife. Other than that, you can do what you will to me. My daughter is in protective custody and if you’ve killed Candace, I have no further desire to live anyway. So where the hell is she?”

## COLD FUSION

The men glanced at one another for a moment. One shrugged. "She is just down the hall. We will take you to her in a moment. I want to warn you, she, er, appears as she does because she is a very foolish woman. She came close to dying twice. I hope you are not as foolish, although judging from your appearance, I'm not sure."

Arnie's stomach turned over; it was as he suspected. Candace might fear the unknown, but give her a valid enemy, something she could see, and she rose to the challenge with surprising vigor. He decided to match her, step for step.

"You might think you have the advantage now, *comrade*, but let me tell you the truth. You need me far more than I need you. We are not the pushovers you expected, heh, *comrade*? Not the wimpy little Americans you expected to find, and this is only the beginning, believe me. Don't trust your press, *comrade*. They lie to you. You'll never get out of this country alive, I promise."

In a swift move, the man jumped at Arnie. He buried his fist in Arnie's stomach. "Don't call me *comrade* again."

Arnie bent over double, took two deep breaths and straightened up. "Fuck you, *comrade*."

\* \* \*

"Okay," Jim said, staring at Lenny as he talked to Ella on the cell. "First of all, don't turn the Jag off. Be ready to run at the first sign of trouble. Next, you girls have your guns ready to fire, safety off, and make sure Amy is on high alert. Most blacks are scared shitless of big dogs, so you have that going for you. Above all, if anyone approaches the car, be ready to bail."

Lenny nodded at Jim and started dialing his cell. "Tell them I'm calling the cops as we speak. Then we're going to take a quick hike up the street, see if anything's going on in that warehouse, but we're not going inside. Either way, we're just gonna let Pete and the LAPD take the heat and the glory." He

## GAYLE FARMER

paused a moment then began speaking to Pete in rapid staccato words, giving their location and the situation as they knew it.

Jim listened a moment and then returned his attention to Ella. "We aren't equipped to do anything at this point anyway. We shouldn't even be here, it's like asking for trouble. If I'd known where the hell you were headed, I'd just have called the whole thing off from the get-go. I want you girls alert ... all of you."

Lenny glanced around at the deepening shadows and stepped out of the car with Cricket at his heel.

"Start the Jag now and keep it going. If anything happens, get out of here and then call the cops. We'll leave the phone open, but I might not be able to talk to you. Here we go."

Lenny and Jim hurried down the sidewalk, two large dark shadows tagging them.

On rigid alert, Cricket and Tony stalked down the sidewalk, eyes darting into the gloomy corners, ears swiveling for unexpected sounds, prepared for attack from all sides. They knew they were not alone.

Half a dozen guys sat in an old Chevy, passing a joint and watching their turf for invading gang members.

"Que passo?" The driver shrugged at the Jag and the women inside and snickered.

"No se."

"Looks to me like the gringos are here looking for some trouble. Es no their place here, like el nigre. No mas." He glanced at the driver and grinned, gold flecked teeth catching a gleam from the last intact streetlight on the entire block.

One of the men in the back seat said, "More better still, el caro rojo es solo." He elbowed his buddies and leered. "We go say hello to the señoritas? Maybe go for a ride, have a little party. El caro es muy rapido."

The driver laughed in agreement and the engine turned over with a low screech. The old Detroit battleship pulled into the street, lights off and lumbered down the road to the stop sign.

## *COLD FUSION*

It made the turn at the bottom of Condon and crept up beside Jim's recently vacated van and then edged sideways into the slot ahead, partially blocking the Jag.

The men got out of the car and spread out, blocking the Jag in. The one in the lead pulled a knife out of his pocket. The blade--a wicked eight inches at the least--shot out of the nose of the knife with a click, glittering in the moonlight. He slashed it back and forth a couple of times for emphasis and grinned.

Amy saw them first, her body quivering as other-worldly growls and snarls issued from her mouth. On edge since their arrival in Compton, her hackles rose along her spine, bristling as her snarling increased in volume.

"Oh, my God," Ella said, palming her gun. She slipped off the safety and took a deep breath as she saw the men begin to circle the Jag.

"Holy shit!" Terry slid the gearshift lever into R and pressed the button on the console that said S. She'd never tried it, but remembered vividly the few times Bob had. "Hold on," she said to Ella.

"Amy, down!"

The dog had no time to obey before the Jag shot backwards and sideways, up over the curb in a semicircle, then pulled into the street, tires smoking. The little rear end sat down hard as the tires spun and then grabbed.

The men hesitated a moment and then scattered, correctly assuming she was prepared to run them down. Two gang-bangers slammed against the ancient Chevy to avoid being run over, and one took a glancing blow to the thigh as he tried to make a grab for Ella's door. Yelping in pain and fury, he screamed at them in shrill Spanish. The men ran toward their old beater, still shaking their fists in the air.

Shrieking in the silent night and shooting pebbles into the air, the Jag fulfilled its reason for being.

## GAYLE FARMER

Before the men realized what she had in mind, the little car roared by the tired old Chevy and tore up the street. Zero to sixty in what seemed like a couple of feet ensured that both the car and her occupants were safe from her assailants as long as they could keep moving.

The men jumped back into the old bomber and pursued the girls, screaming obscenities and grinning as they saw the light for Rosecrans. It'd been green long enough to guarantee a red for the Jag. Then they'd have easy prey.

Terry saw it too and floored the car. Like a cherry red rocket it exploded up the street, hit the slight dip just before Rosecrans and tore through the yellow light.

Such an excessive show of speed was a fairly common occurrence on LA streets and the girls got two salutary honks and the expected rah-rah's and fingers from a group men who scattered, swerving in all directions as the convertible tore across the boulevard against the light.

"Where the hell are you going?" Ella glanced from side to side, noting they now had two cars in hot pursuit. "Now what?"

"You're asking *me*? I'm only the driver, you're the navigator! *Now* what to you?" She slid to a stop at the next red light, petrified as the men closed the distance behind her. She uttered a swift plea to God for safety and made an executive decision. She turned left against the red, right in front of a cop.

He slammed on his brakes, blue smoke puffing out from both back tires. He skidded sideways to a stop, gaped out the window in outraged amazement, then turned on his lights and sirens. He hung a U turn in the intersection and gave chase.

Having no desire to engage with the cops, the boys from the 'hood immediately gave up the chase. The old Chevy slammed on its brakes and prepared to make a right turn, away from the Jag and the cop. Unable to avoid a collision, it was promptly rear-ended by their fellow gang-bangers in a browned out Buick.

## *COLD FUSION*

The Compton veteran, already suffering from serious frame damage, gave up the ghost in an explosion of water that immediately turned to vapor as the radiator burst. Huge spouts of steam flowed from under the hood.

Cars of such dubious value were easily replaced. The gang-bangers bailed.

Terry pulled over to the side of the road, shaking from head to foot. Three men materialized in a dark doorway only to melt back into the shadows as the cruiser screeched to a stop behind the Jag.

For the third time in as many minutes, Amy dragged her battered body from the minuscule floor of the Jag's back seat and leaped onto the bench. This time she sat up on her haunches, paws on the canvas top, nails hooked into the rigid frame. Maddier than hell, the furious dog glared from side to side, snarling, snapping and ready for a fight with anyone who wanted to engage.

As the cop moved toward the car, he drew his gun. Amy stared him down, ears flat to her head, every tooth in her head visible. Deep snarls rumbled up her throat. Saliva dripped off her fangs as she lowered her head.

"Amy!" Ella gasped, reaching for the dog. "No, down." She gave a familiar hand signal and the dog immediately dropped to the seat.

The cop stood five feet back from the car and nodded. "Lady, I don't wanna, but if he gives me a hard time, I'll shoot him."

Considering the area, they weren't surprised to see three more backup cruisers pull alongside the Jag. Another cop began to get out and then sat back down. Moments later, all three light racks began to flash and the squad cars backed into the street with sirens wailing and tore up 145<sup>th</sup>.

The police officer held Terry's license and registration in one hand, nodding in weary compassion as she babbled about

## GAYLE FARMER

being surrounded and then chased through the streets by a bunch of screaming gang-bangers who surely wanted to kill her, or at the very least steal her car.

Ella embellished the story even further, hands waving in the air, eyes wide as she talked about stilettos, guns and how the flesh on her arm crept as the thugs approached the car. She rubbed her forearms in emphasis and shivered for good measure.

He began to back away even before his radio squawked, and excused himself with a nod and a promise to return soon. After a quick conversation with whoever manned the radio, he returned to the Jag and thrust the papers back at Terry.

“Senorita, I understand how scare you were. It was for good reason your skin creeped. Madre Dios, what are you doing down here? Go now and don’t come back here again no more, okay? Get the hell out of Compton before you start a riot.”

The cop hurried back to his car, flipped a switch, and the night burst into a cacophony of shrill wails. Lights flashing as well, he screamed up the road after his buddies, barely avoiding the two abandoned clunkers blocking the middle of the intersection.

Ella stared at her twin, eyes wide. “So, go, girl! Get the hell out of here before someone else pops out of the woodwork.” She turned in her seat, eyes searching the murky shadows, the doorways and corners, hiding places for those with only the worst intentions.

Terry shot away from the curb and headed for Rosecrans and the nearby freeway.

“Ames, poor girl. Are you okay?” Ella leaned over, stroked the dog’s cheeks and planted a kiss on her ebony forehead.

Amy proceeded to recite a litany of woes. She raised her muzzle and made *woo-woo* sounds while her tones ran the gamut from high whines to low, throaty growls.

“Is she okay? Man, I heard her hit the side of the car hard when we went around that corner. Poor girl. We need to get

## COLD FUSION

her a car seat or a harness or something that keeps her in one place.”

“That would kinda defeat the whole purpose of having her with us, don’t ya think?”

Nodding, Terry alternated her gaze from the roadway to the rearview mirror. Up ahead, freeway signs pointed to civilization.

Ella continued to stroke the angry dog and Amy continued to complain. “Okay, that’s enough now, really. Lie down.” She turned to Terry and shrugged. “Yeah, she’s fine, physically, but, man, she’s still pissed off. Okay, girl, it’s okay.” Ella pulled her cell from the floor of the car and called out to Jim. The cell had disconnected, so she redialed, relieved to hear his voice.

“Where are you?” they said in unison.

“We’re on Rosecrans, coming up on the freeway. We’re heading to the restaurant.”

“We won’t be far behind, give us another hour tops. We’re just filling in the blanks for Pete and company. And no pizza. We both have some serious heartburn. And be careful, Ella.”

\* \* \*

The electric sign for *ELLA’S* snapped off just as Terry pulled into the lot. They parked in the spot reserved for the Jag and hurried in the back door.

“Man, I need a drink so bad I can’t stand it.” Terry led the way to the bar, shaking her head as she walked. “I’m going to have to rethink this PI stuff. I’ve never been so scared in my whole life. I almost wet my pants when that guy clicked his knife at us. What the hell was that, a switchblade?”

“A stiletto, I think. I almost threw up. Amy was just about to come across the top of the car at him when you backed up. God!” She rubbed the back of her neck.

## GAYLE FARMER

Al saw them coming, read their expressions with easy familiarity and made up a batch of martinis. Two frosty glasses came out of the freezer; he poured, added olives and walked them to the booth.

“Bad night, ladies? You both look done in.”

“Thanks, Al. We’re even worse than we look. Keep ‘em comin’, good buddy.” Ella took several swallows and leaned back into the seat. “Girl, where’d you learn to drive like that?” She grinned, blue eyes wide. “Those guys must have crapped their drawers. I damn near did. You hit one, y’know. Just a graze but you know it had to smart.”

“Well, it was either that or let them get us.”

Ella harrumphed, finished her drink and raised the glass aloft to Al. “They were after your car.”

“Exactly. Can you imagine trying to replace my little Angel? *Not!* So, I figured I’d just run them over if they didn’t get out of the way. Justifiable homicide.” She chuckled in delayed reaction. “They ran in the end, but why is it they always underestimate a woman’s resolve? I almost got that one with the knife. Guess he figured I’d stop. Can’t imagine why.”

“It’s a guy thing. They figure we’ll scream and faint or something. Did you see the wreck? The dudes in the Chevy got rear-ended real good by those yahoos in the Buick. Man what a hoot. Bet they got some huge story going about how macho they were, right up until they have to explain what happened to their cars and why they’re blocking the intersection.”

She chortled again, holding her hands out and making sideways gestures. “And that other car, man, you talk about riding around on a slant. A survivor of the ghetto wars for sure—maybe two. That was its last battle.”

They heard the back door open and smirked at each other. Sure enough Tony bounded into the lounge, Cricket on his heels.

Al had the drinks on the table before the guys sat down.

“We’re all ravenous, Al. Is there any more prime rib left?”

## COLD FUSION

“From what I hear, Chef just pulled one out of the oven ... getting the drop on tomorrow’s lunch crowd, I guess. How many?”

“Four with the works.”

Ella glanced at the dogs on the floor under the table. “Don’t forget the canine contingent, Al. They worked hard tonight, too.”

Al returned shortly, pushing a cart with four salads, a basket of bread, three empty bowls and a pan full of scraps. He placed the salads and bread on the table. Face straight as a poker, he glanced at Jim. “Are they still on the floor or are they joining you at the table?”

Tony, Amy and Cricket stood at his side, tails wagging their hips, ears up, eyes wide in anticipation.

Jim slid his eyes to Lenny, who busied himself studying his nails. Neither girl would meet his glance. He returned his gaze to the bartender, expressionless. “Oh, Al, y’know what? Just set ‘em up at the bar. You all can chat while you slice the fruit.”

That did it for the girls, who virtually howled with glee.

For years, there’d been a running battle between Jim and Ella about hand-feeding the dogs. They’d finally compromised, confining *people* food to plates rather than hand feeding, and Al no longer threw steak scraps from behind the bar.

Having Al feed them still went against Jim’s grain, but he knew defeat when he saw it. So far it had no impact on the dogs except that they wagged their tails every time they saw Al—not exactly a guard dog trait.

Ella held up both hands, shaking her head. “Okay, enough teasing. So, are Arnie and Candace back home with Sara?”

The guys glanced at each other and shrugged. Both faces fell. “Far from it, sorry to say. The only people in the warehouse were the guys in the Mercedes. Cops took them into custody where I’d imagine they are being interrogated as we speak.

## GAYLE FARMER

There was no sign of Arnie or Candace, unfortunately, so we're back to square one."

"Well, not exactly, hon. We know for a fact that Arnie was in the Mercedes when it went to that cabin or whatever. There's no doubt of that because we all saw him get into the car. Were there any other cars around the place, anywhere they could have hidden one? You weren't there very long. Maybe they drove a different car deep into the woods?" Ella shrugged and popped a bite of steak into her mouth, making grateful yummy noises.

"That's entirely possible. We just did a real quick check of the house, not a search. Once we saw the Mercedes go back down the driveway, we both felt they were in the car, but we had to make sure."

Lenny leaned back from the table. "The only other answer, equally possible, is that someone waited at the warehouse and took them out another door, whisked them away in a car we don't know about. We figure that's what must have happened, especially if they expected to be tailed. That's what's causing the heartburn. So many possibilities."

Terry dipped a bite of steak in the au jus and popped it in her mouth. "This is great. So, what do we do now? They have Arnie *and* Candace."

"The cops are all over the warehouse neighborhood like a bad rash. They've wanted an excuse to get into some of those buildings for years, and now, with what just went down, they have every excuse necessary for search warrants for the entire block. Can't wait to hear what they turn up. Shit, I can't believe we let them get away, though. Really pisses me off." Lenny shook his head in disgust and pushed his empty plate aside.

Jim stared at Terry, grinning. "So, where did you girls take off to? We weren't gone ten minutes. The only entrance we could find was the garage door and it was secured. We came back to get you, but no Jag. Gave us a scare at the time."

"Oh, we had quite an adventure. A car full of young Latinos pulled ahead of the Jag and kinda boxed us in. When

## *COLD FUSION*

they got out and started walking toward us, I knew I had to do something, so I pushed the S button, slipped the gear to reverse and backed up over the curb real fast. Then I just charged those guys. I wasn't going to stop and there's no doubt they knew it, 'cause they scattered."

Ella grinned. "You should have seen her, man. This one guy had a knife and there was no doubt they wanted the car at the very least. I had my gun ready, but Terry acted so quickly I never raised it. Poor Amy, she had the worst of it."

Jim glanced at the dog sleeping at Ella's feet then at Terry. "What?"

"Well, Terry yelled at me to hang on and I yelled at Amy to lie down, but the backup and the curb threw her around a good bit. She'd barely crawled back on the seat when Terry had to make another sharp turn and that threw her into the side of the car. Amy was pretty pissed off, so when the cop pulled us over, she was ready for a fight. She did what I told her, so nothing happened, but she doesn't like being manhandled." Ella bent over and stroked the dog.

"What cop?" Lenny asked, eyebrows raised.

Jim stared at Terry. "Why did you have to turn like that?"

"Well, those guys followed us and another car joined them ... some dudes in an old Buick. Anyway, I turned right in front of a cop and he chased us up the street. The gang didn't want to deal, I guess. The guy in the Chevy stopped dead in the middle of the intersection and the Buick plowed into it. Broke the radiator, I guess. You could see the steam billow out from under the hood ... and that's about all I know. Craziest night of my life."

By this time, even Al had gone home. Terry pulled herself to her feet and walked to the bar. She lifted a bottle of brandy and four glasses from the rack and returned to the table with a grin. "Might as well drink. I know I'm never going to get to sleep tonight."

GAYLE FARMER

“That’s not a good thing. We have plans to make and a full day tomorrow.”

## *Chapter 13*

The Russian kidnapers held a quick confab and sharp angry words passed between them. The tallest seemed to be in charge, and he turned to Arnie. Wintry green eyes stared, unblinking, attempting to intimidate. Arnie matched the stare with one of his own.

“Dr. Baker, I ask you, please. Don’t be so provocative. You know we mean nothing personally. Our government is determined that yours will not reach a goal which will once again diminish our position in the world. You must understand we cannot allow that to happen. It is our earnest hope that you will cooperate with us and turn over the formula to my country. We don’t need it for ourselves, considering the oil we’ve just tapped into, but we won’t let your country return Russia to a second place position. You cannot be allowed to stand in our way as we secure control over Europe.”

He approached Arnie, bright eyes wide, almost insolent. Like a cat watching a bird, he gazed at his prisoner. “We have accurately portrayed our position, now you must evaluate your own. You will either give us the formula ... we will give you two weeks to finish, or we will be forced to kill you and your wife. I hope you understand the seriousness of your situation.”

Arnie matched the stare. “I understand your position completely. There’s never been a doubt in my mind.” He glanced at the men who were so convinced they had the upper hand and grinned. “Okay, let me see if I have this right, gentlemen. You

## GAYLE FARMER

say you'll set us free as long as I deliver the completed formula within the two-week time frame, right? You know that is impossible just as I know you will never release me and my wife. I can't conceive of how you would expect me to believe that? Under what guise could you imagine that someone as smart I am would buy such a pile of shit?"

Arnie shrugged and grinned wider. "What you're saying is that you are going to kill me and my wife in two weeks because you also know I can't complete the formula in that amount of time. Why not just tell the truth, lay it out on the table? And why wait? We all know the result will be the same. I can't do what you want." He grinned again, showing small white teeth.

They waited for him to say more and when he did not, the green-eyed man known as Reike beckoned with a toss of his head. "Please follow me, Doctor."

He led the way down the stairs which opened to a large, nicely furnished family room with fireplace. In the far corner, under a window covered with thick wrought iron bars was a workstation complete with his personal laptop, printer and a stack of CDs and files. Arnie's eyes widened in recognition but he didn't remark on that oddity. He already knew the answer.

"Where's my wife?" Arnie glanced at the closed door on the other side of the room and cocked his head at his captor.

Reike nodded. "She's in there." The man hesitated and shrugged. "There is no way out of here, so don't waste your efforts in trying to escape. The bars are set into the windowsill with cement. There is a small kitchen around that corner and the refrigerator is stocked with sandwiches and sodas. Coffee in the cupboard as well. Use your time in an efficient manner, Doctor. The clock just began."

Reike turned and walked back up the steps as Arnie charged into the bedroom to find Candace. She leaped from the bed, a wide smile on her battered lips as he approached.

"Are you okay, honey?" He engulfed her, shaking, tears squirting from his eyes.

## COLD FUSION

"I'm much better now." She cried into his shoulder as he held her close. "How's Sara? Is she okay? They'll go after her next."

"She's fine, honey. Let me look at you." He smoothed her hair away from her face, covering it with gentle kisses. He glanced at her black eye and cut lips and cheekbone. "Those dirty bastards hit you? Did they do anything else...?"

She grinned, plucky as always and pursed her puffy lips. "You should see the other guy. He grabbed me real rough, y'know, and I gave him an elbow in the side, so he slapped me in the face. I delivered the best crotch shot ever scored. He hit the floor like a felled tree."

"Toe tip?"

"Yep."

"Good girl. Then what happened? What did they do to you?" His index finger gently caressed her damaged cheek. "Hurt?"

She took his hand and kissed his fingertips. "His buddy backhanded me a couple of times and I slipped and fell against the side of the fireplace. I bled a lot, so I figured to capitalize on it and pretended to pass out ... scared the shit out of the bunch of them, let me tell you. The guy that hit me just about got *his* lights punched out by the leader ... tall guy, really insane green eyes."

They walked into the large room and sat on the sofa. As she passed by, she grabbed a pencil and a pad of paper off the desk.

"Oh, sit here on the sofa with me. It's so good to see you, Arnie." She turned to face him and began to scribble. *I think the room's bugged.*

He nodded, reached into his jacket and pulled out his palm pilot. He input a message and shifted it in his lap so she could read the face. *How many of them are there?*

"I've missed you so much." She shrugged, placed four fingers against her thigh, shrugged again, then five. "Are the horses doing okay with no one home?"

GAYLE FARMER

*How long have you been in this house?* “Just fine, Candace. They’re over at Jane’s farm, so don’t worry.”

“So who has Sara? Where are they keeping her? She must be scared to death with me gone and now they’ve got you.” She finished scribbling on the pad and turned it to Arnie. *Dan’s involved in this. They took me to his cabin first. The computer arrived late last night. It’s your stuff, right?*

His response was immediate and he nodded. “Sara’s doing just fine, hon. She’s in FBI protective custody. Regardless of what happens here, they’ll never get her. What would be the point, anyway? We’d be dead by that time.” *Yes, I’m sure it is. I’ll check in a minute. They took me to his cabin before they brought me here. I can’t believe it. He’s a frickin’ traitor. I’d never even consider it if I didn’t know it for a fact. Just goes to show you.*

Candace mouthed the words *bastard* and shook her head. She waited for him to send another message, but when he simply stared into space across the room, she nodded. “Good. Her safety is all I care about. Now what the hell is going on with these guys? Why did they kidnap me?”

“They want a formula I’m working on.”

“Formula? What kind of formula?”

“Oh, honey, you won’t understand.”

Her voice was terse. “Try me.”

He heaved a sigh and pursed his lips. “Something that would make a process called cold fusion a reliable source of energy. We can produce it at a fraction of the cost of oil or natural gas and it’ll keep the Greenies happy because there are no emissions.”

Her eyebrows rose along with her voice. “Well, good Lord, isn’t kidnapping a little bit extreme just to get a formula? And what’s cold fusion, anyway?”

He stared at her a moment and sighed again. “It’s long and very complicated.”

“I don’t care, we aren’t going anywhere. Just tell me about it, Arnie.”

## COLD FUSION

“But you.... It’s a reaction that produces unlimited non-radioactive energy using a product we mine from the moon. Now, do you know any more?”

“I don’t know what I know, but at least I’m not out of the loop. Tell me you don’t have to go to the moon.”

“No, not me.

“So what’s this all about, then? Why are they taking all this risk?”

“Now that Russia finally has the hardware to drill through their tundra, they have huge supplies of oil and natural gas at their disposal. They don’t want us to trump them, minimize them again. Of course, that’s exactly what’ll happen regardless of what they do to us. I’m not the only one working on this project. There’s a sister company that’s also on the job in Kansas somewhere. My assistants don’t even know it exists and I certainly don’t know where.”

Candace scribbled on her pad of paper. *Check that picture at the bottom of the stairs.*

*I know. I’ve been watching it for a while. They’ve been standing on the steps, listening to us, watching us from the beginning. It’s like a mirror. Guess they aren’t as smart as they think they are and I don’t think this room is bugged.*

*Be careful they don’t catch your eye. Maybe we can use it to our advantage, so don’t stare.* “Do they know about those guys, Arnie? What will they do when they find out?”

*I have been for a while. Just go with me.* “It won’t matter. I sure can’t tell them anything about the other facility. I don’t even know where it is. All I do know is there’s some whiz-kid running the show and he’s farther along than I am by a long shot. They’ll probably make the breakthrough before I do.”

“How much difference in his time-frame from yours?”

“I have no way of knowing, of course. Like I said, we don’t collaborate, but I know he’s ahead of me.”

“It’s funny in a sad way. All this trouble they went to, kidnapping us, breaking into this house, all that for nothing.”

## GAYLE FARMER

“That’s why the Ruskies are always doomed to fail. They live in a vacuum, so they think we all do. Being short-sighted like they are, and not allowing competition in their country, they figure if they take me out, their problem is solved. But as usual, they’re wrong. They won’t stop the development of the formula, but killing us will have every law agency in the country after them. And all to no purpose. They still won’t get the formula and they won’t stop the development of cold fusion.”

*Is that true? Why are you being so provocative? Are you trying to piss them off?*

*Might as well. Makes me feel better, and no, I’m the only one working on this project. Dan’s a useless dunce. I was going to terminate him the night they grabbed you. He can’t help at all, but I have a new assistant and I have high hopes for her. Unfortunately she still has some distance to go before the finish line, but she’ll get there in the end.*

*So you’re just saying all this so they’ll leave us alone?*

*Yeah, it’s worth a try, sure can’t hurt. They might decide to take off and leave us here while they still have a chance to get away. I just think we’ve run out of time. The cops are all over this and I don’t think it’ll take them long to find us.*

She gave a slight snort and nodded, throwing a surreptitious glance at the picture. “And of course, they don’t want the U.S. to develop something like that because they know we’d share it with the rest of the world and that would be the end of their choke hold on us ... them and the Arabs.”

“That’s it in a nutshell. Do we have anything to drink? I could use a stiff one but I’m sure that’s too much to ask.” He drew her to him and whispered in her ear. “Where can we talk?”

“Follow me ‘cause you’re in luck.” She picked up her pad, slid the pencil into the sofa and rose from her seat. Nodding, she held out her hand. She led the way to the kitchen, arm in arm. “I wrangled a bottle of vodka out of them when I first got here. They sure enjoy theirs so they were sympathetic to my

## *COLD FUSION*

request. I do a lot better with a little mellowing. I just wish I liked it better.”

Candace withdrew a bottle of vodka and a six-pack of soda from the cupboard. She pulled the ice tray from the freezer, filled their glasses and poured them a highball. They turned on the water faucet and stood up against the refrigerator, hoping the light hum would further distort their whispered words.

“So tell me, is Sara really okay?”

“She’s scared to death for you, but she’ll be fine. Is there any way we can get out of here?”

“Not that I’ve found.” She stepped away from him, put a finger to her lips and gestured to him, pointing at a locked door at the end of the room.

A good sized hasp crossed the frame and an impressive padlock held the door closed. He pulled her to him and whispered, “Go stand by the stairs in case they try to sneak up on us. I want to check something.”

She nodded, sipping her drink, and leaned against the door jamb, in perfect position to see them if they came out of the stairwell. “If you’re hungry, check the fridge. There’s all kinds of stuff in there.”

He opened the fridge again and pulled out several packages and bags containing ready-made sandwiches. He mashed them together, making as much noise as possible as he inspected the door.

“I am starved. I’m gonna have a sandwich. You want one?”

“I don’t think so, Arnie. Not right now. I have a headache.”

“That’s probably why ... you’re just hungry.” Noiseless, he began to rifle the drawers, moving stuff around the cabinets and looking for a weapon, all the while continuing a running monologue with Candace.

“It’s been ages since I ate a bite, and you know what that means. I’ll get a headache and have to take a nap. I’m under the

## GAYLE FARMER

gun here, can't possibly complete ... yeah, I know, but I still ... don't cry, baby, somehow I'll do it."

Candace stood with her shoulders pressed up against the far wall, directly under a barred window across from the kitchen door. From her vantage point, thanks to the glass framed picture at the bottom of the stairs, she had a clear view of anyone coming down from above, but at that angle they could no longer see her.

Arnie glanced at her and made a smiley face. He sat on the counter next to the sink, drew his legs under him and stood. He reached around the top cupboard, grinning like a Cheshire cat when he came up with a rather substantial screwdriver.

She gave him a thumb's up and a wink, and hurried across the room. "Yes, I'll have a sandwich after all. Crazy to be interested in food at this juncture in the game, isn't it? I didn't realize how hungry I was until I saw that. This may be our last meal." She grabbed his face in both hands and gave him a resounding kiss, then winced at the ache in her damaged lips. "You're my hero." Then she whispered, "They're not in the staircase. I guess they gave up."

He chuckled. "They heard every word we said, as planned, and right about now, I figure they're trying to decide what to do next. They might just leave without us even knowing it. Of course, that'd be the smart thing to do, so there's little chance." He pointed at the stairwell again and nodded, then gave a quick gesture at the door. He turned toward it, tools in hand, and knelt on the floor.

Candace tiptoed across the room and checked the stairs again. No one stared down at her. In fact, the upper door was closed. She hurried back to the kitchen where Arnie stood by the locked door, screwdriver in one hand and a sharp pointed steak knife in the other.

"We're good for now. Whoa, look at those. Where'd you get them?" She turned on the sink water and leaned toward his ear. "The upper door is shut, so I think we can relax a bit. When I first got here, I checked out the bedroom window and you can

## *COLD FUSION*

just see enough to know there is a little porch in the back, like a mudroom or something. I think this is the door to that room and if we can open it, we can get out of here.”

“Let’s find out.”

“Now? Why not wait until it gets dark? I think we’d have a better chance of getting away if we do that.”

He nodded. “You’re probably right. Let’s find a good place to hide this and then I really would like to eat something.”

“Me, too, actually.”

## *Chapter 14*

Lenny rubbed his forehead, cell pressed to his ear. “Did you get anything out of those guys, Pete?”

“Nah, not a thing except they’re under diplomatic immunity. They keep screaming for their Ambassador, but we’re just laughing at them. The NSA guys are due to pick them up any minute now. I figure if the goons have any knowledge, the Feds will get it out of them soon enough. Unfortunately, we’ll never know. They don’t share.”

“They’ve got DI? Wouldn’t ya just know it? Talk about sharing stuff, we have a couple of things we want to talk with you about. Can you meet us at the restaurant?”

“Twenty minutes?”

“Great.”

With the restaurant in full swing, Jim, Pete and Lenny sat at the table in Ella’s private office behind the kitchen, remnants of lunch pushed to one side.

“We got squat from those guys in the Mercedes. They pretended not to speak English so we had to get an interpreter and you know how that goes, especially when they don’t want to answer questions.”

Lenny made a face. “What a bitch. So they deny taking Arnie from the pier?”

“They held the line right to the end, at least in front of us. Said they had no idea what we were talking about. I told

## *COLD FUSION*

them we had them on the surveillance cameras around the area, but they just shook their heads.”

“Did the NSA team pick them up yet? That’s not a bunch you want to screw around with.” Jim leaned back, shifting in his chair.

Lenny snorted in agreement. “Hardcore, that’s for sure. How about the car, Pete?”

“The Feds arrived just about the time I left to come here but CSI got the car last night. Good chance we’ll find evidence that Arnie was in the car. I just don’t know if it’ll matter.”

Jim sat up. “What’s that mean?”

“If the Feds decide to respect the DI status, they’ll deport those guys and that’s the last we’ll see of them. God, I hope that doesn’t happen.”

“Shit, there goes the whole damn case right down the drain.” Lenny muttered under his breath then rolled his eyes at Jim and Pete, expression grim. “Still, you know, just going on gut instinct, I don’t think it’ll be any time soon. They’re not gonna let those crooks go until they find out what they want, believe me, even if they have to make them disappear for a while.”

Jim chuckled. “I have to agree, Lenny. The boys in black are good at that, plus they’re pissed. There’s a lot more than just a double kidnapping here, remember. We have espionage on behalf of a foreign government which doesn’t sit well with the boys in Washington.”

Pete glanced at his watch with a look of amazement that almost two hours had passed since his arrival. “Just a couple more things and then I’d better get back to the precinct. When you followed those guys to the cabin, did you see anything special?”

“No, just that for a bunch of men, they didn’t make much mess. I figure they brought Candace to the cabin the night they kidnapped her, which is almost a week now. We know Terry and Ella followed the Mercedes from the cabin to the warehouse, so there’s no doubt that if she and Arnie left in the

## GAYLE FARMER

Mercedes, the kidnapers had another car waiting to pick them up in Compton. On the other hand, if they had another car at the cabin, hidden away in the woods somewhere, who knows where they went from there?"

Jim cocked his head at Pete. "We didn't hang around or check the surrounding area except in passing. We were convinced at the time they were in the Mercedes and didn't have a minute to waste, especially with the girls on their tail."

They sat in silence a moment, digesting Jim's last words.

"So what's your next step, Pete? Got a plan?"

"Well, boss, the last place we know they were for a fact is the cabin. Once we toss it and search the woods, unless we come up with something special, I really don't know what else to do. Always a hope one of the kidnapers cracks."

"Chances of that are zilch, don't ya think? DI and all?"

"Ah, you never know for sure. We've kept the whole thing under wraps so the media doesn't have a clue about Candace being kidnapped or about them nabbing Arnie. With school out for the summer and Mrs. Byron taking Sara and her daughter out of town, no one's gotten wind of any of this, at least no one with a vested interest. You can bet the Feds aren't saying anything about the Ruskie and no one else knows. Those guys really play rough. I know that for a fact and once the NSA team gets them hidden away somewhere, it's all over. That bunch has an agenda we don't even know about."

Jim shook his head, eyes clouded with worry. "They're both dead, y'know. The kidnapers will never allow them to testify. Russia will deny knowledge of any plot. They'll give Arnie just so long to come up with the formula and then they'll kill him and Candace."

"You know, there's another possibility ... that they'd take them to Russia, like wards of the state or something, pretend he's a political defector seeking asylum and just be done with it. They can kill them in Russia if they don't perform. They have no compunctions against that kind of thing. It would avoid an international incident, for one thing."

## *COLD FUSION*

Pete stared at his old boss. “Man, I hope you’re wrong on that one. Otherwise, it really is all over.” He rose and nodded at the other men. “I have to get going. I’ll send a couple of patrol cars up there to check out the surrounding woods, see if we can find anything, some sign or a missed clue. It’s just about impossible, but we’ll give it a try. I’ll also get forensics to go over that place with a fine tooth comb one more time.”

“Can you give us half an hour head start? We would like to take the dogs up there and see what we can find. Cricket tracks, and while I can’t imagine where, she might pick up something.”

“You got it, boss. Anyone know who owns that cabin? All we can find is the name of some Delaware Corporation on the deed.”

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Dan Knoff leaned back in his chair, heart palpitating while rivulets of sweat coursed down both cheeks. His forehead glistened, awash in a damp oily sheen. He was about to embark on the most dangerous part of an already treacherous plan.

He pushed his chair back from the workstation and began to pace. When he’d first been contacted, well over a year ago, the situation looked easy. A competitor wanted some information and was willing to pay large sums to get it. Dan had easy access to that information and needed money.

The first bit of data they wanted was so simple he thought for a moment it was a joke. The receipt for \$100,000 deposited in a foreign bank in his name made him a believer. His first move was to transfer the money from the account they’d set up for him in the Cayman Islands to a numbered Swiss account that he knew they couldn’t access.

He wasn’t sure how those things worked, but he fully understood the mentality of the people who paid him for stolen documents and information. He wouldn’t put it past them to get what they wanted from him and then turn him in to the

## GAYLE FARMER

authorities. There was no stopping that, but he could make certain that they didn't somehow spirit the money out of his original account for themselves. If he ended up in prison, and that thought was a possibility he'd given long hard thought to, at least he had to ensure that his family would be protected monetarily.

The next several requests for specific bits and pieces of the formula were similarly conveyed and paid for. His Swiss account balance now exceeded a million and the interest rate promised continued and substantial growth.

Up to that point, Dan had not met the men he funneled his secrets to, always following instructions to send it by courier. All that changed on a day in early May when he was virtually accosted while eating lunch at his favorite restaurant, Chez Beau.

Two men approached his table, sat next to him and after quick introductions presented another proposition. If he would finish the formula exclusively for them, their company was prepared to offer him an unheard of salary and perks to rival an oil sheik. And if he could have, his answer would be yes. Unfortunately he had to decline.

Dan could never finish the formula for them; he couldn't even begin to. In fact, the job offer came at a most opportune time, as he knew Arnie was about to terminate him for nonperformance.

Over the past several months, Arnie had exhibited an increasing amount of disappointment and frustration that Dan seemed unable to keep up his end of the research work. On more than one occasion, Arnie had asked if he felt too overwhelmed to continue on the project, leaving Dan the opportunity to leave with honor and some dignity. After all, it wasn't as though he didn't try, didn't do his best. He had simply met his limits.

The light, softly spoken words of his mentor screamed in Dan's memory. He worked long hard hours, trying to follow through on the small areas of the formula that he might succeed with, but he was in way over his head.

## *COLD FUSION*

As it stood now, more than a year had passed since he'd contributed anything of substantial value to a project that paid him a princely sum each month. The advanced formula already exceeded his mental and educational capabilities, and they were nowhere near the end of the assignment.

Arnie needed help with the huge project, no doubt about it, and he wasn't getting it from Dan. As much as Arnie liked him personally and would not want fire him, his first loyalty belonged to the company who employed him. He needed someone able to contribute, not someone he had to clean up after.

Dan knew that Caroline Woodhouse, the biophysicist Arnie hired in January, was his replacement. A brilliant young woman with three advanced degrees from MIT, she now worked with them on a daily basis. In less than six months she had successfully completed two complex components of the as-yet unfinished formula, working side by side with Arnie as his obvious first assistant.

The night before they flew to Washington to deliver their presentation, Arnie met with Caroline in a private, confidential meeting that lasted well over an hour. Dan was not invited to participate and felt sure that Arnie would invite Caroline to attend the meeting in Washington as well. He was surprised that Arnie didn't, as Caroline had made significant contributions to the formula in the short time she'd worked for Endyme, and deserved the prestige and honor of being included as one of the team.

The only excuse he could come up with for why she was not included was that Arnie, always sensitive to the feelings of others, planned from the start to give him notice after the conference, and he obviously didn't want to do it in front of a colleague.

Although the phone call about some family emergency brought their dinner to an abrupt end before Arnie could say anything, nothing had changed. He would still be terminated

## GAYLE FARMER

when Arnie came back to work, if one of the other department managers didn't do it first.

As it was now, he and Caroline worked together in the lab every day, the silence strained and uneasy as they waited for Arnie to return from wherever he'd disappeared. Dan knew she was aware of his precarious position even though they never mentioned it.

When he finally did get back to Los Angeles, Arnie would give him his notice, along with a generous check for compensation and a glowing letter of recommendation. Knowing it was more than he deserved seared his already inflamed ego and damaged self-esteem.

The last call from the Russians was all Dan needed.

He didn't see this as espionage in the truest sense of the word. It was not a defense issue, no one would die, and no one would starve. It was just which country and which company would benefit monetarily. In his opinion, it was nothing more than a sharp business deal, and he conveniently ignored the millions of dollars his company had already poured into the project.

At first, his conscience fought him like a mad bull, but it wasn't long before he silenced the voices with the amount of money offered. The proposed ten million in untraceable cash deposited in his already sizeable account brought all that high talk down to earth. Money always did it for him, and it would mean everything to his precarious future and his family. He might not be able to finish the formula for them, but he could do something almost as valuable and the cash offer stood.

They needed Andy's laptop, CDs and equipment, and after Caroline went home tonight, he'd collect everything and take it to them. The thought frightened him, but not too much. He insisted on seeing the ten million deposited in his account before he made delivery. He might not be smart enough to figure out the formula, but he wasn't a fool.

Once the computer turned up missing, Endyme wouldn't lose a moment's time in starting the search. They'd let the dogs

## *COLD FUSION*

out and, if Dan didn't get out of the United States fast, he'd be arrested on sight and his family would be publicly humiliated. At that point the charges would advance to treason.

Luckily, the Russians agreed, and the wire transfer to the bank in the Caymans hardly had time to settle before he transferred it to his Swiss account. A quick check of the balance ensured his future was secure.

Dan thought there was a good chance they'd kidnapped Arnie, and wanted the computer and files so he could finish the formula. They would be furious when they found out he couldn't do it, but Dan didn't plan to hang around and see what they did next. Most likely they would kill him and when that happened, charges of accomplice to murder would be added to treason and espionage. His leg started to jump again as sweat dampened his shirt.

He thought about his family and shook his head. Maybe in a year or so, when the furor died down and the cops and the FBI had tired of searching for him, he could talk with Susan, try to explain how it all started. He knew she would understand; she always did. Time was all it took.

One thing for sure, she and the kids would never have financial worries. He'd already paid off the house and purchased enough blue chip stocks for them to maintain their standard of living off the interest for the next decade or two.

By that time the kids, already in their early teens, would be through college and most likely married. There was always the chance that Susan would divorce him, but he refused to think about that or about the look on her face when she found out what he'd done.

Conscience thus assuaged, he sat at his workstation and glanced at the clock. Caroline would leave the lab in less than an hour. An hour after that, the guards changed. He often worked late into the night, and they wouldn't notice he hadn't signed out until the next shift change at midnight. Only then would one of the guards come to the lab to check on him.

## GAYLE FARMER

That's probably when they'd notice the key to the stairwell door leading to the garage was gone as well. And even then, would they put it together? It didn't matter. He'd be out of the country well before midnight.

The restaurant where he'd arranged to meet the Russians and transfer the equipment had a dark parking lot and a small clientele. The exchange would take no time at all and he knew they'd never be seen. Less than twenty minutes away, LAX waited with planes ready to take him anywhere in the world.

Dan patted the attaché case next to his leg and smiled. Inside were his bankbook, passport, recently purchased airline ticket and several thousand dollars in cash. He turned his attention back to his computer, entered the LAX home page and checked the schedule for departure times and destinations.

His papers were in order and all his reservations had been confirmed earlier. First stop, Paris. Next was a leisurely drive to Frankfurt where he would leave the Parisian rental car at the railroad station. From there, a short train ride to Cologne and a week-long stopover to make sure he wasn't followed.

By many a circuitous route, including bus and private car, he would make his way to his final destination, Lake Geneva, Switzerland, Lausanne to be exact, and the offices of Dr. Hans Erherd.

It was a beautiful city, one he'd visited long ago. It would become his home, at least for the near future. The plastic surgeons in Switzerland were beyond compare and Dr. Erherd was the best. Soon even Susan wouldn't recognize him.

Chuckling at the high tech encryption program on his computer that guaranteed privacy from all discovery, he deleted every item that referred to his upcoming trip.

## *Chapter 15*

Jim and Lenny pulled out of the parking lot and drove down the street toward the freeway. They slipped into the turn lane, slowing as the traffic began to back up.

Lenny's cell rang. "Hello, Browning here." He paused a moment as a frown furrowed his brow. The expression flitted from outright anger to intense disbelief. Nodding, he closed the phone and slipped it back in his pocket.

"I'm really going to hate this, aren't I?" Jim pursed his lips, tapped the blinker and eased into the left turn lane.

"That was Pete with an update. I hardly know where to begin. Let's see, the frickin' Ruskies are heading home. Someone raised such a stink about their arrest, words like international incident were bandied about."

"Ah, shit."

"Oh, there's more. Last night, one Dan Knoff met his demise in the parking garage where he worked with Arnie, and guess what? He owns the cabin we're heading to."

"I don't believe it. Arnie's assistant is involved in this?"

"Believe it. Looks like he worked undercover for the Ruskies. Arnie's computer and all his records disappeared from the lab last night and Dan was the only one with access."

The air went out of Jim in a whoosh. "Oh, man. How'd they do it?"

"Bullet to the right temple, tried to make it look like suicide, but didn't put much thought into it. The guy's a lefty."

## GAYLE FARMER

Traffic thinned out as they climbed into the hills. The huge oak trees sheltered the road from the hot, late afternoon sun, dappling the blacktop with shadows.

“We’re probably just chasing our tails, but I still want to look around, don’t you? I’d like to give Cricket another chance at tracking.” Lenny pulled a scarf from the back seat and nodded. “I’ve kept this around on the odd chance, y’know. Got scent for Candace as well.”

“Not only that, but those Ruskies they just sent home? They’re not the only ones involved. Someone still has Arnie and his wife, and the theft of the computer and all those programs proves they’re still alive. We just lost the chauffeur. The other guys are around here somewhere.”

They turned into the driveway and followed it up to the cabin. It was an idyllic summer afternoon, with bees buzzing in the flowers and woodland creatures chattering as they went in search of food. Squirrels scolded them from the treetops, cheeks plump with seeds.

Jim continued past the house and parked on the far edge of the clearing. “The boys will be here soon enough, no point in taking up a choice spot.”

They walked around to the back of the SUV and opened the door. They unleashed the dogs and Lenny called Cricket to his side. He extended the scarf and invited her to smell it. She sniffed deep, as though drawing the aroma into her lungs, there to be remembered forever. She barked once and sat, staring at Lenny. He made the sweeping motion she waited for. “Find.”

Nose to the ground, she coursed the clearing at a trot, her silence telling Lenny she had nothing so far. She continued at a good pace, almost skidding when she came abreast of the path one would normally use to go from the porch to a car. She whined, head now bare inches from the ground, ran up the porch stairs, sat and barked.

Bright-eyed and more than a little curious, Tony watched Cricket, head tilted to one side. He followed her moves with interest, his short tail rotating as he watched her work.

## *COLD FUSION*

Periodically, light whining sounds rose from his throat and he glanced at Jim, hoping to be allowed to join in the fun.

Knowing Arnie wasn't inside, Lenny called her back, cast his arm toward the forest and again gave the order to find. She repeated the cast and almost immediately gave a yelp as she hit again.

Jim and Tony remained in the background as Lenny worked Cricket. The dog gave an incredible performance and Jim wished Rudy could witness the results of his training efforts. Tracking was not a Doberman trait, but Rudy had the ability to bring things out in his dogs that the breed was not known for.

Cricket burst into the underbrush and started down a trail invisible from the clearing. While not widely traveled, it was no simple animal track and several sets of shoe prints, although vague, were apparent to the naked eye.

Jim and Tony followed at a sedate pace, walking well away from the trail and giving the dog ahead unfettered and undisturbed peace in which to work. When his cell rang, he almost ignored the unknown caller ID, not wanting to miss a moment of the dog's work. He looked at the screen a moment, then back at the dog. The next time he glanced at it, a text message sprawled across the faceplate.

\* \* \*

Arnie sat before his computer, carrying case on his lap, a crafty expression on his face. The Russians removed his cell phone, but allowed him to keep the Palm Pilot for working on his formula. They'd hooked him up to the Internet and warned him flat out they were monitoring everything he worked on from an upstairs computer.

The keyboard of his laptop had a variety of blank buttons as well as the usual assortment and Arnie hit one of them. His screen went dead and moments later, one of the thugs charged down the stairs. "Why do you be off line?"

## GAYLE FARMER

Arnie turned in his chair, glaring at the man. “Because I only have just so much memory and I don’t need the net right now! I’m working on an intricate part of the formula, you asshole, and your constant interruptions are making it impossible for me to concentrate. What the hell! Do you want the damned formula or not?” His voice ended in an irate screech.

The man pulled back, a quizzical expression on his face. He started to speak, hesitated and nodded. “Your only hope of survival is to complete the formula.”

Arnie’s voice rose to a howl. “I know that, you stupid idiot! So then get the hell out of my face and leave me alone or you can all just go to hell. I don’t have a frickin’ prayer anyway and all these threats and interruptions just make me crazy.” Red-faced, Arnie threw his pencil at the man and jumped to his feet. “Ya want a piece of me, just come ahead and get it.”

The man took two steps across the room, fists clenched, ready to fight. Reike appeared at the bottom of the stairs just then and called his compatriot off in quick, guttural Russian. Both men turned and walked back up the stairs without another word. The upper door closed.

The blood drained out of Arnie’s face as quickly as it had bloomed. He stared at Candace as perspiration bathed his ashen face.

“Whoa,” she whispered, eyes wide in admiration. “Good for you.”

He exhaled, puffing his lips out. “I had to get them to leave me alone for a while so I can contact Jim. Man. I could puke. Would you make me another drink? A stiff one. Crap. I was never meant to be a street fighter.”

Candace hurried to the kitchen and made them both a highball. She placed them on the desk next to the keyboard and perched on the chair.

He made an appreciative face as he took several sips and flipped through his case of CDs searching for the one he wanted. He inserted it in the slot and a series of business cards appeared

## COLD FUSION

on the monitor in alphabetical order. He skimmed through until S popped up, followed by Sessions and Browning.

The card contained their office phone, both personal cell phones, email addresses and their IM service. He inserted his Network Card into the laptop slot and plugged back into the net. He input Jim's cell phone email and when connected, prepared to send his first message.

Arnie shrugged at Candace and indicated the screen. Beckoning her over, he began to type. *WRDK107018callArnie* "We should be hearing from them any minute now." On cue, the little window opened.

"Where r u?"

"Can u get to a puter? BAC@END.org."

"10min."

Arnie closed that screen and popped up another full of math problems and symbols and turned to Candace. He drew her to him and kissed her neck several times. "Meet ya in the kitchen. Go talk about food and turn the water on."

She smiled, glancing at the picture at the bottom of the stairs to ensure they were not being spied upon and kissed him back. "So, you're hungry again? I guess excitement can do that to ya." She rose to her feet. "Okay, I know we have some containers of salad. They brought all new supplies in just before you arrived."

"The salad is still crisp, but I don't think we have dressing."

"That's fine. You know me, always dieting." The very words made them burst out in hysterics. "Like that matters!"

He whispered, "Has to be Dan. Not only the cabin, but my computer, my work files? Too much coincidence."

"That ham looks good." She turned to him and nodded at the door. "If I can find a bit of butter or oil, I'll make a grilled sandwich. Sound good?"

The light, fluttering trill of his IM called them back to the computer.

"Where are you? With Candace?"

GAYLE FARMER

“We’re across the street and about a quarter mile down from Dan’s cabin. Big gray split level. We’re on the bottom floor. Windows are barred but there’s a back door off the kitchen we think leads to a mudroom. If we can pry that door open, we can get out.”

“Locked?”

“Yep, but I have a screwdriver and a utility knife.”

“Fenced?”

“Chain link. Problem?”

“Nope. How many?”

“Five. Heavily armed.”

“Hang in there. Got your cell?”

“No. Only puter.”

“Okay, we’ll be silent from here on in except for a quick cell text.”

“I’ll switch over.”

\* \* \*

Lenny watched Jim lean away from the laptop, close it, and return it to its case. He wasn’t at all surprised at his partner’s next words because they’d been rolling around in his head since early that morning.

“I think we need to reconsider our part in this case. I wasn’t all that comfortable when we began this thing with Candace needing a body guard. That’s just not our shtick, but once we talked her into getting Sadie, I pretty much figured the case was closed. Instead, her stalker is murdered on her property, she gets kidnapped a couple of hours later and the ball bounces back in our lap because her husband can’t be reached. You’d think that was bad enough, but oh no, not by a long shot.

“Now we’re dealing with international espionage by the Russians, yet, including kidnappings and multiple murders. They *have* to be the ones who killed Tom Harris. I know this is right up your alley after all those years as a homicide detective, but I’m so overwhelmed I don’t know what to do next.”

## *COLD FUSION*

“I agree completely. I think we need to turn this over to Pete and let him and the LAPD handle it. We can give input, support their efforts any way we can, for sure, but we can’t risk Arnie and Candace’s lives by trying to do this alone. In the first place, we need a lot more manpower than we have, even with the dogs.”

Their train of thought derailed as two squad cars and an unmarked pulled into the driveway behind them. The uniformed officers climbed the porch steps and entered the cabin.

Detective Pete Riley approached the SUV and waved to Jim and Lenny to join him.

“Here we go.” Lenny got out of the car and sighed in resignation. It went against his grain to give up, but there was no other choice. As a former LA cop, he knew what needed to be done. Still, he didn’t like it one bit.

“Pete, we just talked to Arnie and he ...”

“Arnie? Where?” He scanned the area, eyes searching the surrounding woods, finally settling on Jim as he got out of the van. “You talked to him? Where is he?”

Lenny held up his hand. “Whoa, dude, give me a minute and I’ll tell you. We talked to him by computer ... instant messaging. They’ve got him and Candace right down the road in the basement of a big gray split level and they’re fine, at least so far. At least five goons on the team, maybe more and all heavily armed. I think you need backup, Pete. Best call the SWAT guys, too. Those thugs have two hostages and they’ve killed twice before. No reason for them to hesitate this time.”

Riley smiled at his old boss. “Do you have an address? I’d like to see who owns the place.”

“We followed Cricket down a trail that ends across the road from a house that looks just like the one Arnie talked about. It’s how they moved Candace and Arnie, can ya beat that? They walked them out. I don’t remember seeing it, but maybe we can find the street number. Let’s go check it out.”

## GAYLE FARMER

They hurried down the trail, soon coming to stand just a few yards above the gate.

“That’s gotta be the place, Pete. It fits the description Arnie gave us to a tee.”

Jim shrugged. “Check out the bars over the basement windows, just like Arnie said. Not exactly the neighborhood where one would expect that kind of thing. This has to be the place.”

With a grin, Pete clapped Lenny on the back and pulled his cell from his pocket, making rapid contact with his office. He ordered warrants giving them access to records showing the name and contact number for the house’s owner and the assistance of both the Sheriff and another LAPD team at that address. Finally, he asked for a special SWAT backup unit.

The men turned around and walked back up the trail, deep in conversation.

“What’s next on your agenda, Pete? Good move with the warrant, by the way. Should slow things down considerably, but without it, you run a real risk of blowing the case, especially with foreign nationals involved. You may have to wait, but we don’t.” Lenny glanced from his partner to his former protégé and shrugged. “We don’t need to wait for anything. How about if we do a little reconnoitering and see what we can find?”

Jim nodded. “Like how? What do you have in mind?”

“Well, we could check around the back of the property, see where the best place would be to gain access. Once we’re inside, we can check the house. We know where Arnie and Candace are right now, so we might be able to get them out without drawing attention from the kidnapers. By the time the SWAT team gets in place, it could be all over. Worth a try.”

The men were silent a moment, considering a variety of options and their possible repercussions.

“It sure beats sitting around here, Pete.” Lenny turned to Jim. “You game?”

“Right with ya. What do we need?”

“Nothing that isn’t in the van. Come on.”

## *COLD FUSION*

They trudged back up the trail to the clearing in front of the cabin.

“This okay with you, Pete?”

Detective Riley turned on his heel. “Like that gal on the TV....” He stuck both index fingers in his ears. “La-la-la-la-la-la. I haven’t heard a word you just said and I don’t want to know about anything you guys are getting ready to do. Same cell number, Lenny?”

“Yep.”

“Me, too. Keep in touch.”

“Pete, you’re a hoot.”

He nodded, turned toward the cabin and mounted the steps. The door closed softly behind him.

“Let’s go.” Lenny led the way to the SUV, opened the back doors and ordered the dogs down. He opened a steel filing case and removed two pairs of night-vision goggles. With a chuckle, he handed one to Jim. Next, he hauled out two small bolt cutters, an eight-inch long pry bar that would double nicely as a blackjack, and a tiny flashlight.

Jim picked up his laptop and shrugged at Lenny. “We need some way to keep in contact with Arnie. It’ll give us a hell of an edge if we know what the Ruskies are doing. Arnie can keep us up to speed and we can return the favor to Pete.”

“He wasn’t kidding about the la-la. He could lose his badge if this goes wrong.”

“And if it goes right, he could get a promotion.”

The high, leafy trees shrouded the neighborhood with premature darkness. As usual, the breeze increased as the sun began to set. Before long, twilight would fall. Until darkness cloaked their movements, they waited patiently.

## *Chapter 16*

A misty half-moon dodged in and out of the thick, fleecy clouds and the winds increased just enough to provide a perfect sound cover.

“This is the first chance I’ve had to use these,” Jim said, placing the night goggles on his head and adjusting the harness a bit. “I think I’d rather have them on a helmet than just this harness. Remind me to tell Rudy. One side slides a bit so it’s kinda wobbly.” He continued to play with the chin strap.

Lenny snugged his harness down hard, fiddling with the buckles a moment and then nodded in agreement. “They really make a difference, huh? He’s so innovative. I think we have at least one of every toy made. Where does he find the time?”

“That’s how he spends his nights.”

“One day you’re going to have to tell me his story. It must be something.”

“Yeah.”

They’d spent the last hour of twilight in the deep woods above the gray house, waiting for night to descend. Using darkness as a cover, they gathered their things and started their trek down the slope, following the fence until they were out of sight of the house.

Lenny pulled his bolt cutters from his pocket and chuckled. “Isn’t this vaguely familiar?”

## *COLD FUSION*

Jim nodded. “Nothing’s ever new. Let’s hope that it works as well for us as it did for them.”

Lenny began to snip the chain link next to the supporting post. In moments, he’d cut a four-foot slice. Above him, Jim cut the fence in a horizontal direction. He jerked the chain link several times, widening the gap to about three feet.

Jim called Tony to his side, made a pounding motion with his fist and swept his arm in a half-circle. The dog slipped through the fence and disappeared into the night.

They chose to approach the house from the garage side, as the chance of anyone inside seeing them was slim to none. Only one window high above them shed light. A door drew their attention and they nodded at each other, pointing.

Walking with stealth and great care they skirted shrubs and low obstacles clearly in view thanks to the goggles and moved toward the house. Backs to the wall, they crept along the side of the residence. They turned the corner and saw the porch Arnie had mentioned.

The screen door hung ajar and they mounted the steps, guns drawn. The porch, no more than four feet long and about as deep, contained yard implements, a couple of pairs of rubber boots and two winter parkas, but nothing else.

The door leading to the house opened inward, giving them nothing to work with.

“Arnie said there’s a hasp over the door so no point in wasting time with the door knob. Let’s see about that door into the garage.”

Lenny nodded in agreement then turned to Cricket. He snapped his fingers and pointed at his toe. The huge dog came to heel, hackles rigid, ears laced to her head.

Jim raised the dog whistle to his lips and blew one sharp toot. Tony materialized at his side, eyes wide, on guard. They walked to the door, never expecting for a moment to find it unlocked. When it rolled in his hand, Jim stared at Lenny with wide eyes. They shrugged and Jim pulled his cell from his pocket, dialed in Arnie’s IM service and texted him.

## GAYLE FARMER

“We r in garage. U stay put, we’ll find u.”

\* \* \*

Well out of sight of the kidnappers, a small task force gathered at the bottom of the curve in the road, making plans to storm the house and rescue Arnie and Candace. In addition to the six-man team Detective Riley brought in, reinforcements included an LA Division SWAT team and two teams of LA County Sheriffs.

At the bottom of the street, two CHP units waited, complete with riot gear and ready to turn back anyone trying to enter or leave the area. Their armored vehicles straddled the road and blocked entry to anyone but law enforcement. Several spike strips crisscrossed the road before and after the heavy cruisers and ensured speedy capture, even if the kidnappers rammed the squad cars.

Both Sheriff’s teams and one of the squads of L.A. cops guarded the front of the property, getting in position to defend the perimeter fence should the kidnappers try to leave on foot again. The risk designation regarding the possibility of harm or death to the hostages was a code red. The Russians made sure Arnie knew they would never give him up and he’d passed that information on to Lenny.

Detective Riley stood off to one side with the SWAT team leader and described the security setup. “The gate is part of the *Click2Enter* system, so we have access whenever we want it. A PI team hired by Arnie Baker is working two K9 units as well. They’ve already gained access to the estate through the fence and they’re inside at this time, searching for the Bakers. They’ve made contact and know they’re located somewhere on the bottom level of the house. As soon as they connect, I’ll be notified.” He indicated his cell.

“*What?* There are civilians involved in the rescue? What the hell is this all about?”

## COLD FUSION

“They’re not just civilians. One is my former boss, Lenny Browning, LAPD homicide detective for nine years. The other is well-known in law enforcement circles. They’ve worked together on a variety of successful rescues. Don’t worry, they won’t get in your way.”

“*Son of a bitch.* We don’t work with gumshoes, man, you know that. What a bunch of shit. Can you call them out of there?”

“No, I can’t.”

“If they screw this up, heads will roll, believe me.”

Just then Lenny’s cell rang.

\* \* \*

Jim glanced around the garage, taking note of the contents which included the Lincoln, a riding lawnmower and a golf cart. Hoses, garden implements and a variety of ropes hung on the wall.

A hasp and lock secured the door leading into the house. Lenny worked on cutting it open and gave a satisfied sigh as the cutter heads met. He pulled the lock away from the door and slid the hasp over. He motioned to Jim, pulled his gun from his holster and nodded. Both dogs, already on alert, came to heel.

Lenny opened the door slowly without a sound and glanced at the area directly in front of him. To the left, a staircase rose over his head to the floor above where the quiet drone of TV told of other occupants. He could see little of the rest of the room from his vantage point and eased the door open, peering around the other side. With great care, the men moved cautiously into the house.

A computer sat in the middle of a desk, a printer steadily spewing reams of paper as it copied the formulas on the screen. In a familiar pattern, it continued down the screen to the bottom of the page then started another as the information flowed. The monitor flickered black and white, throwing shadows on the walls.

## GAYLE FARMER

Jim tapped Tony's forehead and pointed at the dark space under the stairs. He disappeared into the shadows.

Lenny and Cricket entered the room, searching for Arnie and Candace. The dog raised her muzzle and sniffed, tail gyrating. Lenny followed her to the kitchen where Arnie worked at getting the lock open. Lenny saw Candace first and raised a finger to his lips as he hurried over to them.

Eyes wide, she stared at Lenny then nudged Arnie who knelt on the floor loosening the bottom hinge pin.

"Lenny!" He rose to his feet and grabbed him by both arms. "God, it's good to see you. How'd you get in?"

Lenny glanced over his shoulder, turned and headed back to the garage. "Talk later. Quick. We've gotta get out of here. Let's go. You need anything?" He shrugged at the workstation. "We have to leave right now. Come on."

Arnie stuffed all his CDs in the pocket of his jacket and took Candace's arm. "Lead the way."

They crossed the room with long strides as Jim opened the interior garage door. He motioned Tony out, closed it behind them and slid the hasp back over the lock, effectively barring the kidnappers from accessing the garage from the family room.

Jim popped his head out of the exterior door, took in the quiet darkness and turned to Arnie. "Take that trail all the way down to the end and follow the fence to a hole we made. We'll surely catch up before you get there, but if not, go through and follow it down to the bottom of the hill until you reach the turn in the road. There are several cops down there waiting to help you. Hurry, we'll be right behind you." He waved his hands at them. "Go!"

Arnie and Candace hurried out the door and across the lawn, disappearing down the trail.

Lenny pulled his cell out and dialed. "Pete, we've got them out. They're heading down a trail next to the perimeter fence line. From there, they'll follow it across the bottom of the property until they find the hole we made on the far side of the backyard. With any luck, they'll meet up with the cops at the

## *COLD FUSION*

bottom of the road. Notify them to be on the lookout ... we don't want them to get shot by mistake."

Lenny gave Pete a complete description of Arnie and Candace, including the clothing they wore. He glanced at Jim and nodded.

"We're on the lawn outside the garage and about to head down the trail ourselves. We could use some cover."

Shouts and banging on the door interrupted his words. "The Ruskies just figured it out, Pete. We're on the run. Keep in touch. We should meet up with Arnie and Candace in about five minutes. I'll call when we're all together."

GAYLE FARMER

## *Chapter 17*

Detective Riley closed his cell with a snap and hit the call button on the walkie-talkie connecting him with his men. “The Bakers have been extracted. They’re heading this way. Be on the lookout.” He gave a complete description of the couple and then signed off. He hopped in his car, heart pounding, and tore up the hill. Pulling in behind the other cruisers he drew his gun and joined his crew.

The estate gates parted in response to the *Click2Enter* code, and three patrol cars, sirens blaring, charged down the driveway, training their powerful high-beams and spotlights on the front of the house and the wide, expansive front porch. The house blazed, lit up like broad daylight. The jarring sounds of a loud-speaker boomed through the pitch-black night, repeatedly calling on the kidnappers to come out of the house with their hands up.

Another LAPD vehicle drove into the driveway and continued around to the back of the property. Darkest night became high noon as the huge klieg lights mounted on the armored truck erupted, allowing the cops to monitor movement around the rear of the estate. Slowly, the lights swept the upper part of the backyard, as well as the fence line at the other end.

Moments later, gunshots from inside the house took out the bay windows and sprayed the front of the lawn with glass and bullets, ricocheting off the driveway as well as the closest

## *COLD FUSION*

squad car. The cops returned fire and made contact, causing one of the Russians to scream in response to the hit.

Lenny pocketed his cell and snapped his fingers at Cricket. She stared at his hands, reading the signals. He pointed to the far side of the house and whispered, "Go." She streaked across the dark yard and disappeared into the bushes.

Jim had already set Tony on his appointed rounds and motioned for Lenny to follow him down the path. They vanished into the darkness, night vision goggles once again in place. They made good time and soon caught up with Arnie and Candace who cautiously worked their way down the trail, darkness impeding their steps, unseen roots and bushes threatening to throw them to the ground at any moment.

After a quick reassurance that no one was hurt, Lenny whispered, "Let's wait down at the bottom of the property for a bit and see what happens. We can cut our way out down there if necessary. Let's just hang around here and see what goes down."

"Sounds fine to me and it's a good place to see how the dogs handle the mission. Tony is an old hand, but this is Cricket's first time out. I can't wait to see how she does."

Jim led the way, alerting Candace--who had a tight grip on his jacket--of impending shrubs or trees that could trip her up. Arnie kept his arm around her waist, steadying her, while Lenny brought up the rear, one hand guiding Arnie's shoulder.

They made good time and continued down the trail to the corner of the fence. Moving alongside it in a lateral direction, they hesitated from time to time, listening to the cacophony of noise still pouring from the house above them.

Between intermittent gunshots and shattering glass, coupled with the continual urgings of the loudspeaker, the area echoed with violence, yet not a single surrounding house light came on to show the unusual disturbance had roused the ire or curiosity of the immediate neighbors.

## GAYLE FARMER

Gesturing with his hands, Lenny urged everyone to continue down the fence line until they hit the next corner. They'd entered the property on that side of the fence and both he and Jim had a clear picture of the nearby area from that point on.

Arnie had a firm grip on Candace as she followed in Jim's footsteps, steadying her as they dodged low-hanging tree branches and bushy shrubs. The darkness made everything recede into murky shadows and the untrimmed path was treacherous.

More than once, she steadied Arnie, giving him something to hold onto as his foot caught under an unseen tree root, threatening his balance in the menacing darkness. Twice he slipped as she dodged around some branches, and they both stumbled.

Finally they reached the far corner of the fence and leaned against it, catching their breath in quick short gasps and holding each other in a close quivering embrace.

Lenny pulled his cell from his pocket and redialed Pete. Voice low, he spoke with the detective, telling him of their location and their tentative plans.

"We're out of your way, Pete. We have Arnie and Candace with us, so don't worry about an extraction. We're at the southwest corner of the property, next to the fence. We've decided to wait here for a little bit and see what the Ruskie's have planned." He nodded several times then slanted his eyes at Jim.

"I'm glad, Pete. Okay, keep us posted on where the SWAT team is and what they want us to do." Lenny and Pete spoke a bit longer and then he hung up.

\* \* \*

As instructed, Tony waited in the shadows not far from the path Lenny and Jim had used. He watched them for a moment then turned sharp attention to the men who charged out

## *COLD FUSION*

of the screened porch. They tore down the steps, guns drawn, shouting frantically and turning from one direction to another.

Cricket, under orders as well, waited on the far side of the house, hidden in the thick foliage. She divided her attention equally between the vague movements at the bottom of the backyard that she knew to be Lenny and the men charging across the grassy plot before her.

As the men crossed the lawn and disappeared in the inky darkness, she streaked through the backyard on a diagonal path and hid in the dense shrubs. Never taking her eyes off her quarry, she watched as their halting progress took them on a straight line to where her sense of smell said Lenny was. Cricket lowered her head and began to stalk them.

Tony settled back into the shrubbery, attention fixed on the house. He whined under his breath and waited.

A large LA police truck rumbled down the driveway just then and entered the back yard. It rolled to a stop and trained its bright kleig lights on the perimeter landscape, temporarily blinding Cricket. She crouched and hesitated, blinking, then continued on her quest, shoulders lowered and head down, clearly on track.

Several more men crept through the porch door, but unlike their predecessors, they stood motionless, hidden in the shadows. Instead of charging down the stairs and following their compatriots across the yard to the bottom of the property, they hesitated, waiting.

Shielded by the porch and as yet unseen by the cops in the truck, the kidnapers watched the movement of the huge lights as they methodically swept the yard. On the third sweep, the boss, a man known as Reike, looked at his comrades, nodded and began a countdown.

The light swept past them and they ran across the yard into the darkness. Less than a hundred feet stood between them

## GAYLE FARMER

and their goal, a deep, thick patch of shrubbery. They ran hard and fast and made it across the expanse of lawn unseen.

Panting, they pressed their backs against the prickly hedges and waited, wincing as the long thorns dug into their flesh. Not twenty feet away, equally concealed, lay Tony.

Hidden by the intense darkness, Reike turned to his fellows. "Successful completion of mission is no longer possible. We cannot even fulfill prime directive. Chances are slim that Baker's still even on property. Best we can hope for is break away from from detection and escaping international shame. Passing that, our honorable death. Although I fear there is little likelihood of ever seeing him again, taking Dr. Baker with us would be good thing. At least let us take as many cops with us as we can." Green eyes glittering, he said, "Da?"

"Da," the other men responded, nodding, voices curt and emotionless.

Without moonlight the tall, leafy trees made the night as dark as sin. Even the stars did little to help. The men made slow stealthy progress, often slipping and falling as they worked their painful way down the fence line and then across the bottom, aiming for the far side of the property and an unintended rendezvous with Jim and Lenny.

They melted in and out of the shadows, dodging behind the elaborate hedges that decorated the back yard, tripping over low shrubs and banging into tree limbs, muttered curses marking their halting progress down the trail.

Head lowered, Tony followed them with ease, hackles up, ears tight to his skull. He stuck close to the hedges, cloaked in darkness, no telltale shadow to herald his arrival.

\* \* \*

## *COLD FUSION*

Jim adjusted his night vision goggles, glanced at Lenny, and began a slow scan of the property between the house and the fence where they now stood.

The police unit continued to sweep the back yard with its large klieg lights, but they had little success in penetrating the dense areas of shrubbery and bushes.

Tall leafy trees made a thick canopy overhead, and further contributed to deepening the darkness. The tiny slice of moon had no light to share, even when it managed to slip out of a cloud for a momentary appearance.

“I think I see something ... someone, waiting on the porch steps ... several of them.” Lenny turned toward Jim and pointed.

“I see them too. Looks like they’re waiting for the light ... yep, there they go, taking the same route we took.”

They watched the men scurry across the side of the yard, traverse the patch of lawn and disappear into the shrubbery. They followed the path along the fence. With any kind of luck, their course would bring them all together in less than ten minutes.

“Okay, no doubt they’re searching for Arnie and Candace. We’ve got to get them off the property and into protective custody.” Lenny pulled his bolt cutters from his pocket and led the way along the fence line for several hundred feet. With his finger to his lips, he leaned close to Arnie. “A bunch of guys just ran out of the house and headed to the far side of the property just like we did. They’re coming down the trail next to the fence. They should be here pretty quick unless they fall and break something. We need to get you out of here.”

Jim and Lenny led the way back up the far side of the property and stopped.

“This is a good place, Jim.”

They worked fast, snipping the fence links. Soon they made a hole big enough to get through without tearing skin or clothes. They grabbed the edge and pulled it aside so Arnie and Candace could get through.

## GAYLE FARMER

Jim nodded, encouraging them to crawl through the space. “We have no idea how many of them are looking for you. We know one group is following the same trail we took, but another group might be checking this side of the property. Put enough distance between yourself and the fence that they won’t see you if they’re coming down the property on this side. Then go directly up the hill. We’ll notify Pete ... let him know you’re on your way up. Be careful, move slow and be on the lookout for those guys. We have no idea where they are.”

“What? Aren’t you coming with us?”

“No, not right away. We’re going to wait down here for a while and see where the Ruskies end up. We’d like to take them all into custody, see if we can encourage them to talk. We need to know where they came from, who they work for and who hatched this scheme.”

Lenny nodded in agreement. “We don’t know anything about these guys except they murder without a thought. That’s a very bad character trait, especially since it’s you they’re after, so be careful.”

Arnie turned and nodded, taking hold of Candace’s arm as she wiggled through the gap. “Good luck to you as well. We’ll try to keep out of the way. And guys ... if anything happens, I just want to thank you for all you’ve....”

“It’s gonna work out all right, Arnie.” Lenny waved at him, interrupting. “Go on ahead. We’ll be okay and so will you. Let us do what we have to now. Go on, just stay far enough away from the fence that they won’t see you.”

He and Jim pushed the fence back into place. Without night vision goggles, the hole was invisible.

\* \* \*

Arnie held Candace close a moment as Jim and Lenny disappeared in the darkness. He kissed her and drew a deep breath as he felt her shudder. “Don’t worry. We’re going to be just fine, honey. I promise.” He glanced from side to side as if to

## *COLD FUSION*

check out the surroundings, even though his vision was reduced to a few feet around them.

“Okay, let’s walk straight away from the fence for about a hundred feet, what do you say? I’d like to put as much distance between them and us as I can and I doubt if they’ll try to climb over it, especially in the dark. Besides, they have no idea where we are, and I agree with Lenny. If we get more toward the middle of this yard, we’ll be fine.”

She nodded then, gasping as another barrage of gunfire erupted from the front of the house. “Yes, yes, let’s get away from here. God, it’s like waking up in a damned war zone.” Candace slipped her arm through his and gave him a gentle nudge. “Lead on.”

They turned toward the interior of the property, slowly picking their way through the bushes.

“There has to be a house around here somewhere.”

Several times she stumbled, almost falling. “Either the owners are all away or they’re deaf. No way someone could possibly sleep through this commotion. You’d think the whole neighborhood would be lit up like a Christmas tree. Positively eerie with it so dark like this.” She chuckled. “Except for the gunfire, of course.”

“God, yes,” he said. “If we can find the house, maybe get inside, we could hide out until morning. Once day breaks, things will be different.”

“Sounds like a good plan. Y’know, I’m wondering how much further we should walk before we head up toward the top of the hill? I can’t see the fence anymore, so I think we’re far enough away. The house has to be near the road, don’t you think?”

Arnie continued to hold her elbow. “I agree. We’re so deep into the property they won’t see us. Let’s find that house.”

They altered their course, heading toward the road where they thought the house would be. Their progress was slow but fairly steady as they wound their way around shrubs and bushes barely visible until they tripped over them.

GAYLE FARMER

The first time Candace fell, Arnie crashed to the ground with her, their feet tangled in some exposed juniper roots.

“Son of a bitch,” he whispered, pulling his feet from under the low slung root. “Are you okay, honey?”

Moaning, Candace rolled over and shook her head. “I’m not sure, maybe just a little shook up. My ankle hurts a bit and my arms feel scratched up, but I think I’m okay. You?”

He lifted her to her feet. “I’ve never been anywhere so damned dark in my life. I can’t see my hand in front of my face. We have to go slower, hon. Last thing we need is to break a leg. I wish I had a cane or something I could sweep in front of us. God, what a mess.”

“Where do you think everyone is? It’s positively uncanny.”

“Well, if you heard a gun battle going on next door, wouldn’t you be hiding out? For all we know, they sent cops in to warn everyone to keep the lights off and stay away from the windows. Plus, I think the road ends just above us. After Dan’s chalet, there’s nothing on that side of the road. Remember the office party he threw last summer? We hiked to the end of the road and it’s not far above his house. He took great pride in saying he was at the top of the hill and he mentioned how isolated it is up here.”

“Now that you mention it, yes, I remember. We had such a good time. Strange how Dan turned out, huh? Never had him pegged for a traitor.”

“I worked with him for several years and I didn’t spot it either. Makes me wonder at my ability to judge people.”

Arms linked, they continued until they came across a path that could logically lead to the house.

“Do you think we should give it a try?” She hung on to his arm with both hands and squeezed. “Lenny *must* have notified the cops by now. They should be looking for us, right? If we can get into the house, we can call them ourselves, tell them we’re safe and where we’re hiding.”

## *COLD FUSION*

“Okay, let’s take it. It’s still heading up in the right direction and I’m sick of crashing into things, but if we’re being followed....”

They made much better time using the path and as they crested the slope, the roof line of the house came into view.

Candace reached out her arm, crossing Arnie’s waist and slowing his progress. “Maybe we ought to wait a minute, check it out ... see if anyone’s up there waiting to ambush us. Let’s just stand here for a little bit and listen. It’s so quiet we should be able to hear them if we stay real still. It gives me the creeps.”

“I don’t see how they could possibly have gotten ahead of us. I’m sure the house is empty. It has to be or the owners are camped out in the dark. There hasn’t been a sound since we left Jim and Lenny. Whatever do you figure happened to those Ruskies they were waiting for? I was expecting quite a commotion. Gotta wonder if those dudes took another route or if the cops got them.”

“A while back there sure was pandemonium coming from the house they kept us in. Lots of shots fired so maybe they were hit. Sounded like the battle of the Alamo.” She clutched his arm to her body, taking strength from his quiet courage. “I hope all those bastards are dead. Stinking terrorists. Hope they all rot.”

\* \* \*

The men continued straight into the tangle of brush that comprised the middle of the property. They dove for cover as the lights began their return sweep, hiding from the explosion of brightness that came from the police unit parked in the back yard above them.

They huddled in the middle of a thicket, shoulder to shoulder, trying to reach a decision. Although they were only second level operatives, they knew their prime directive was to eliminate Dr. Baker. From the beginning of the operation, that

## GAYLE FARMER

was made clear to them. No matter the cost, he could not be allowed to live.

On the other hand, faced with a life or death situation and a minimal chance at success, they weren't so sure they wanted to die. Exchanging their lives for Mother Russia no longer held the allure it first had, especially since they would die in obscurity as failures.

The low-lying shrubbery created the perfect cover for a dog, even a big one. Still as the tomb, Cricket lay in wait, watching as her prey made slow progress through the bushes. Her stumpy tail rotated several times as a familiar scent wafted toward her, clear and reassuring.

Before long she would complete her task. Round gold-flecked eyes closed to slits, she rose from her hiding place and slithered along the trail, ears pinned and hackles up, close on the heels of her quarry.

\* \* \*

Lenny's cell vibrated. "Yo."

"What's up? Did they get out okay?"

"Yeah, they're on the other side of the fence, working their way up the property to the street. Be on the lookout for them. What's happening on your end?"

"Well, more than we expected," Pete said, voice tight. "We figure there are still at least two guys in the house, maybe more. Arnie's count was off by three or so, but it really doesn't matter. They're returning heavy gunfire, they're well armed and it doesn't look like they're coming out. You see any more of the dudes that came out the back?"

"No. We're downhill so far we can't see the house from here, plus we were busy cutting through the fence so we could get Arnie and Candace out of reach. We're ready for them, though, and the dogs are on track. We'll keep you posted."

## COLD FUSION

Lenny closed his cell and pushed it back in his pocket. He stared down the fence line wondering where the Ruskies were. By all rights, they should have arrived by now. “You see anything more of those guys?”

“No,” Jim said. “They ran right past Tony, so you know he’s on them. Have you seen any sign of Cricket?”

“No. I sent her in the other direction just before we ran down the trail. I couldn’t see the house from then on. There’s a good chance she’s following a separate group. Or she could be waiting for them to come out of the house. Like Pete said, they’re still returning fire, so we’ll have to see how all this shakes out.”

Jim and Lenny began to scan the land before them, night vision goggles illuminating the property. The foliage presented an impenetrable wall.

“Well, I can see what’s out in front of me, but otherwise it’s nothing but a tangle of landscape.” Jim turned toward the hole in the fence and shrugged. “I may be worrying for nothing, but Pete should have picked up Arnie and Candace by now. There’s nothing more for us to do here, so I’m for following them. What do you think? It’s obvious the Ruskies decided to cut across the property once they got out of the range of the klieg lights.”

“I say let’s go.”

They climbed through the fence and began the walk up the hill. As rough as the terrain was in the other yard, this was a like a jungle, a wilderness left to nature that hadn’t seen the hand of man in many years. Junipers, their thick curling trunks snaking across the ground, made walking hazardous even with the goggles.

“If they stayed fairly near the fence, the walking isn’t so bad, but I told them to put some distance between it and them, so if they ventured away from it, and I’m sure they did....” Lenny’s voice petered out as they scanned the terrain.

“Traacherous.”

## GAYLE FARMER

“I can’t find any sign of them. As far up the property as I can see, they’re not by the fence ... nothing is.”

Jim turned toward the interior of the land and shook his head. “They might have moved away from it when they first started up the hill. If they did and they’re walking around in that...” He nodded again at the snarl of trees. “I bet one of them got hurt.”

“Crap.”

\* \* \*

Now well behind the sweeping lights, the Russians slowed their pace as darkness swallowed them up. They reached the perimeter fence and stopped to catch their breath, watching the activity in the front yard and driveway leading to the road above them.

Three cruisers, lights revolving, headlights high, made it an impossible escape route. At least half a dozen more parked haphazardly along the road. They could not hope to sneak by them unnoticed.

Shrouded in the darkness, one said to the other, “We kill doctor and then we die here and now. Better here than some American prison camp. We can’t get car and we can’t get to road. We must find him first, at least die like hero. They must be around here close by. Where else to go? And where is Reike?” He turned and glanced down the fence line, away from the road, and nudged his compatriot.

They walked slowly down the hill, guns drawn, alert for Arnie and for whoever had busted him out. They saw a small gate in the fence with a simple handle on it, a pass through for neighbors to gain access from one yard to the other. Obviously, this was how the men came and went when they freed the doctor and his wife.

The gate pressed inward confirming it had been opened from the other side for access. They pulled the gate toward them, walked through and then closed it with a firm click.

## COLD FUSION

“What we do next? I will not die for damned formula.”

“No, is crazy lost cause. I’m not dying for this, either.”

“We make escape plan first, talk about new plan later. Night so dark can’t see two feet. Is perhaps better to wait until dawn? At least we see.”

“Not so good. Then everyone able to see. We get out now. Cops not watching other side of road. Maybe we can cross farther down and get away, regroup, make new plan.”

“If we find Baker, we kill him now, but if not, we run.”

“Da.”

\* \* \*

“It’s positively surrealistic, Arnie. I know how it feels to be blind. I mean, can you ever remember anything like this?”

“Eerie.”

Like a self-fulfilling prophesy, Candace stumbled and fell again, her already weak ankle protesting at the continued jolts and stabs. “Damn! How the hell did I miss that?” She slapped at the low shrub that ended the trail and marked the beginning of the more formal landscaping that surrounded the back yard.

“Oh, my God, are you all right?”

“Now it really hurts and these dumb tennies are no help. They don’t give me a bit of support. Ouch.” She sat on the ground, gently rubbing her tender leg and muttering impotent threats at the gang who’d kidnapped her. “Crud.” She extended her arms to Arnie and rose with his help. “I am so damn mad right now if I get my hands on one of those guys, I’ll choke the life out of him.”

“I know what you mean.” He hugged her to him, hardly able to see the outline of her body. “How is it now, honey? Can you walk?”

He offered his arm and she staggered a bit as she steadied herself.

GAYLE FARMER

“I’ll be okay if I can hold on to you. Yes, okay, oohh, God, just let me lean on you a bit. Okay, let’s go.”

They continued on their journey, now made considerably easier as they approached the house. Without warning, they set off an unseen motion sensor that controlled the decorative landscape lighting next to them. Candace gave a low shriek and clapped both hands over her mouth.

Startled, they gasped in fear, stopping dead in their tracks, eyes darting around, trying to get a fix on where they were. Tiny little bulbs cast dim illumination into the flower beds and elaborate shrubs that lined the backyard.

“God almighty, what the hell was that?” Arnie shivered, finally getting control of his throat muscles. “Glad I don’t have a weak heart.”

Candace nodded several times then cleared her throat. “Damn, that was scary. Is this a good thing or a bad thing? At least I can see the outline of the house.”

“I’m not sure. The lights are so dim that on a normal night you’d probably never notice them. They’re some kind of little decorative thing, I guess. Tonight, though, there’s no doubt they stand out. So, no, not a good thing.”

“Now we can see where we’re going.”

“So can anyone else who’s interested.”

“Good grief.”

As though to be as disagreeable as possible, the lights went out.

Candace grabbed Arnie’s hand, panting in fear. “They’re on timers like the ones we have around the barn, but ours don’t go off so quick. That couldn’t have been sixty seconds. They usually stay on for like fifteen minutes or so. They must have a special short setting.” She walked ahead, remembering the direction she wanted to take, gripping his hand for reassurance and support.

They picked their way across the lawn and almost screamed as tiny lights erupted in the middle of a huge arrangement of ornamental grass.

## *COLD FUSION*

“Oh, my God,” Candace said, a hand at her throat, knees knocking. “I have to pee.” She staggered across the lawn to the side the house and leaned against it, panting and listening to her teeth chatter. “Give me a minute, huh?”

Reunited, they held each other, hardly daring to breathe. The light went off as quickly as the first and they sighed in relief.

Voice low, he spoke in her ear. “I know those guys will follow us if they get a chance, but it’s me they’re after. I want to find a safe place for you to hide and then I’ll try to get back to the cops. They’re coming for me either way, but I don’t want you hurt in the process. Sara needs you.”

Silent for a while, she shrugged. “If I thought I could help I’d insist on coming with you, but you’re right. I’d just slow you down. Now, where can I hide?”

“Let’s see if they’ve left a door unlocked, or maybe they have a little yard shed somewhere you can hide out in until morning. You have no choice, hon. You need to sit down and rest your poor foot.”

“What about the lights? You know they’ll have the porch lit up. Let’s try to find a shed, or maybe I can just sit here.”

Across the yard, a ground light sprang to life, bathing a group of rose bushes in soft pink.

They flattened their backs against the side of the building, watching for any movement that would explain why lights across the yard came on. There was only one answer.

“It’s them.”

\* \* \*

The men froze in place, hardly daring to breathe. Not more than thirty feet away, a light flickered on in the middle of a large bunch of plants. They glanced at each other then quickly scanned the area for the cause and finding nothing, gazed at each other again, shrugging. As unexpected as it came, it went. Darkness dropped on them like a black shroud.

GAYLE FARMER

“Arrgh! What the hell’s going on?”

The taller of the Russian men leaned down, whispering into his compatriot’s ear. “That was motion detector, but it wasn’t us. We didn’t make it come on, so who the hell did?”

“I don’t know. Be still and listen.”

\* \* \*

“What do you figure that’s about?” Jim asked, pointing at a faint glow at the top of the rise. “Something from the cops?”

“Not bright enough. At first I thought it was a flashlight, but it’s too steady.” Lenny increased his pace. “Landscape lights, it’s gotta be. Let’s go.”

“I wonder if it’s a ... it just went out. I figure it’s a motion detector.”

“That could mean a lot of things. If we saw it, so did everyone else. I’m not sure that’s good, especially if it’s Arnie and Candace. We better drop a gear.”

“It could just as easily be one of the dogs.”

They lengthened their strides, the goggles making the path clear. As they crested the hill, another set of dim lights came on, these closer to the shadowy edges of the house and barely visible, even with the night goggles. They crouched, waiting, eyes searching the darkness.

“That’s gotta be two of the Ruskies, right over there. Who else could they be?” Jim whispered, pointing.

“I see them, too. There’s another one deeper in the shadows.”

“My God, check out along the far edge of the house. Isn’t that Candace? I don’t see ... okay, there he is, right behind her.”

Lenny shook his head. “Jim, this is absolutely crazy. I wonder if they’re aware of each other yet.”

“No one’s moved an inch ... okay, lights off again.”

“Where do you figure the dogs are?”

## *COLD FUSION*

\* \* \*

Tony kept his distance as he followed the men down the path. Unimpeded by the dark, he wove his way through the shrubs, silent and stealthy. Not too far away, he caught the scent of his partner. The short tail twitched and then stiffened.

Once out of sight of the sweeping lights, Reike led them off the path, cutting toward the other side of the property. He knew their only hope of escape meant gaining access to the street and they had to travel far enough down the road to come out behind the cops. They needed to get onto the next property. It was the only way out.

His memory served him well. He clearly remembered the wide swath of grass that separated the road from the estate gate and fences. It made a secondary buffer and would provide at least a minimum amount of cover as they worked their way down the hill.

The men stopped many times as they got their bearings in the pitch black. They had just enough glow from the sweeping spotlights to see the taller shrubs and trees, but the low lying bushes and exposed roots made walking difficult.

They continued across the lawn until they came to the fence, and noting the foliage along the edge had been trimmed, they turned and began the climb toward the road in search of an easy place to get over the fence. If necessary they could scale the chain link, but if they could find a gate between properties, so much the better.

They came upon the small gate in the fence, walked through to the other property and continued their trek toward the road.

Reike nodded to the other men. "Be watching for cops. We need to get to street as quickly as possible, but we have to make sure we don't alert anyone. The border along...."

Several yards away, subdued rays of pink light sprang from the middle of a rose bush. They dropped to their knees,

GAYLE FARMER

gasping, eyes frantic as they tried to figure out what had set off the lights.

Reike laid a hand on the arm of the fellow next to him and whispered, "Look! Over to the right there. It's Sergi and Vada. Let's go, but be careful."

The light went off and once again, Reike whispered, "Sergi?"

"*Da*, is Sergi."

"We're over...."

The men moved toward each other just as another puff of light set off an ornamental shrub to their right.

"Son of a bitch! Get down."

The men hit the ground again, successfully setting off yet another little bush. Panting, wild-eyed, they waited for their leader to say something.

"Nobody move," he said, his breath coming in quick shallow jerks. The lights near him went off, followed shortly by the others. "God, it's giving me freaking heart attack." He took several deep, audible breaths. "Okay, we must make run for it. We'll never find Dr. Baker and now we're in the middle of these crazy lights. Run straight to house then across to other end of property, try to reach street from there. With luck, we won't set off more lights."

The last light blinked off.

## *Chapter 18*

What should we do, Arnie?” Candace peered into the darkness and then turned to face him.

“We need to get to the cops. Stay close to the side of the house, head for the street and pray we don’t set off any more of those damned lights. God, it’s enough to make you jump out of your skin.”

They edged along the wall of the house, creeping toward the road and the squad of police gathered in the driveway next door. With their attention fixed on the lights sweeping the front of the building, they never saw the men hiding in the thick oleander hedges.

\* \* \*

Lenny flipped his cell open. “Pete, we’re in the backyard of the house next door and we’re about to have a party, at least that’s what it looks like. Not only are Candace and Arnie here hiding against the far side of the house, but the Ruskie’s are about sixty feet in front of us ... between you and us, actually. We’re over by the fence and we’ve got a perfect opportunity to take them all out, couldn’t have set this up better if we’d tried. I wouldn’t believe it if I didn’t see it.

“Get that truck turned around and have the guys shine those lights over here and then get ready. Those skanky bastards are gonna run like the roaches they are. Also, keep an eye out on

## GAYLE FARMER

the far side of the front of the property. The Bakers are hiding in the shadows over there, probably planning to head your way. They're plastered up against the house like a second coat of paint, so they're safe and definitely out of the line of fire. Now, the Ruskiies, they're standing right between us. Let's squeeze 'em."

Silent, Lenny and Jim closed the distance and soon drew within earshot of the Russians.

With little fanfare other than the low throbbing sound of the diesel engine, the truck with the klieg lights backed quickly over to the dividing fence, spun the turret around and lit up the neighboring backyard like a bright summer day.

The Russians scattered, running from the sweeping brightness and leaving a trail of decorative landscape radiance in their wake as they bolted for the house. The massive spotlights followed their path, then caught and fastened on Reike and his cohorts, pinning them to the wall like a row of bugs.

Not far from the petrified and furious Russians, Tony crouched in the cover of a dense clump of shrubs, still on track. Nostrils quivering, he caught Jim's scent. He stopped panting, body immobile, head cocked as though eavesdropping on his prey while they whispered to each other.

The dog pressed himself deeper into the bushes as footsteps approached and passed him, accompanied by another spate of angry whispering. Head lowered, Tony shifted his weight and crawled toward the men. When he got within five feet or so, he paused, waiting.

Lenny and Jim reached the edge of the lawn, still cloaked in darkness and waited to see what went down next.

Pete and company came around the upper corner of the house, guns drawn, while the loudspeaker demanded that the Russians surrender with their hands up.

## *COLD FUSION*

The gang, unaware of Jim, Lenny or Tony, huddled behind an inadequate stand of young trees, trying to dodge the merciless klieg lights. They closed ranks, merging with the side of the house. A feeling of despondency encompassed them. Their mission had ended in failure. Escape was impossible and none of them wanted to be arrested and imprisoned in the United States, let alone be shipped back to Russia in disgrace. Their only real choice now was how many of the cops they could take with them.

“I will not return home to Mother Russia as a failure. For myself, I will make cops kill me. They have good reason ... it will not be hard. For each of you, it is personal choice. The mission failed, but we did our best. We did not account for the resolve of Dr. Baker and the men working with him. I don't know how, but I know he brought cops to us. Their success in rescue is his responsibility. He's very clever man. You did best job you could. Now we give them something to remember us by.”

Reike moved slowly away from the group, his gun already drawn, and aimed it at the nearest cop.

Before he could fire, his body rose in the air, whipped backward in a tight arc and his knees buckled. Both arms flailed in the air and he screamed, doubling over at an impossible angle as ninety pounds of Doberman slammed into his back like a cannonball. His head and neck jerked backward and to the side as his shoulders snapped forward at odd angles to his torso. The gun flew out of his hand and skidded into the bushes. Reike crashed to the ground, twitched convulsively several times and lay still.

Tony darted back into the shrubs, still unseen by the other men on the team.

Another of the gangsters, also not about to be taken alive, drew his gun and pointed it at the cop in front of him. He took dead aim, but before he could squeeze off a shot, a sharp popping sound reverberated in the night. He tilted to one side, turned slightly and dropped his weapon. With a quizzical

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expression on his face, he stared at Pete's smoking gun, touched the spreading red stain on his chest a moment and then his knees caved in. He staggered forward several steps and collapsed in slow motion.

When the last upright Ruskie prepared to return fire, Lenny took him out, shooting the gun from his hand and severing two fingers. The man began to scream, grabbing his wrist as blood poured from his wound. He sank to his knees, clutching his hand and wailing at the top of his lungs. He crumpled like a felled tree, face forward on the ground and rolled over on his back, howling in pain and fury.

"Thanks, boss. We got it from here." Detective Riley nodded at Lenny in gratitude, and then turned to his men. A new flurry of activity followed by a shriek of fear got their attention. He pointed at the inky shadows near the house at the same time as sounds of a muffled shout and sharp cries filled the air.

They spun around to see another gang member lurch out of the shadows and collapse, waving his hands in the air like a puppet on a string and gibbering at the top of his lungs as though possessed by demons. Open-mouthed and paralyzed, he babbled, pointing at something still concealed in the dark.

Another man writhed on the ground, wailing as he wrestled with what looked like a snarling, slavering mass of snapping teeth. The growling had the quality and texture of fingernails on a blackboard. Both men began to wail.

Correctly assessing the situation, Jim called, "Down, Tony. Guard."

The dog released his hold and backed up just far enough to be out of reach of the men. He stared them down, baring his fangs. Low growls emanated from his throat. Occasional snaps of teeth succinctly implied what would happen if either of the men moved.

Then there was another sudden rustling in the brush next to the house, followed by a deliberate attempt at making noise.

## *COLD FUSION*

“It’s me. Please don’t shoot.” Hands up, Candace moved into the sweeping lights, a man close at her side. “Please, he’s got a gun in my back.”

Lenny took several steps backward, melted into the shadows beyond the reach of the klieg lights and began to move in behind the man holding Candace.

Jim and Tony remained in position, as did the cops.

“Step away from the woman,” Riley shouted, his gun fixed on the space between the man’s eyes. “There’s no way out but you don’t have to die. Let the....”

A blur, like a sleight of hand magic trick swished through the air, knocking Candace in one direction and her captor in another. Cricket whirled on the man as the woman hit the ground, slid across the lawn and rolled into the shrubs. She hit the oleanders with a solid thud and lay still, moaning.

Snarling, Cricket jumped at the man’s chest. Her teeth fastened on his up-thrust arm, quickly shredding the light material of his shirt. Blood spurted everywhere and he crashed to the ground, the heavy dog stuck to his chest like Velcro. As though offended by his pitiful shrieks, she clamped her jaws on his throat and squeezed. Pinned, the man stopped moving and thus probably saved his life.

Confident that Cricket had her man under control, Lenny went in search of Arnie, soon finding him bound and gagged, lying along the side of the house. “Oh, my God, dude, are you all right?” He pulled the tape from Arnie’s mouth, pleased to see him nod as he drew deep breaths of air into his deprived lungs.

“I’m ... fine,” he said, still wheezing. “How’s Candace? They got her and I....”

“Don’t talk, Arnie. Get your breath back. She’s fine, we got them all. Let’s get you loose and meet up with everyone else.” Lenny pulled a knife from his pocket, made quick work of the tape and then helped Arnie to his feet.

GAYLE FARMER

“I’m fine, really. Go ahead. I’ll be ... right behind you.” Arnie chugged like a locomotive as they walked and twice he stumbled.

Lenny hollered a warning as they came around the other corner of the house.

Pete nodded at them in relief then turned back to the cops who were busy handcuffing and Mirandizing the Ruskies.

Lenny patted Arnie’s back, pointed him toward the side shrubs and gave him a light shove. “She’s right over there, buddy, go ahead. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

He crossed the yard to Jim and nodding at Tony asked, “You seen Cricket?”

“Yeah, she’s up near the other end of the house. She’s got one of them on the ground and won’t obey my orders to stand down. The cops are waiting for you.” He jabbed his thumb to the right and grinned. “Definitely a one-man dog.”

Lenny hurried across the lawn, waving at Pete. The men moved aside and pointed at the man on the ground.

Cricket loomed above her prey while little chittering sounds accompanied by deep growls flowed from her throat. One paw rested on his chest as she dared him to move.

“Down, Cricket.”

She backed away, stumpy tail rotating at the sound of his voice.

“Heel.”

She rushed to his side and sat, head tilted, eyes wide, looking up in expectation. The chittering started again as her ears flipped up and down in rapid succession.

“Good girl, Cricket, good baby.” Lenny squatted before her, took her head in both his hands and rocked her back and forth, his nose an inch from hers. He stroked the big dog’s head, smiling as she grinned at him. Her ears continued to move as though about to take flight and unable to control herself any longer, she gave one short, joyful bark and began to lick his face. Woo-woo sounds poured from her mouth and she wriggled like a

## *COLD FUSION*

puppy. Finally, in a state of ecstasy, she threw herself on her back and howled with joy.

“I think we got them all,” Pete said, nodding as the last of the gang entered the paddy wagon. He turned toward Lenny with a grin. “What a great dog you’ve got there. Looks like you guys have all the fun. The other one is Tony, isn’t it?” He glanced down the yard where the dog sat at Jim’s side, tongue lolling as he panted. “You ever miss the department, boss?”

“Just what do you think, Pete?”

## *Chapter 19*

Candace settled deeper into the chaise lounge, her taped ankle propped on a pillow, and glanced across her cup of coffee at her husband. “I figured I’d sleep for a week. So weird, isn’t it?”

“Stress and fear do strange things to us. After all these years of waking at five-thirty, I guess we’re programmed to getting up at this time. Our minds won’t let us relax. I bet we’ll sleep tonight. Plus, anticipation has a lot to do with it.”

They watched the sun make a grand entrance, painting the tips of the trees mauve, slipping effortlessly into pink and then gold.

She glanced at Arnie and shrugged. “I used to watch the sun rise each morning, especially in the cabin. They were spectacular ... incredible colors, and I’d pretend we were together, imagine your face. After the first day, once I knew they weren’t going to rape me or kill me, it wasn’t so bad. They knew I didn’t have any answers for them so they left me alone. I wasn’t good for anything except to bait their trap and lure you in.”

Arnie leaned forward, poured her another cup of coffee before refilling his own. “You poor baby. I can’t imagine how frightened you must have been.” He shook his head slightly and took a sip. “It must have been hell for you. I was frantic, of course. All I can say is thank God for Jane. She’s been a saint through all this and we owe her a special gift of appreciation.

## *COLD FUSION*

She kept Sara centered, concentrated on staying positive even though she was scared to death as well. They continued with their routines as much as could be expected. They took Thumper and that new pony back to Jane's and she kept the girls busy working for their pony club tests. By the way, Sara and Betsy passed. I probably should not have told you. It was the only bright spot in Sara's life from the moment you disappeared."

Candace blinked back tears, knowing how frightened Sara had been and again thanked God for the blessings of friends like Jane. "She's like her second mother. It was the only thing that kept me sane through all that. I knew Jane would take care of Sara while you were looking for me. Did Juan and Maria stay cool?"

"Oh, you know them. Steady as a rock. The only thing he said to me after I got home was that he was praying for you and that I shouldn't worry about the horses because he had everything under control. He's another one that deserves more than just a thank you, not to mention poor Luci, of course. She came over and exercised the horses every morning even though she was scared to death for all of us. She was convinced someone would snatch Sara, too."

He glanced at his watch and grinned in anticipation. "Speaking of Jane, she said she'd bring Sara home first thing, which I'm figuring could be any time now. I can't wait to see her."

"Me, too. I'm glad we waited until morning, but I have to admit it was all I could do not to run over there, even at that early hour, and grab her up. Oh, God." Her voice quivered and she picked up his hand. He rose, then, moving his chair next to her chaise. She scooted over, patting the place next to her. He lowered his body into the chair and reached for her. Head resting on his shoulder, she sighed. "I love you so much. You're my hero."

Sounds of neighing floated up from the barn as Juan fed the horses their breakfast. He added a generous scoop of grain to

## GAYLE FARMER

their buckets and blinked back quick tears of relief. He shot a thank you to God for answered prayers and stroked the velvet noses nuzzling him. “The mama is home. All is good.”

The sun continued its lazy trek across the treetops, waking the blossoms to fragrance. The woodland creatures stirred, voyaging forth for choice flower tops and the best, most tender leaves while the birds chirped high in the branches, greeting the sun with trilling songs. Today the sky seemed very blue and the lacy puffs of clouds looked vaguely like angels.

They heard the buzzer in the kitchen announce that someone who knew the gate code was coming down the driveway. Still holding hands, Arnie helped Candace off the chaise. She limped as fast as she could, hurrying across the veranda and down the steps, arriving in the driveway just as Sara burst out of the car screaming, “Mommy! Daddy!”

She erupted into tears, arms wide as she scampered toward them. Hugs and cries and reassurances that they’d never be separated again filled the air. Sara grabbed her mother in a fierce hug, threatening to topple both of them to the ground. They rocked back and forth, crying, laughing, hugging each other and babbling.

Arnie plucked her from Candace and swung her around, tears hidden as he buried his face in her neck. Squealing in delight, Sara wrapped her arms around him, showering his cheeks with kisses.

Jane stood off to one side, face beaming with smiles. She fought back her own tears as she watched the family reunite. Her lower lip bobbed as Candace turned and beckoned her to join them. Tears streaming down their faces, they embraced.

“Oh, Jane, how can I ever thank you? My dearest forever friend. What would this family ever do without you?”

Lips bobbing, Jane swallowed several times and sniffed. “Candace.” She wiped her eyes and nodded. “I’ve never been so scared in my life. Thank God you’re alright. I ... I....”

## *COLD FUSION*

They hugged again, rocking silently for a moment, patting each other's backs and murmuring words of love and relief.

"We knew you'd be okay," Jane said, smiling, eyes glistening. "We talked to you all the time and every night Sara wrote you a note. Then we would pray to God to take care of you and send you back to us safe and sound. We just knew He would, and look, here you are."

They cried a bit more and then Jane whispered, "In a minute or two..." She glanced over her shoulder as a blue SUV pulled up behind her truck. They heard the door slam.

Smiling, Jane nudged Candace. "Someone else wants to see you again. She was heartsick when you disappeared..."

"Sadie? Is that...?"

The sound of nails clicking on the blacktop followed a whining, snuffling sound and soon a large black shape bounded around the edge of the garage. She gave a howl of pleasure and hurled herself at Candace's feet, a quivering mass of canine excitement.

Crying, moaning and making little hicking sounds in her throat, the Doberman thrust her head into Candace's hands.

Tears continued to stream down her face as Candace sank to the ground and hugged the dog, reassuring her that everything was alright.

Sadie alternated between licking Candace's face and talking up a storm, trying to explain and ask questions at the same time.

Sara ran over to them, squealing with excitement. They sat on the grass, arms around each other and cuddled while the dog continued to lick faces and sing.

Jane stood off to the side with Jim and Lenny. She glanced at the dog and shrugged. "I felt so bad for her the night they got Candace. I've never seen an animal so torn up, so completely devastated. I'm glad it worked out for all of them."

## GAYLE FARMER

Jim nodded. “Rudy took good care of her, tried to keep her busy, but she missed Candace. Turned out great in the end.”

Arnie stared at his wife and daughter a moment longer and then reached into his pocket, extracting a piece of paper. He walked toward Jim and extended his hand.

“Words will never express how grateful I am to you. I owe you my life and Candace’s. This check won’t come close to what we really owe you, but what value can you place on a life?”

Jim placed his hand over Arnie’s, tapped it and nodded at the joyous tableau. “Glad it all worked out so well. If I were you, I’d take your girls out for dinner. All of them. Tonight would be perfect. It’s my treat. They’ll all be welcome.”

Grinning, he took the offered check and handed Arnie a fancy business card with nothing on it but the name *ELLA*’s scrawled across the face and a chic Hollywood address.

The End

## Publisher's Note

There is a new space race underway in the world today that has received little attention in the media. Although it isn't often discussed by politicians, it has the attention of many major players on today's international board.

Most of the world's leading powers, including the U.S., Russia, China, India and Europe are setting their sights on the moon, specifically on its vast supply of a substance rarely found on Earth that some believe could hold the key to fusion reaction.

Nations across the globe are in a race to be the first to develop a functional fusion reactor. The prize in these efforts is a virtually unlimited, clean, non-radioactive fuel source called Helium-3.

He-3 is a light, non-radioactive isotope of helium which is rare on Earth, but highly abundant on the moon's outer crust. As a power source, at least in theory, Helium-3 is an extremely potent, non-polluting substance with virtually no radioactive by-product. It is so powerful that many scientists estimate just one space shuttle load, or roughly 25 tons, could supply the United States with its entire energy needs for a whole year.

If the space shuttles were converted to the mission of mining the moon for He-3, our current fleet could potentially carry enough He-3 to supply energy to the entire planet with materials to spare. Energy costs would be the equivalent to oil at \$7.00 per barrel and the profit to the U.S. taxpayers could exceed \$300 billion per year. Each and every year.

The United States is currently leading in this race, but our lead is dwindling. While the U.S. is consistently cutting back on the budgets for these technologies other countries, including China, are expanding their programs in effort to achieve these lofty goals.

At a time when other countries are putting more resources into fusion research, less and less U.S. funding is going into developing these technologies. And while other countries are working to nurture the talented engineers that can develop these technologies, the United States is cutting support in favor of more immediate goals and projects.

Currently China produces engineers at a rate of ten to one over the U.S. and Europe combined.

The race to mine the moon will be won, and to the victor will go the spoil, but the winner of this race is far from certain.

Professor Gerald Kulcinski of the Fusion Technology Institute, University of Wisconsin, is one of the leading researchers in fusion technology. He currently maintains the only Helium-3 fusion reactor in the world. Working with what can only be considered a shoe-string budget of barely a million dollars annually, he maintains a staff of five graduate research assistants.

Working with a limited budget and facing heavy skepticism among his peers, Kulcinski has produced notable results. Kulcinski's He3-based fusion reactor is very small. The reactor contains spherical plasma roughly 10 centimeters in diameter that can produce sustained fusion with 200 million reactions per second.

Currently the reactor uses more energy to sustain the reaction than it produces, but Kulcinski and his staff believes that with time and funding, the breakthrough will come.

The reactor uses a technology called inertial electrostatic confinement (IEC). This differs from other approaches to nuclear fusion in several important ways.

Using the IEC approach, Helium-3 would not require a huge tokamak reactor like the multibillion-dollar one being developed for the international ITER project.

Kulcinski's IEC reactors would have a price tag of about \$50,000 each and would be small enough to sit on a table top. Each of these reactors could power a small city or a large industrial complex.

The reason the reactors can be so small is because Helium-3 is non-radioactive so the He-3 reactor will not require the heavy shielding need in other reactors. Equally important is the fact that there will be no radioactive by-product from the reactors, making the Helium-3 reactor a truly clean, safe and virtually inexhaustible power supply.

The use of a lightweight, clean fusion reactor is not limited to powering to our cities and power plants. Nuclear propulsion has another potential uses. They include a wide variety of propulsion methods that use some form of nuclear reaction as their primary power source. Many military submarines and a growing number of large civilian surface ships, especially icebreakers, use nuclear reactors as their power plants.

Additionally, various types of nuclear propulsion have been proposed, some already tested, for spacecraft applications.

In March 2004, NASA began a partnership with the Department of Energy's (DOE) Naval Reactors Program which has a lot of experience in developing rugged, compact, long-lived reactor systems for use in harsh conditions. In September 2004, NASA's JPL (Jet Propulsion Laboratory) selected Northrop Grumman Space Technology in California as the contractor for co-designing the proposed Prometheus JIMO spacecraft. The contract award was for approximately \$400 million, covering work through mid-2008.

Projections said that the engine could ultimately be used to take a manned mission to Mars and to power other ambitious deep-space vehicles and missions. These might well include a mission to mine Helium-3 from the moon.

Nuclear power and propulsion will likely be an important factor in missions to carry humans to Mars and back.

Using current rocket technology, it would take at least six months to cruise to the Red Planet. Project Prometheus could cut this travel time to two months. Like the moon, Mars also has substantial deposits of readily available Helium-3. This technology could eventually become the critical factor in the success of a mission to mine the moon.

In view of the current budgetary concerns of the United States, funds for this project have been substantially reduced and its success faces an uncertain future.