

Gayle Farmer

FIRESTORM



FireStorm

Gayle Farmer

In gratitude

**This book is dedicated to the
California Firefighters**

And

**to all those brave men and women
across our country
who risk their lives every day
so that we can be safe.**

Thank you

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Chapter 1

Molly Kramer stared out the window of the SUV, working hard at keeping the bored expression on her face. At fifteen, she was much too grown up to show the excitement she felt. Long, slender fingers twirled a lock of straight blonde hair that shimmered down her shoulder.

Beth Chapman, co-adventurer and best friend, sat on the middle seat beside Molly, absently plucking at the hem of her pink shorts and tapping her foot. Gray-blue eyes wide with anticipation, she nudged Molly and nodded at a billboard of Shamu jumping high out of the water. They giggled under their breath.

As befitting his inferior age, sex and status, Danny Kramer bounced around the back of the SUV, alternately pointing at signs and giving a running commentary on what he planned to do once they got inside the park.

“First off, I wanna see Shamu. Last time the place was so packed I couldn’t see everything. That’s why I’m glad we’re here early, Mom. Then the polar bears, y’know. They’re the coolest and since they’re right next to the penguins, I plan to spend lots of time hanging out there.”

He patted his pocket and grinned. “I brought my camera, too. I want you to take loads of pictures of me and the animals, okay, Mom?”

As he paused to catch his breath, Molly turned around and glared at her brother. “Where’s your off switch? You’re babbling like a flippin’ idiot.” She crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

Face as straight as a poker, Beth said, “But then again, Danny can’t help it. Can you? You were just *born* an obnoxious little bugger.”

Danny grinned at her. “Bite me, dog face.” Impervious, insolent, he stared at her a moment longer, smirking. He slowly returned his attention to his parents. “Sea World is my fave of all the parks, Dad. Even better than Disneyland. I like the animals better than the rides, don’t you? I mean, when you think of it, here you get both....” He continued to stare at Beth from under his lashes as he rolled through his monologue.

Molly and Beth jumped out of the car, wide smiles of anticipation parting their lips. Desperate to get away from Danny, they hurried to the admission booth, joined the short line, bought their tickets and entered the park.

Dave Kramer called to the girls as he came through the gates, eyebrows up, prepared with the usual speech. “Check your cell phones for service.”

They did so, nodding in agreement.

“You girls know the drill. Stay together at all times, especially in the restrooms. Buddy system, right? I wish you’d stay with us.” He cast a quick glance at his son and shrugged. “But I know you’ll have more fun if you’re off on your own. We’ll have our first meet-up at the dolphin display in two hours. Ten o’clock sharp.”

“We’ll be there, Dad. See ya later.”

Molly breathed a sigh of relief as they walked away from her family. “That kid makes me crazy.” She ran a hand through her hair, lips bunched up like she smelled something bad.

“He’s a total idiot.”

“Really, Beth, I could kill him. I keep telling Dad he has ADHD or something, but he just gives me this look and talks about how I’m older and should cut him some slack. The only slack he gets from me is the rope around his neck, just before I strangle him.” Molly made a face and shrugged.

“He makes me glad to be an only child.” Beth chuckled as she unzipped her fanny pack and withdrew some money. “I don’t think I could live in a house where he lurked around every corner. Besides, talking about him is a downer and a waste of time. I’m starved. We left so early, I didn’t get breakfast this morning.”

“Me, too, but then, I’m always famished. I guess this isn’t the time to think about diet. I’m gonna get an ice cream waffle.”

“Oh, yes. Chocolate.”

Laughing, they got in line, indulging themselves in their favorite pastime – people watching. Molly saw him first.

“Hottie alert, man. Look at that guy over there ... the one with the dark wavy hair. Oh, the dude is, like, serious whoa.”

Beth nodded, blinking as the hot waffle and cold ice cream gave her teeth fits. She raised a finger, swallowed and mumbled, "Tight buns. Hot eye candy." She studied him a bit longer and nodded. "I could deal with that, couldn't you?"

Molly nodded several times, keeping her eye peeled for new guys to rate. "I think it's really important that a guy look hot, don't you? I hate that boy next door, squeaky clean look."

"He's got a great ass, that's for sure. Lips, too. I bet he's a good kisser."

"Definitely a bad boy; oh, man, here comes another one." Molly nodded over her shoulder at what had to be a lifeguard on his day off. Light blond hair, an impossible tan and a tight, athletic body made her eyes pop. "Check it out."

"Oh, man. Now that's my idea of a foxy looking dude."

"Uh huh."

By ten o'clock the lines had lengthened as park patrons laughed, ate and drank. Dave saw the girls first and waved his arms to get their attention.

Beth nudged Molly and nodded. "Parent sighting." They picked up speed, weaving in and out of the crowd, pretending they were on skates.

"So, what did you do first?" Susan Kramer grinned at the girls, eyes alight. "I bet I know ... ice cream waffle, right?"

They laughed in agreement. "Chocolate!"

"That's just what you needed, bubble butt." Danny snickered, grinning at Beth and gazing pointedly at her derriere.

She stared at him with wintery blue eyes, refusing to pick up the gauntlet. Dark, swooping eyebrows rose and her brow furrowed. Beth mouthed the word *asshole*, making sure only Danny could see her.

Dave's face turned bright red and scowls creased his forehead. "Danny! What kind of talk is *that*? Knock it off. Did you leave your manners at home?" He pursed his lips and continued to frown at his son. "If you think that's cute or somehow attractive, you're clueless."

"Oh, he talks to me like that at home, too. It's nothing new." Beth maintained her stare, refusing to break eye contact with

Danny. The slightest of smirks curled her lips as Dave continued to scold.

Disgusted, Molly threw her hands in the air. "He has no manners to leave, at home or anywhere else. I keep telling you he's a first class geek." She stopped short and shot an uneasy glance at her Dad, not wanting to launch a full scale debate of Danny's good and bad points. "So, what did you guys get to do so far? Have you seen the climbing wall over at the arcade? We're going to give it a go."

"Whoa, that sounds like fun," Danny said, easily diverted. "I did that the last time. It's a ball. You guys gonna give it a try? That'd be something I'd sure like to watch." He turned toward Beth, opened his mouth as though to speak and then closed it, returning his gaze to her butt.

Dave nodded at the girls. "We're going over to Shipwreck Café for lunch. I already made reservations for twelve-thirty. If you happen to get there first, have them show you to the table. Be good and we'll see you in a couple of hours."

Molly glanced at Beth and shrugged. "I know it's crazy ... the little pervert-monster is only twelve, but I swear Danny has the hots for you."

"Gee, ya think? What was your first clue? I could drop-kick the little sucker, I swear. You must be blind if you're saying you never noticed how he stares at me? *Little freak!* All the lewd remarks and comments about my looks?" She ran a hand through her shiny black hair and pursed her lips. "Jerk."

"You should be used to it by now. It's the price you pay for being so beautiful, I guess. And okay, I admit it. I have noticed. At first it was funny, y'know, but lately he's just rude; that last remark he made was too much. I swear, I thought Dad would bust a gut. Actually, Danny's lucky Dad isn't into making a scene in public. And Mom?" She swept her hand, palm down across the top of her head. "I mean, like it went right over her head. It's like she's on another planet or something."

They got in the rock climbing line and glanced around the park as they inched forward.

“Oh, look over there. There’s that guy again, remember? The one with the dark hair? He’s so hot.” Beth prodded Molly with her elbow as she smiled at the young man. “He’s staring at me.”

“How old do you think he is?”

“I don’t know, seventeen, eighteen? Ya think?”

“Yeah, about that, I guess, maybe older. Oh my God, he’s walking over here. Are you gonna talk....” Her voice rose to a squeak.

He stopped at an empty bench about thirty feet from the girls and sat facing toward the rock climbing wall, sipping his soda. From time to time he’d glance at Beth then smile and turn away, attention riveted on the crowd.

It was finally their turn to climb. The exhibit operator beckoned Molly forward and hitched her into the safety harness. He started to tell her how everything worked, but after a quick recitation of her experience he accepted that she’d done this dozens of times before and knew the drill.

“Have fun.” He turned to Beth, helping her adjust the harness.

Being seasoned climbers, they scaled the wall like little spider monkeys and then rappelled down even faster. They got in six climbs before the operator waved them off.

“You gals are really good,” he said, helping Molly out of the harness. He moved over to Beth, smile wide. “Come back later when the crowds are thinned out and I’ll let you go for a long run.”

“Sweet!” they said in unison. “We’ll be back.”

* * *

He watched the girls scale the wall, long golden legs reaching for the incuts and bulges that offered support; slender but muscular arms gripped the handholds. He licked his lips and grimaced several times at the sight of Beth’s legs. Her short shorts caused perspiration to bathe his upper lip.

His breath came quick and fast as he stared, his stomach aching. The feeling passed and with a casual expression on his face,

he rose from the bench, glanced around at the crowd and followed the girls to the next display.

They stopped at the polar bear area and worked their way toward the front of the crowd. It was feeding time and the attendants threw fish into the cage to the delight of bears and park guests alike.

He followed closely and stopped right behind Beth. He moved closer, now bare inches from her back. He leaned over and drew a deep breath, savoring her perfume and her personal, individual aroma. Her long hair wafted in the gentle breeze, black as a raven's wing.

Quiet, he waited for her to notice him. It took her several moments before she realized he was there.

"Oh," she said, moving away. She gazed up into his dark, deep-set eyes.

"Hi," he said, smile wide and engaging, eyes crinkled at the corners. "I'm Sam Hudson. What's your name?"

"I'm Beth Chapman and this is my friend, Molly Kramer." The girls exchanged a quick glance.

He leaned forward and grinned at Molly, hoping she wasn't going to be a problem. "Is this your first time at the park or do you come here all the time?"

"No," they replied slowly. "We come here a couple of times a year. How about you?"

"I'm a first timer and this place is everything I heard it would be and then some. The exhibits are great, don't ya think? I just moved down here, actually. I start college in the fall."

"Oh, where do you go?" Molly asked, her tone a tad warmer.

"Ah, USD. How about you girls? What college do you go to?"

They broke out in laughter, shaking their heads. "We'll be juniors in high school in September."

"I don't believe it. You're kidding. Wow." His tone became at once familiar and congratulatory. "You could have fooled me. Most high school kids are pretty dumb but you seem so much more grown up and sophisticated."

He glanced around as the aroma of grilling meat wafted through the air. "Man, I'm as hungry as one of those bears in there.

Don't the burgers smell great? You want to join me? There's pizza and all kinds of sandwiches if you don't want burgers. My treat."

"Sorry, we can't," Molly said. "We're meeting my parents at the Shipwreck in ten minutes."

He glanced at them, a conspiratorial grin on his lips. "Ah, why not blow them off? I bet you'd have more fun with me."

Beth chuckled. "There's no doubt about that."

"It might be more fun, for sure, but not for long. My father would pitch a fit ... life would not be worth living for the rest of the summer. At the very least."

Sam hesitated a moment, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, you gals have a nice lunch. I'm sure we'll bump into each other again." He waved at them then turned and walked away.

The girls watched the antics of the bears as they dove into the icy pool for their live dinners, coming up with a wiggling fish in their powerful jaws. They meandered down the walkway and headed to the restaurant, deep in thought.

Molly glanced at Beth and shook her head. "What did you make of Sam?"

"Sweet, fun to talk to and he's even hotter close up." She grinned at Molly and shrugged. "Great bod and just right with the muscles. I hate that bulked up look, y'know?" She puffed up her cheeks, rocked back and forth and made sounds like a mad monkey. "But him? I like his looks, muchly. Plus, he'd just shaved. Man, I hate that prickly look. What makes guys think girls like that?"

Molly nodded, continuing to scan the crowd. "Beats me; some stupid actor started it, I guess. Actually, the grunge look really turns me off. Can you imagine the breakouts you'd get after kissing someone like that? Eeuw, not my bag, but you know what? He's a lot older than we first thought. I bet he's at least twenty-five."

"Give me a break. Nah, I bet he's only, like, eighteen. He's just starting college, so how old is that...eighteen? Isn't that right?"

"You can start college at any age, and I'd guess at least twenty ... he just looked older, he seemed older. Well, when you consider we're only fifteen, twenty *is* older. I can't imagine what he sees in us."

They walked along in silence. Finally Molly said, “The more I think about it, the more I mean it ... I don’t like him. There was just something off.”

“Why are you obsessing about this?” Beth said. “He seemed very nice and friendly. Besides, who cares; it doesn’t really matter. We’ll probably never see him again.”

Molly chuckled. “I wouldn’t bet on that. He really liked you.”

“Give me a break. You know that’s just silly.”

They approached the host station at the restaurant and Molly gave her name for the reservation.

“Please follow me.” He led them to a large corner table in the back of the room. Beth chose the chair next to the high bank of windows, Molly at her right. The host placed five menus on the table and left.

“Can I ask you a question?” Beth glanced at her friend, eyebrows up, her face wearing a puzzled expression. “Why don’t you like Sam? You’re usually a really good judge of character, so it’s making me wonder. Is it anything in particular or just one of your famous feelings?”

Molly grimaced and leaned back in her chair. “Well, famous feelings, I guess. I don’t know the first thing about him, but neither do you. He gives me the creeps, like he’s playing with us or something. And yes, it’s kinda like that, sort of a premonition. But mine often turn out right, huh? How about that Maggie? I told you she was a witch from the get-go.” She took a long sip of water, shrugged at her best friend and continued.

“Sam is, I don’t know, it feels like he’s lying about something and I still think he’s way too old to be interested in us, don’t you?”

Beth exaggerated her yawn. “I’m not even sure he *is* interested. What makes you think that, anyway? He was just making conversation. Once you told him we had to meet your family for lunch it seemed to me like he lost interest. You’re making too big a deal out of a whole lot of nothin’, Mol. I just figured he was new to the area, maybe wanting to make some friends. You know how that is. I didn’t think he was pushy or anything, did you? He just seemed friendly to me.”

“Well, for one thing, even if he did think we looked his age, once he found out the truth, you’d think he’d bail. We’re, like, jail bait, y’know? Kids!”

“If you think about it, Molly, that’s just about what he did do. Once we refused to have lunch with him, it didn’t take long for him to split.”

“That’s true, I guess,” she said, nodding but not convinced. “And isn’t it strange he wanted to eat with you so bad he invited us both on his treat? Like, that’s a ton of money to spend on strangers he’d never see again, and so odd to include me....” Her voice crackled and she waved her hand at the waiter. “Can you bring us some lemonade?”

She took a long sip of the frosty drink, shaking her head. “Man, I was so thirsty, I couldn’t say another word.” She cleared her throat and grinned at the icy pitcher. “That’s great. Anyway, I suppose he might have just bumped into us at the polar bear exhibit, but we first noticed him when we got our waffle, remember, early this morning? The next time we saw him was at the climbing wall, and like you said, maybe it’s a coincidence, but Beth, *maybe* he followed us, picked us out of the crowd. Maybe? And if so, why?”

“Oh, Molly. You make it sound all creepy and stuff. Where’s that coming from? He’s new in town and only wanted to make friends, even just for the day.”

“But that’s the thing, part of what I’m saying. *We’re* not friend material for a guy that age ... he’d consider us kids. You know that as well as I do. I mean we’re only three years older than Danny and I can’t imagine willingly spending a second with a kid his age, especially not like *that*. Y’know what I mean? Why’s he wasting time with us when all these college girls are here and available? He’s a good lookin’ dude and obviously has money, so why bother with two kids? I wonder what Dad will say?”

Beth’s eyes flew open. “Oh, my God, you’ve gotta be kidding, right? Don’t you dare ... God, don’t tell him, Molly. If you tell him, we’re gonna have serious issues for the whole summer. For one thing, we’ll have to stay with them for the rest of the day ... them and Danny the Pre-teen Pervert. Don’t spoil ... speak of the devil, there’s the little brat now.”

Danny started shouting at them halfway across the dining room. Beth turned and stared pointedly out the window, refusing to even look at him.

“I got to ride the roller coaster twice. Man that ride is such a charge.” He made exaggerated motions with his hands as he collapsed into the chair next to Beth. The table rocked lightly as he continued. “I went down all the hills with my hands up. It was cool. So fun. Did you do that ride yet?”

Beth ignored him and continued to stare out the window at the throngs of people walking around the park and wished she were anywhere else but at a table in a packed restaurant listening to Danny rant. He’d actually touched her arm once in his excitement and her expression as she turned toward him grew deadly. Ice-blue eyes stared at his fingers, willing them to rot off. Slowly she brought her gaze to his. “Don’t you ever touch me again.”

Beth closed her eyes and turned back toward the window. She blinked in startled surprise when she realized Sam had caught her eye. He waved to her, smiling. Beth blinked again to rid him from sight, but there he stood, continuing to smile, index finger beckoning.

The waitress arrived to take their orders. Molly asked for the fried chicken basket and then it was Beth’s turn.

“I’ll have the hamburger platter, please.” Beth handed the menu off and glanced back out the window. Sam had moved closer to the building and now stood no more than ten feet away, still summoning her.

She frowned slightly then rose from her chair and picked up her purse. “I have to go to the ladies. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“You want company?” Molly asked, beginning to get out of her chair.

“Nah, stay here and visit with your folks. I’ll be right back.”

Chapter 2

Molly chatted with her family about the exhibits they'd enjoyed, including the climbing wall, while Danny conducted a running commentary of his adventures, often punctuated with fist thrusts and chest tapping. A good fifteen minutes passed before the waitress arrived with their meals, and Beth had not yet returned from the restroom.

"That must be some line," Dave said, concern narrowing his eyes. He turned around in his chair and summoned the waitress. "I'm just curious, is there a particularly long line to get into the restrooms? Our friend seems to be gone overly long?"

"No sir, there's no line at all."

Dave drew a sharp, quick breath and thanked her. He stared at his wife a moment as a film of perspiration bathed his forehead and upper lip.

"Susan, would you and Molly check the restroom, please? Maybe she's sick. I'll stay here with Danny."

After they left, Danny leaned toward his father. "You know, Dad, something really strange is going on. Did you notice how Beth kept looking out the window while I was talking? You remember that? At first I thought she was still mad at me, but then I saw what she was staring at ... this guy wanted her to meet up with him. He kept waving at her, like really insistent that wanted her to come outside. Do you think maybe she went out to see him?"

Dave began to respond and then noticed his wife and daughter returning to the table alone. Expression anxious, Susan hurried across the dining room floor, Molly close behind.

"She's not in the restroom, Dave. I checked to see if she'd wandered into the gift shop, but no one remembered seeing her. What should we do?"

He shook his head several times and patted the chair next to his. "Well, we can't get in a panic; she could come back any minute. First of all, sit down and let's get finished with lunch. We have to make some sense of this, try to get to the bottom of how this happened and empty, growling stomachs won't help." He turned to Molly and raised his eyebrows.

“Do you have any idea where Beth is? Danny says he saw her staring at some guy outside the window. You know anything about that?”

Eyes wide, she turned toward her brother. “You did?” She stared at Danny a moment, shook her head and returned her gaze to her father. “We met a guy named Sam Hudson. It was at the polar bear exhibit. They’d just started to feed them and the bears were all excited and stuff. We got to chatting about how cool they were and their ears, how they swivel around it’s just cute. He came up behind Beth and just, you know, like started a conversation. Everyone does that at places like this, and he acted very friendly, nice. He invited us for lunch, but we said no, that we had to meet you guys here. After a bit, he just kinda lost interest, said goodbye and left.”

“What did he look like?”

“Real cute, dark wavy hair, dark eyes. He had a good build.”

“How old do you think he was?”

“Well, I thought maybe twenty-five. Beth figured more like twenty.”

“I’d guess he was at least twenty-five. What the heck does a guy that old want with kids when there’s all these college chicks walking around?” Danny glanced from his dad to his mom. “That’s really weird, don’t ya think? And I agree with Molly, much older than twenty.”

Susan locked eyes with her husband. “What do you think we should do, Dave? She’s only been gone half an hour. I mean, what do we say to the police? You know Connie and Rob will freak out, and if it’s all a false alarm ... that she just went somewhere for a little bit ... and yet, the more time that passes....” Uneasy, she glanced at the kids from under her lashes and then returned her gaze to her husband. “What should we do?”

Dave shook his head and turned to Molly. “Do you think she went to see Sam? Is it possible?”

“My God, I can’t even imagine it. Beth isn’t boy-crazy or anything. Shoot, she has her pick of any guy in school, but I guess so. I don’t know why she’d do that, no reason I can think of, but it’s

possible she could have. Where else *could* she be? Where would she go alone? None of this makes any sense, Daddy. I'm so scared."

"Would she, is there any chance she'd get into a car with him?"

Molly's jaw went slack and her eyes dilated. "No, of course not, certainly not willingly. And where would they go? I ... Daddy, I think you better call the park police."

Dave nodded at Molly and raised a hand for the waitress. "I need to get in touch with park security. Can you tell me how to do that?"

She reached into the pocket of her apron, withdrew a rubber-banded stack of cards, plucked a red one from the group and handed it to Dave.

"There's the number for park security as well as the local police should you need them. The security headquarters is just up the lane from here, very short walk. Go out the front door, make a left and it's three, maybe four doors down."

Dave paid the cashier while Danny and Molly waited outside with Susan.

"Wow, I never realized how many people got jammed into this place. Mom, it doesn't look good, does it?" Uneasy, Danny gazed around at the throngs of people with new eyes. He edged closer to his mother. "I never realized how really packed this park is. You could get lost real easy."

Molly searched the crowd, eyes darting from person to person as she tried to find Beth. "This is just not the kind of thing she would do, Mom, I'm telling you. Something has to be wrong, but what? She has her purse, her cell. Why not call us?" Her foot tapped a staccato beat and her heart pounded as she stared at the throng of people. "I am so furious with her ... scaring us to death. Wait until..." She swallowed convulsively and cleared her throat. "My God, what's wrong with me? I'll call her."

She reached for her cell and hit the first button on speed dial. The cell rang and rang and finally it went to voice mail.

"Beth, where the hell are you? Are you all right? You're with Sam, aren't you? Give me a call right now. Dad's all freaked out and we're going to the park police to report you missing. This isn't funny and I'm so scared for you. Dad's getting ready to call

your parents and they're going to flip out." She drew a ragged breath as she heard her voice go shrill.

"This is all going to end up being my fault, somehow and I think that *sucks*. Why aren't you answering your phone?"

They sat across the table from the Park Security Chief, a large, balding man in his early fifties. He looked up from time to time as they gave their statements, often interrupting for clarification.

"I called her cell phone, but it went to voice mail." Molly's lower lip trembled and she nodded several times, wringing her hands.

"Something is terribly wrong because she has to know we're worried to death about her. Beth would never do that, just turn her phone off and ignore us. *Never*. We've been best friends since first grade. I know her like my twin sister and she wouldn't pull a stunt like this. She's in bad trouble." Tears glazed her eyes, brimmed and slid slowly down her cheeks. "He stole her, it had to be him. Sam kidnapped Beth."

Dave nodded in agreement. "She's a very responsible girl and behavior like this is totally out of character. When she's out on a trip with us, she knows she's supposed to keep her phone on at all times. Rule number one. Something must have happened. Should we call the police?"

"We already did. They should be here shortly." He continued to question them about Beth's state of mind, other friends, how she did in school, only breaking off when two patrol officers walked into the office.

Gomez and Bryant introduced themselves, nodding.

Officer Bryant's eyes swept the Kramer family, settled on Molly and began the questioning anew. "Did you see anyone suspicious watching her, following her?"

Molly nodded, telling the cops what little she knew about Sam Hudson and his offer to buy them lunch.

"Did he get aggressive with you? Did he become pushy or urge you to change your mind and go with him?"

“No, sir, he didn’t, not like you mean. He laughed at the idea of us eating with my family and said he thought we’d have a lot more fun with him. Beth laughed and we agreed that was probably true, but it didn’t matter, because we had plans. A little while later he said goodbye and walked away.”

“Is there anything else you can tell me that would help?”

“Well, Sam said he thought we were older, actually, thought we were college kids. Even when we told him we were only fifteen, it didn’t seem to make any difference. I mean, like most older guys, ya tell them something like that and they would split. He just said how sophisticated we acted compared to other kids our age. We thought that was kinda strange, y’know. Well, I did, anyway. It didn’t seem to matter to Beth enough to even talk about. She mostly just, well, shined him. But that’s about it. There was nothing, y’know, mean about him. He just wanted to be friendly, I think ... thought”

When she finished, Danny piped up. “I saw him too, Officer; some guy standing outside the window. He kept motioning for her to come out.” He glanced at Bryant and shrugged. “I think she went outside to talk with him. There’s no other explanation for her disappearing like that. Where else would she go? Where is she now?”

“Did you see him clearly? Could you identify him?”

“Yes, sir, I sure can, and in detail. I saw him close up for a good four or five minutes but I don’t think he saw me. It was the way we sat at the table. That’s why Molly didn’t see him at all. She had her back to the window.”

Gomez turned to Dave and Susan. “Did you notify her parents that she’s missing?”

“No,” Dave said. “We wanted to talk to you first. It’s hardly been an hour yet and we hoped, we thought maybe we were jumping the gun, you know, that she’d turn up with a plausible explanation?”

Face ashen, he turned to the cop in mute appeal. “We did the right thing, didn’t we? I mean, letting her go to the restroom alone? She’s fifteen, for pity sake ... was that wrong? How did this happen? We take her with us all the time and Molly goes with her folks. We’ve known each other forever.” He put his hands over his

eyes and sighed. “That child was my responsibility. What am I supposed to tell her parents?”

“Sounds to me like she made an independent decision, Mr. Kramer. I know where you’re coming from as the adult in charge, but she misled you, lied to you. We have to take responsibility for our actions and it was her choice to lie to you in the first place. She’s fifteen, not five. Going out to meet a stranger is never a good idea regardless of your age; she had to know that.” He looked away for a moment, concentrating on the monitor of his laptop.

“On the other hand, considering the kind of person Beth is, it makes a voluntary leave sound unlikely. The fact that she’s made no effort to contact you so far, even though she has her cell with her is very troubling indeed. I don’t mean to frighten you, but we’re about to release an Amber Alert. Do you have a photo of her? A picture really helps.”

Molly fished around in her purse, pulling out her most recent stack of photos. “We took this last month at a party.”

Gomez took the picture, looked at it a moment and turned to Bryant with a deep sigh. “Ah, what a beautiful girl. God, I’ll get this on the net right now.”

Their eyes met, Bryant nodded and continued questioning the Kramer family. “Did this guy have a car? Did he talk about himself at all?”

“If he did, we never saw it,” Molly said. “All he told us was that he’d just moved to the area and was going to USD in the fall. Other than that, we really didn’t talk much. The whole conversation didn’t last more than five minutes.”

“Did Beth seem anxious to meet him, get to know him?”

“No, not really. She was more curious about my reaction to him than anything else. She’s very popular, head cheerleader, top grades and gorgeous, so it isn’t like ... y’know, she isn’t looking. Beth has her pick of guys.”

Molly shrugged, clasping both hands in her lap. “I didn’t particularly like him. I felt like he was lying, holding something back, but when I mentioned it, she just tossed it all off like, who cares; we’ll never see him again anyway. It just didn’t matter to her one way or the other. We do a lot of people watching, y’know, scoping guys out. He was just a face in the crowd, someone who

caught our attention, nothing more. That's why this whole thing is weird."

"Do you believe she went outside to meet Sam? Do you think she's with him now?"

"I can't imagine why, but yes, I guess so. But only because I don't know where else she could possibly be. I'm her best friend, we're very close, and believe me, we don't keep secrets. If you're wondering if she knew this guy from somewhere else, just forget it, 'cause she didn't." Molly paused, reflecting. She sighed and pursed her lips.

"This just isn't something I'd ever expect her to do. It makes no sense, but what else is there? Where else would she go like that and not tell us?"

Molly's cell went off just then and she jerked it open. Her face grew pale and she stared at her father, shaking her head. "Oh, no, it's Beth's mom. Daddy, you ... I can't, I..."

"I'll talk to her." Dave took the phone, expression bleak. He drew a deep breath. "Oh, Connie, I don't know what to say. Is Rob there with ... good." He paused a moment and closed his eyes; his face flushed to a peculiar shade of purple.

"Connie, dear, please. No, it wasn't like that at all. On the contrary, we'd just ordered lunch and she excused herself to go to the restroom. She never came back to the table." More silence and an occasional nod.

Dave pinched the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger, visibly shaken. He cast an agonized glance at his wife, shook his head and closed his eyes again.

"Yes, Molly said they met this guy and he asked them to join him for lunch. They said no and that was pretty much the end of it, at least as far as Molly knows. He must have followed the girls to the restaurant because Danny saw him too. He noticed Beth staring out the window at a guy ... yes, Sam; he kept gesturing at her to come outside. She left shortly after that."

Dave put his hand to his forehead, nodding several times. "Yes, we'll be back as soon as the police release us. I think we've done what we can here. We'll come over to your house before we go home. Hopefully there will be good news before we even get there."

Officer Bryant gazed at Dave in sympathy and turned toward Molly. “We’re waiting for the police sketch artist to get here. We need you to put together a picture of this guy, as perfect and complete as a photograph. Maybe you could take this time to see him in your mind again. Think about expressions, tattoos, scars. Think of everything you can that’s distinguishing, anything folks would notice.”

He looked up as another unmarked Crown Victoria came to a stop outside the security office. “Here he is now.”

A tall man in his late thirties entered the room, an attaché case tucked under one arm, a laptop computer in the other. He introduced himself as Officer Coleman, booted up the computer and began to set out his things.

“Sit next to me so you can both see the picture develop. What color hair and how did he wear it?”

“It was dark, wavy. Not long, really, but not buzzed.”

“And thick; the hair was real thick and shiny, like he’d just washed it,” Danny added.

The cop continued to tap the keys, bringing a variety of hairstyles up until the kids agreed on one.

“That’s it,” they said in unison.

“Now the eyes, were they little, big, slanted, round?”

“They were just regular, I guess. Very dark. And deep-set into his head.”

Molly nodded. “The lashes were very thick and long. I noticed that right off.”

Officer Coleman’s fingers flew. “Like this?”

They nodded again.

“Were his eyebrows prominent? Like a ridge across his forehead?”

“No, they were regular.” Molly peered closer at the screen. “The eyebrows arched a little more and they weren’t quite that thick, like more, yes, like that. That’s very good.”

Molly and Danny stared at each other as Sam’s face began to emerge, nodding as they described his cheeks, his chin.

She peered closer. “He had a dimple, I think, and regular straight teeth. I don’t remember his lips, so I guess they’re regular, too.”

Up until that point, Molly and Danny had spoken together, often in unison as the picture developed. With a fair outline before them, the officer said, "One at a time, now, draw me a word picture and tell me some details. You start, Molly."

"It's his eyebrows; they looked more ... even and smooth. Like maybe they were waxed or something. Probably professionally done. I know that sounds weird, no guy I know plucks his own eyebrows, but that's how they looked."

"How about you, Danny? Anyone famous he reminded you of, similar features, stuff like that?"

"Do you remember that old time rock guy, Ricky Nelson? They play his old shows on TV all the time, right after Frasier? Anyway, this guy kinda reminded me of him, especially in the eyebrows. And his nose was thinner than that, more narrow; not quite that wide and his mouth was all sucked in, like, I don't know...." Danny made a sour lemons face. "You know?"

Molly shook her head. "I don't remember his lips that way. They were thin, I guess, not much shape. Maybe he was making a face at her when you saw that, Danny."

Danny thought a moment. "Yeah, well, I guess that's possible."

Subtle changes here and there revealed Sam Hudson with such vivid accuracy, Molly gasped at the finished product.

The cop tilted the screen toward Danny.

"Yep, that's the guy I saw her staring at."

"You've been a big help. You would not believe the kind of head start a clear picture of the guy gives us. You did a great job, kids."

He worked on the computer another couple of moments then packed up his things, nodded at the officer and headed for the door where he paused, turning toward the kids.

"Thanks to you, the Amber Alert is now in effect. In another five minutes, the guy's picture along with Beth's photo will start hitting the Amber Alert signs on every freeway in California and the five surrounding states and she's been gone less than ninety minutes."

Officer Bryant started collecting his things as well. "Looks like we're finished here. If something comes up, a memory,

anything you think might help us find her, give me a call. You have my card.”

The Kramer family left the park police office silent and afraid. Single file, they headed for the parking lot, unaware of the people they passed, lost in their thoughts.

“Oh, my God,” Molly said, pointing at the security sign on the approaching light post.

It showed a picture of Beth with a full description of what she wore, including hair color and length. **HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL** flashed above her photo. Below flashed the dreaded words, **MISSING, BELIEVED KIDNAPPED** and the picture of Sam Hudson.

They exited the park in numb silence, too shaken to speak. Traffic out of the park in the early afternoon presented little challenge. They accessed the I5, accelerating toward Del Mar.

When not in use, the signs took on an uncanny ability to just about disappear. Once activated, the huge, flashing signs couldn't be missed.

The color photo of Beth along with the artist sketch of Sam Hudson blinked at them in living color. The crawl line gave a physical description of Beth, including her clothes. The end of the script flashed the black, menacing words: **STRANGER ABDUCTION.**

Molly burst into tears, burying her face in her hands.

* * *

Beth awoke with a blinding headache that intensified as she drew in breaths of gasoline-tainted air. The tape over her mouth made breathing difficult, especially with a runny nose. Numb arms tied behind her back pressed up against what had to be a spare tire.

Her mind raged around two thoughts as they fought for precedence. First and foremost, she had to get out of the trunk and put as much distance as possible between her and Sam. *But what if you can't run away?*

Her mind started to scream.

If you can't get away he's going to rape you. Then he'll kill you.

Choking on her sobs, she drew strangling breaths through her full nose and started to pray for control. If she started to hyperventilate, she'd die in the trunk.

In an effort to regain control, she forced her mind to remember all the shows she'd ever seen where people escaped from car trunks. The last one she remembered had to do with taillights. With that, she fainted.

Sounds. Feelings of motion. It took her a moment to remember where she was. The car continued to roll along, shifting, swaying, its movement oddly seductive, comforting somehow, like rocking.

Beth faded in and out several times, but each time she emerged stronger. *Sam*. It had to be him ... this must be his car. Fully conscious now, she thought for a moment, trying to remember what she'd been taught to do in situations like this.

Taillights. Oh, God. I've got to roll over.

She inched her body around, head and shoulders curled so she could reach the taillights and gave an ineffectual poke with her toe. Unable to make hard, direct contact that way, she tried to roll over.

If she could use her heels, she could do some real damage to the taillights, but it would mean rolling onto her bound hands. Hunching her shoulders and rocking back and forth, she prepared to roll.

The car stopped.

Beth began to pray. *Oh, God, why did I ever go outside? Why didn't I just ignore him? Oh, don't let him hurt me, God, help me!*

Her bladder let go and she began to cry.

The car resumed moving.

Beth sighed at the momentary reprieve and relived the day from the moment she and Molly had first seen Sam while they ate their waffles, to the climbing wall, and finally outside the restaurant.

This was all her fault and the decisions that led to this event and the choices she'd made caused it to come about. She'd sealed

her fate when she snuck out of the restaurant and no matter what else happened, she had no one to blame but herself. How did she let this happen? What a stupid thing to do.

When she'd hurried to the front door of the café, she expected to see him standing just outside the entrance. Instead, Sam had moved away from the restaurant and now waited across the lane in the shadows of a huge oleander hedge.

Knowing she didn't have much time, Beth rushed through the crowd of people, curious at his obvious urgency and hoping Danny didn't spot her and nark to his folks.

They had talked a moment, then he muttered something, moved close to her and that was the last thing she remembered except for the painful pin prick in her neck.

Her knowledge of drugs was limited to movies, TV and gossip with her friends. She had no personal experience, but it didn't matter; she knew what had happened. She didn't know how or what he gave her, but somehow Sam had drugged her.

Beth came back to the present with a jerk as the road steepened and the turns become tighter, sharper. They were going into the hills. An overwhelming bolt of fear struck her and her bladder let go again. She began to moan.

The guard recognized their car half way down the block and the country club gate swung open before they hit the entry. Dave waved at the guard, but instead of turning left and heading home, he turned right toward Beth's house.

"Oh, my God," Susan said, staring at Dave. "What are we going to say? I don't know if I can do this. Connie's going to be frantic ... you know how she is about Beth, and I don't know what to say. What can I say?" Her normally happy face froze in fear and sorrow. "Oh, God, what are we going to do?"

He reached over and patted her hand. "I know how you feel, honey. Just try not to take anything she says to heart because she's going to say stuff she doesn't mean."

Dave pulled into the driveway of a sprawling split-level house. Before they could park, Connie and Rob Chapman charged

out the front door, faces livid with fear. Connie ran up to Molly as she climbed out of the car and took her by the shoulders.

“What happened? Where is she? How did this happen? Tell me!”

Molly kept shaking her head as tears rolled down her cheeks. “I don’t know, I swear. We all sat around the table talking about the stuff we did and our fave exhibits and rides. We placed our lunch orders and then Beth needed to go to the restroom. I offered to go with her but she said no. She never came back. She didn’t come back to eat her lunch and I know she was hungry.” Molly began to sob.

Trembling, voice like a rasp, Connie said, “Don’t make it sound like it’s all Beth’s fault. You must know something, you were involved, too.”

“Connie,” Rob said, voice trembling as he put his arms around his wife. “She doesn’t know anything or she’d already have told the police. You’re just ... terribly....” He pulled her head to his shoulder as she started to cry again.

He turned tortured eyes to Dave and shook his head. “Let’s go in the house before the neighbors come out. It’s all over the news. They’re well-meaning and all, but we can’t deal with that right now.”

Rob led the way to the family room, indicating seats. “Dave, do you know what this is about? Did you see the guy? Is there a chance that he kidnapped her, might be holding her for ransom?”

“I have no idea, Rob. The cops never mentioned that to us. Besides, that would be a hit or miss proposition in a crowd that size. He was a stranger to them. How could he know which kids came from money and which didn’t? I mean, they all dress the same, all the kids look alike. How could a stranger know?”

Rob’s jaw loosened a moment and then he closed his eyes and shivered. “I guess I’m just snatching at straws. A kidnapper would at least keep her alive, wouldn’t he, not hurt her? Oh God, anything but a rapist or a murderer. Oh, my poor little baby!”

Molly cried out and buried her head in her hands. “*Noooo*. I want to go home. I don’t want to listen to this ... there’s nothing, I

... I couldn't see out the window. I don't know where she went. Mommy, please take me home."

Her cries escalated, keening sounds that raised the hair on everyone's neck while she rocked back and forth, hugging herself.

Susan reached for Molly and took her in her arms. "There, baby, I'm right here." She looked up, made eye contact with her husband and nodded.

"I'm going to take her home, Dave. Give me a buzz when you're ready and I'll come back and get you."

Rob shook his head. "No need to do that. He can take our golf cart home and return it tomorrow. I don't see us using it any time soon."

Susan walked over to Connie and held out her arms. They embraced, crying. "I'm keeping her in my prayers, Connie, you know that. As soon as I get home, I'll call church and get the ladies to pray, too. Oh, my God, I just..." She shook her head several times, swallowed convulsively and sniffed. "Be strong."

Connie fixed her stare on Dave. "I know you weren't there when she met this guy, but do you get a feel for him?"

Dave looked down at his hands, studying his fingernails in a fearful silence. He glanced across the room at his son then, staring at the boy, astonished.

"I forgot you were here, Danny. Go catch a ride with your mom before she leaves. If they've already left, walk home."

Danny began to protest, correctly read the expression on his father's face and nodded.

"No sweat, I can beat them home, even if they already left." He paused a moment and glanced at Beth's parents. "I'm so sorry about, I mean, like this sucks, but the cops will find her; they always do. She'll be home in no time, you'll see."

Twelve-year-old male confidence, reeking with bravado, swaggered out the door, chin high, shoulders back. He made it clear to the end of the driveway before he started to cry.

Adult desperation remained behind, permeating the room. They stared at each other, eyes haggard and full of fear. Rob got slowly to his feet. "I need something to drink. Dave?"

“Anything you’ve got.”

Rob went to the bar and retrieved two ice cold beers from the fridge. “You want something, Connie?”

She shook her head, lifted her wine glass then turned to Dave again.

“Do you have any idea who this guy is? Did you get to see him?”

“I’m sorry, Connie, but no, I didn’t see him. Evidently he followed the girls to the restaurant and walked around it, hoping to spot them. Maybe he even came inside long enough to see their table placement and figured he could get Beth’s attention through the window. I don’t know, of course; just guessing. Molly said they sat there at the table for maybe ten minutes before we arrived.”

Dave took a long swallow of beer and stared into his glass, still unable to make eye contact with Connie. He shrugged and made a face.

“As luck would have it, they put us in a corner and she sat right next to the window. I guess he saw Beth and got her attention. Danny said he kept waving at her to come out.”

Connie sipped her wine, shaking her head slowly back and forth. “I don’t believe this for a moment. I know my daughter and this just does not sound like Beth. Not at all and it makes no damned sense. She knows better than that in the first place, and besides, she isn’t a risk-taker.”

She slid a glance at Rob and bit her lower lip. “Beth would never get into a car with a stranger, not for any reason; I know it and so do you. So, if she didn’t go willingly, that means he kidnapped her. Why didn’t she put up a fight ... scream? Why haven’t we gotten a ransom note ... where is she? How the hell did he get her from the parking lot to his car with all those people around and no one noticed anything?”

They sat silent, digesting her words and the inference they contained.

The jouncing, bumpy ride ended abruptly. The driver’s side door banged shut and she heard keys jingle in the trunk lock. A

whoosh of fresh air told her the lid was open. Faking sleep, she lay quiet as he pulled her roughly from the trunk. Her feet hit the ground with a jolt, making her cry out.

“Stand up,” he said, giving her arms a vicious jerk. He ripped the duct tape from her mouth, laughing when she yelled in pain. “Oh, that hurts, huh? Get used to it.”

Her eyes darted from side to side, familiarizing herself with what little she could see of her surroundings. They were in the forest, parked in a little clearing in front of what looked like an old barn. Tall, leafy California oak trees blocked all but the most tenacious sunbeams. Clumps of scrub brush and other vegetation grew here and there. Mostly the area was barren sand, especially within ten or so feet of the barn.

Sam unlocked the door, opened it and pushed her ahead of him into the peculiar twilight. He flipped a switch and a dim bulb high in the rafters gave off a meager light in the windowless room.

“Walk over to the wall.”

Beth did as he told her, again scoping out the interior of the barn as best she could. What little furniture it contained was old and dilapidated. The sofa, in particular, had seen better days. A rumpled, unmade bed took center stage, positioned as it was at the bottom of the large TV. A DVD player, tape recorder and several pieces of digital equipment flanked the TV.

A refrigerator stood in the corner, wheezing, and the hotplate on an old Formica table made up the rudimentary kitchen.

It might have been a barn once; now it was Sam’s hideout, his lair.

“Welcome home, baby.”

He dragged her across the room to a locked door, pushed the hasp back, opened it and shoved her inside the dank room. He slammed it closed with a bang that made him laugh.

Sam scurried across the room, collapsing on the sofa with a thump and giggled, rubbing his hands together in a manic frenzy. He turned on the TV and began to fondle himself.

Chapter 3

Jim Sessions drove into the parking garage beneath the building, inserted his pass card into the gate slot and waited for it to lift. He proceeded to the end of the row, turned the corner and pulled into his assigned spot.

He got out of the Suburban and opened the side door. A magnificent Doberman Pincher stepped down onto the garage floor in a fluid, seamless motion, ears up, eyes gleaming. The short black coat glowed with health and even if the muzzle now had a fair sprinkling of gray hairs, the dog remained fearsome to behold.

Tony gazed up at Jim, his stumpy tail wagging.

They walked across the garage together and stepped into the waiting elevator. They rode to the penthouse and as the elevator slowed, Tony began to whine.

“That’s getting embarrassing, dude. Besides, you’re fixed; you both are. What’s with this sudden passion for Amy?”

The name of his lady love caused the great dog to begin to stamp his front paws together in a fast, staccato beat, all the while staring at Jim and grinning.

“You need taps on your pads, dude, or maybe a mariachi band.” Jim chuckled. “I’m tellin’ ya, Tony, you’re setting yourself up for a fall.” Eyes alight, he inserted his key in the lock as a snicker crept up his throat. “Okay, buddy, here we go.”

Jim opened the door and stood back.

On the other side of the door, poised for battle, stood a Doberman of equal size, lips lifted in a hideous snarl. Motionless they waited, staring each other down, short ears flat to their skulls they sized each other up, growling in deep guttural tones.

Tony dodged to the left, then the right and hesitated. Clamping his tail to his butt, he curled his haunches under his belly and tore down the hall, Amy hot on his trail. He collapsed in a heap in front of the TV and rolled over on his back.

Amy skidded to a stop and began to stalk him. Quivering, grinning, ready to party, she jumped at Tony and delivered a body slam to his ribs. She leaped to her feet and began to prod him with

her nose. He lay quiet for a moment, wriggling with delight, then sprang to his feet and sprinted back down the hall. They crashed into the door, a panting mess of happy dogs.

“Every night it’s the same thing. I still can’t figure what the hell started that. You should see him coming up the elevator. Regular Fred Astaire.” Jim bent over and kissed Ella on the lips. “Mmm, actually, well, I think Tony’s in love.”

“So is Amy, believe it. This playing hard to get is just a role. She watches for him all the time. I think it’s cute.”

Jim sighed and walked across the room to the bar. “So good to be home. You want anything, El?”

“A glass of zinfandel sounds good. There’s an open bottle on the bar. I made some snacks to go with.” She shrugged at the table. “This wine is to die for. Wait until you try it. Really tasty. Chef put it on his *highly recommend* list. Let’s have it on the lanai, shall we? It’s a beautiful evening.”

Jim pulled two crystal glasses from the shelf and poured. He carried them out to the table and placed one before her. Grinning, he raised his glass up to the setting sun, gently swirled the liquid and sniffed. Finally he gave the wine a sip.

“Good legs. Mmm, plummy, notes of dark chocolate and cherries. Great color, just like your hair.”

“Oh, give it a rest, would you? Chef gives me the same song and dance ... hints of licorice and pepper. How can you taste stuff like that in wine anyway? I get the plummy and for sure the berries, but chocolate?” Ella sniffed her glass again, shrugged and took another sip. “This wine tastes really good, but there are some we carry at the restaurant, God. Chef likes a new Cab we just picked up; he says it tastes of tobacco and dirt. Now there’s a recommendation to the dinner guest, huh? Our chef pairs this with a nice helping of dirty lettuce served in a used ashtray.”

“Always business with you, but I’d like to change that, wench.” He laughed at her comment, eyes crinkled in glee. “I have the rest of the week free, my love. Free and all devoted to you. What would you like to do, get married?”

Ella glanced at the large emerald solitaire on her finger and laughed with delight. “Sounds great, baby, been a long time coming. So, shall we fit it in between lunch and cocktail hour?” She

stopped playing then, looked at the ring again and pushed her lower lip out in a pout.

“Nothing I’d rather do, but this is the prime season for the restaurant and business is booming. I can’t leave until maybe October or better, November. Hey, how about if we have a November wedding? Thanksgiving?”

He nodded enthusiastically and grinned at her. “I hate to wait that long, but I agree with your reasoning. Where?”

Her face assumed a dreamy expression and she sighed. “Oh, maybe a cruise? Wouldn’t that be terrific? We could get two weeks if we plan it right.”

“Two weeks. Sounds like heaven. Where would you like to go? Have anything specific in mind?”

She drew a deep breath and chuckled. “Yeah. Do you think maybe Hawaii? What a ball.”

Jim’s cell rang, shattering the moment. He flipped it open to an unknown number on display, and shrugged. “Hello, Jim Sessions here.”

He listened a moment, nodding several times. “Yes, I know a bit about the case, Mr. Chapman. I saw TV coverage earlier. Have the police heard anything yet?” A bleak expression crossed his face and he sighed. “I’m sorry to hear about that.”

Jim hesitated a moment, listening. “Yes, we can take the case, Mr. Chapman. Please give me your phone number and I’ll call you back shortly.”

Jim closed his cell and glanced at Ella, green eyes cloudy. “That was Rob Chapman. His daughter, Beth, was the girl kidnapped at Sea World yesterday. We saw the news alerts, remember? Anyway, the cops are stymied and he wants us to investigate, see if we can come up with something before the case gets too cold. Already been twenty-four hours since the snatch. Not good.”

He opened the cell again and called his partner and fellow private investigator, Lenny Browning.

The door slammed behind her, throwing the room into semi-darkness again. Beth heard movement in the shadows and froze.

“Hi. Don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you.”

Beth jumped, pressing herself against the wall. Frantic eyes scanned the gloomy room, searching for the source of the voice.

“I’m over here in the corner.” The girl stood slowly and waved a tentative hand. “Here.”

Beth’s eyes slowly adjusted to the dimness and made out the figure advancing toward her. “What’s your name? My God, why are you naked?” She averted her eyes, embarrassed.

“That freak took my clothes. My name is Audrey Simms. You?”

“Beth Chapman. How...how long have you been here?” Her teeth began to chatter, causing her to bite her lips.

Audrey drew a ragged breath and sighed. “It feels like forever, but it’s only been a couple of days, I guess. What is today?”

“Saturday.”

“Whoa, that’s a whole week. I guess I’ve lost track of time. It’s so hard to tell night from day in here. My God, my poor parents must be going out of their minds. Have you heard anything about me, anything on the news or the TV?”

“Your name rings a bell, but I can’t say for sure. Seems I remember someone being kidnapped down in Orange County, right? Oh, my God, was that you?”

“Yeah. I was at Disneyland with a couple of girlfriends. I got caught in a long line for some ride and had to go pee. My friends saved my place, but I never came back to them. He got me coming out of the restroom. Pretended he was lost and asked for my help in trying to hook back up with his family. I fell for it and walked with him to one of the park intersections and that’s the last thing I remember until waking up here. Where’d he get you?”

“Sea World.”

“San Diego. Whoa, the bastard moves around. Do you know where the hell we are?”

“We’re in a forest, lots of huge trees and a dirt road. I didn’t see much, but I’m certain there are no other buildings around, so we’re alone for sure. I didn’t hear any sounds, either, y’know,

roads or anything. He drugged me with something and I was out of it for most of the ride up here, but judging from the sun, I'd say it's no more than three or four hours since he got me, so that makes it late afternoon."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Is there a bathroom here, water? I wet my pants and I need...."

"Oh, yes, cold water only, but plenty of it. He thought of everything. Over there." Audrey pointed at a doorway to her left and shrugged. "It's all yours, such as it is."

Beth hurried across the room, acutely aware of the smells emanating from her body. She entered the bathroom and looked for a door to close. No door.

In one corner was a crude shower stall equipped with a hose hooked over the top of one side; it looked anything but inviting. A sink stood between the shower stall and the toilet. The floor, nothing but a sheet of uneven linoleum over wood planks, was so filthy it made her cringe.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as Beth thought of her bathroom at home, the thick fluffy pink towels, soft white throw rugs on the immaculate floor, smelling of citrus and pine. Memories of her shower curtain complete with mermaids holding tiny treasure chests and the little sea creatures that joined her daily baths made her almost hysterical.

She turned the water on with shaking hands, stripped off her filthy clothes and stepped under the hose. She twisted the nozzle to on and a chilly spray of water hit her in the face. A bar of soap sat in a cup which rapidly filled with water and she scrubbed herself quickly, terrified of being caught alone and naked. The odorless soap sitting in the cup would provide a bit of soapy water to wash her outfit in.

A quick glance showed her there were no towels. Beth stepped onto the grimy floor, filled the little sink with the soapy water and began scrubbing her clothes. The light cotton would dry quickly, but it was all she had to wear. She rinsed her garments several times, wrung them out as well as she could and put them back on.

Beth walked back into the room, still dripping. Her hair hung to her shoulders in coal-black waves. If she didn't get to a hairdryer soon, she'd end up with a mass of ringlets.

Audrey sat on the side of the bed, staring into space, tears trickling down her cheeks.

Beth sat next to her, trying not to stare at her body. "Are you hurt? What's he done to you and why did he take your clothes? Oh, God, you have bruises all over ... oh, man, are those teeth marks?"

Audrey pointed at the many camera lenses peeking from the ceiling and the walls.

"He watches me every frickin' minute he's here. Every night he comes in and makes me do things to him. He's the most disgusting pig I've ever heard of. Makes me want to puke." She cried harder, as if talking about it heightened her fear and revulsion.

"Oh, my God, he rapes you?"

"He would if he could, but he can't get it up, so he uses other things, his hands; he bites me all over."

"What ... things does he...?"

"He has all kinds of sex toys; vibrators, all kinds of stuff. He can't get off, so he just keeps trying new things, anything to get hard. Nothing works but he won't stop trying. He gets so furious that he can't get off, he beats me, like it's my fault or something." She shifted slightly and groaned. "I can hardly move." Audrey put her head in her hands, moaning.

Eyes dilated, Beth repeated Audrey's words. "Nothing works but he won't stop...." Her voice trailed off as her eyes commenced to bounce, darting around the room, the floor and ceiling, taking on a feral, haunted expression. She felt her gorge rise as she paced, touching the bare walls, frantic with fear. "Oh, God, I gotta get outta here. Oh, God."

"There is no way out. I've checked and there isn't much to see. No windows and no doors. How old are you, Beth?"

"Fifteen."

"Have you, er, ever...." Audrey chewed on a thumbnail as Beth shook her head.

"Had sex?" Her voice hovered above a whisper. "No, of course not. Not really."

Audrey pursed her lips, head shaking slowly back and forth. Tears began to flow again. "You poor kid."

Beth's voice rose. "Why? What ... what's *that* mean? How old are you?"

"Twenty-three. I look so much younger 'cause I'm little, I guess. I think that disappointed Sam once he realized."

"He told you his name was Sam, too?"

The door burst open then and slammed into the wall, making both girls gasp.

The empty restaurant lay in shadows. Four people sat at a booth in the lounge, remnants of pizza crust all that remained of their usual house special.

Terry Wagner sat next to her boyfriend, Lenny Browning, as he and Jim discussed the Chapman kidnapping and their plans to find the missing teen. From time to time she'd catch a glance from her twin.

"Must be a full moon," Terry said. "It's like all of a sudden there's an epidemic of these things going around. Do you remember a week or so ago a girl disappeared from Disneyland? And now we have this one. Puts a new spin on the word *amusement* park."

Ella nodded. "Boys, too. There was a boy kidnapped from a video arcade down in Old Town a couple of months ago. I don't think they ever found him. At least, I never heard about it."

"Teens disappear off the streets all the time. Some times they turn up, sometimes not." Lenny shrugged.

"It gets worse every year." Jim pursed his lips in disgust. "Damned frickin' perverts. It's possible we got in at the beginning of a serial rapist or killer." He hesitated again then turned to Lenny.

"We need a contact in the San Diego force, someone who could help us out. You know anyone from the old days who might be willing to share info?"

"Actually, yes I do. A detective I used to work with transferred down to San Diego a couple of years ago, right before I

quit. She's very intuitive, sees stuff a lot of people would miss." He opened his brief case, withdrew his card file and flipped through it.

"Here she is. Dana Sanderson. We worked together on several cases when she was with LAPD ... years ago. She's really good. Let me see if I can get some info."

Lenny dialed a number, connected and made nice for a couple of moments, passing time in chitchat. Finally, he got to the point and asked a series of questions, nodding from time to time, but mostly quiet, listening.

"You bet, Dana, and thanks. By the way, if you're ever up in the old 'hood, let me know and we'll do lunch."

He closed the cell and glanced at Jim, pale blue eyes veiled. "It's not good, not at all. They found her fanny pack under the bushes across from the restaurant. Her cell, wallet, everything. He didn't even take her money and she had almost a hundred bucks with her."

"Shit. I hoped maybe she had it on, figured maybe we could track her if they used her credit cards or that cell. Anything else?"

"Pretty slim pickens, Jim. A couple confirmed they saw Beth and Sam getting into a car in the Sea World parking lot. Unfortunately, they didn't get much of a make on the car let alone any part of the license plate. One thing about it they both remembered was a clown doll stretched out along the back window. On the ledge, y'know?"

"That's different. You don't see that all the time. No color, make and model, huh; any idea how old?"

"The car was that deep gunmetal gray and the guy figured possibly eight or nine years old, maybe a Honda, but he couldn't be sure. Said it was in great shape, clean, no damage he noticed."

"Did they mention Beth, how she behaved? Did she give any indication to the couple that she was in trouble?"

Lenny shrugged. "She didn't say or do anything in particular. The woman said she seemed tired, lethargic and that she leaned against the man like she was drunk or something."

"Well, there's the answer to one question. She didn't leave willingly; he drugged her." Jim glanced at Ella. "That fits with what

Molly said about her not leaving with him of her own free will. This is getting grim.”

“At least we know what our man looks like. Dana said the artist sketch of the perp was so accurate that when the couple saw the first poster go up, they never had a doubt and went immediately to the security building to tell what they’d seen and make a report. They figure they were in the park about half an hour, so the sighting in the parking lot is right in line, time-wise.”

“Can they alert the public about the clown? Maybe add that to the Amber Alert?” Dark eyes wide, Terry gazed at Lenny, head tilted to one side.

“I doubt they’ll do that, hon. It’s a vital clue and if it’s publicized, he’ll just get rid of it. Every cop in the state is looking for a gray car with a clown in the back window. All we can do is pray it’s not too late.”

“Oh, Lenny, how long do you think she has?” Ella’s eyes widened as she saw the look on his face. “Just tell it like it is.”

“Statistically, it’s already too late.”

Ella shifted her stare to Jim then shook her head. “My God, that’s terrible. Is it always that way?”

“Depends. Most who simply want to murder or who want to rape then murder, kill their prey within the first five hours after capture. Now those into sex slaves, things like that, they want to keep their victim alive, so it’s more likely we can rescue from that group. Problem is you never know what you’ve got until you catch the perp or you find a body.”

The door burst inward and slammed into the wall with a crash. Sam entered the room, face split with an ugly smile. He waited on the threshold, eyes flitting from one girl to the other, relishing their fear. He stepped inside and turned the key, locking the door. Tucking the key into the pocket of his shorts, he approached Beth, licking his lips and chuckling.

“Take your clothes off and give them to me.”

She backed away from him, shaking her head from side to side. "I don't want to. No, please leave me alone. Please don't hurt me."

He continued to stalk her until her back bumped up against the far wall. "Do it or I'll do it for you."

"No, I can't. Please, please let me go."

He leaned into her and placed his forearm across her chest, pinning her to the wall. Slowly but with great delight, he began to pinch her breasts. Fingertips concentrating on the sensitive nipple he squeezed, increasing his pressure, now bringing the ragged fingernails into play.

Her cries rose, pleading begging. "No, please don't hurt me."

"I think you should do what I said right now. You'll be sorry if you don't." He continued to pinch, increasing the pressure each time as his breathing increased and became ragged, uneven. He licked his lips continuously until she began to screech. He pinched again and waited, holding the pressure hard another moment. Fiery eyes bored into hers until she began to scream.

His hand shot out, grabbed the front of her light cotton top and her bra and yanked. Sam threw her to the floor, still holding her blouse and pulled again. The light cotton garment tore but did not separate. His grin spread as he pulled once more and began pinching her so hard she shrieked.

"I warned you. I gave you the opportunity, but you wanted to play. That's good though, I love to play."

He pressed her into the floor and pulled again, ripping the blouse in half. He threw it on the floor then pinched her several times, delighting in her screams.

"Now take off your shorts."

Shaking, terrified, she refused, unable to move or do anything more than cry out as he pinched her.

The shorts and panties tore as well and he dropped them slowly on the floor.

"See, it all comes out the same in the end. While it would have been easier if you'd done what I said in the first place, it was much more exciting this way. And it's only the beginning. We're

gonna to have so much fun. You have a gorgeous ass. Roll over, I want to see.”

Without waiting for her to comply, he rolled her over. Mouth agape, he worked her cheeks back and forth, slower, faster, his eyes wide, staring. He rolled her back over, eyes sliding across her bruised breast.

“Oh, look at how red and swollen that one is.” He reached for her other breast and concentrating on the nipple, soon brought Beth to the point of wailing, pleading with him to stop. Her bladder let go again and he laughed aloud.

Beth started to shiver as his eyes feasted on her slender body. He grinned, still licking his lips, and pinched her several more times. He rose abruptly and walked toward Audrey.

“We’re gonna have a great time, but not tonight. Let’s go, Audrey. I got some new movies to watch. We’re going to have a very entertaining evening. The best yet.”

He unlocked the door, opened it and pushed Audrey into the main room of the barn. He turned to Beth.

“Don’t be jealous and don’t you worry, you aren’t going to miss a thing. You can watch the TV and get in the mood, kinda get an idea of what’s waiting for you. You’ll get your turn, I promise. Tomorrow we’ll play and I’ll show you all my new toys.”

Beth heard him lock the door and cried in relief. She stumbled to the bed and collapsed. Her breasts ached so badly it hurt to cross her arms. One nipple bled slightly from where he’d dug in his nails; both had swollen to twice their normal size.

A moment later a TV screen, inset into the wall, came on. She stared at the monitor in fascination as the movie started. A couple walked onto the set, sat on a sofa and proceeded to kiss. The kisses quickly turned forceful as the man pulled the woman’s sweater over her head. Next came her shorts and bra.

He stripped as well and performed a variety of sexual acts upon her, using an assortment of implements and vibrators with a slow easy familiarity that made her moan. The languid kisses became more passionate as the movie progressed. He forced her head down, grinning in anticipation.

Beth blinked at the screen then glanced away, dragging a shaking hand through her hair. Porn wasn’t exactly new to her.

She'd seen pictures in magazines but this was the first movie she'd ever seen.

It went on for hours, one movie after another, the sexual intensity and violence escalating. She knew what he was doing, the deliberate attempt at arousal, and turned away from the screen, refusing to watch but unable to escape the audio.

The movie ended and she recognized the couple on the screen. Now the movie was live as Sam knelt over Audrey, mimicking the men in the movies. There was no getting away from the sounds as Audrey sobbed and screamed, begging him to stop; Beth began to weep.

Chapter 4

Molly sat alone in her room, thinking about Beth. *What is going on? Where are you and why can't they find you?*

Something had to be done, there had to be a way, some way to find her missing friend. Three days and not a word was a very bad sign. Molly watched enough TV to know that time was about to run out.

Her eyes, already red and swollen from crying, now hurt from the constant friction of her fingers wiping, rubbing, lids scrunched up and squinting. Consciously she relaxed her eyes as little white starbursts exploded behind her lids; her lower lip trembled.

I'm going round the bend. I am. I'm losing my frickin' mind.

Tears seemed to be in endless supply as they slid down her cheeks with no end in sight. Guilt rode her like a wild horse while her mind raced through the endless terrible possibilities of what could be happening to Beth. Her stomach turned over and she wretched.

She barely heard the doorbell ring, but the sound of voices in the formerly silent house told her they had company. Molly inched the door open, waiting to hear the conversation. Talking to their sympathetic but inquisitive neighbors just made matters worse; the police were a different story.

Her mother's voice, clear as a bell, came to her. "Yes, she's in her room. Let me get her."

Molly heard footsteps on the floor, opened the door wider and beckoned her inside. "Who's here, Mom? Is it the police?"

"No, it's two private investigators from Los Angeles. They're working for the Chapman's. They came over to talk with you. They're trying to find out if you know anything more about Beth that might help them locate her."

"Let's go," Molly said. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

Susan Kramer introduced her daughter to Lenny and Jim and indicated that they should come into the family room. They gathered at the large round table, settling into comfy club chairs.

Jim leaned toward the girl and smiled. "You and Beth were best friends, huh? Can you tell me about her, what's she like?"

Her desolate expression belied the emotion in her voice. "She's wonderful, the best. We're very close; we do everything together."

"What things did you do? Is she brave? Reckless? What do you think she's doing right about now?" Jim listened closely, watching her facial expressions.

"Well, we're very active. We're both cheerleaders and we ride our horses all the time, go to shows and stuff. We jump fences, so she's brave, I guess, confident. She's not afraid to go fast, but I would never call her reckless; she's certainly not a daredevil. I figure right about now she's trying to figure out how to get away and come back home."

"So she wouldn't just roll over and give up?"

"Beth? Not a chance."

Lenny continued to take notes although the tape recorder in his pocket captured every word for later perusal.

"Did you talk much with Sam? What did he have to say?"

"Just small talk, really. We just hung out in front of one of the exhibits ... polar bears. It was their feeding time and it's always great fun watching the attendant feed them. You know how it is in places like Sea World; you chat with the people next to you, everybody's having fun and it's no big deal. He said he'd just moved to San Diego and that he'd enrolled in USD for the fall session."

Jim nodded in encouragement. "Relax a moment and think back in your mind. How about the park? Did he seem to know it, say if he'd been there before? Anything like that?"

"He told us he'd recently moved to the area, that this was his first trip to Sea World and that it was his favorite park so far. He went to Disneyland first and loved it. Said he planned to visit all the local theme parks before school started."

"Did he mention which ones ... maybe state a particular choice he had in mind to visit next?"

“No, he never said which ones, sir. Just that he wanted to visit all of them.”

Jim and Lenny locked eyes. They rose in unison, clicking their briefcases shut.

“Thank you so much, Molly. You were such a big help. If something else, anything at all pops up, be sure to give me a buzz.” Lenny handed Susan and Molly some business cards. “Keep these on you. You never know ... it’s a small world.”

“And getting smaller,” Jim said. “We’ll talk soon.”

They climbed into the Suburban and headed back to Hollywood. Lenny pulled his cell out and began to dial.

“Hey, Dana. Yeah,” he said, chuckle bleak. “Nothing for years and then twice in a day; I know. Listen, we just talked to Molly Kramer and she told us that our perp plans to visit all the area theme parks before school starts in the fall. Did you know that? I didn’t think so. I’m glad I called, then. Yeah, sometimes ya just gotta ask the right questions, I guess.” He nodded several times, silent.

“Disneyland. Yep. Last week, he said. Sounds like we’re going for a serial kidnapper at the very least. We’ll keep you posted if anything comes up on our end. Good hunting.”

Lenny closed his cell and glanced at Jim. “I’m glad I called her because they didn’t have a clue. Dana will update the different local departments involved, keep everyone informed on the latest news and all the agencies are on the lookout for that clown. They’re upping the surveillance on all the area parks, too, plus alerting Knott’s, Magic Mountain and Universal Studios. They all have excellent security teams who know what Sam looks like. They’ll be watching right along with the Sheriff. With any kind of luck, they’ll nab him when he strikes again, and there’s no *if* about it. When.”

Jim nodded several times, slowing down as they approached the freeway exit. “We’ve got our first solid lead. Now I’d like to pinpoint his base and find out where he lives. I figure it’s isolated, somewhere quiet where people would not become suspicious at unusual activity.”

“That’s a given you can count on, that and one other thing. I bet his base is within a two hour drive of here. Guys like this

generally like to stay in familiar territory in case they have to run from the cops.”

“I bet you could cut that down to one hour and still be in the zone. There are bunches of theme parks in this area to chose from, and since we can’t cover them all, I’d say leave them to the cops. They’ve got the manpower. What I’d like to do is find out more about the clown.”

Lenny shrugged. “We need to have a talk with that couple and get a good description of it. If we can find out where he got it that might give us a location, something more to go on.”

“I have their number,” Jim said. “Let’s get back to town and develop a plan. Maybe we can see a connection, something similar between Sea World and his primary choice, Disneyland. Actually, the first place I thought of when Molly mentioned him going to all the theme parks was the zoo. I think that’s a very likely target; it’s certainly a place to start.”

“Considering what he’s after, I’d discount Lego Land. Mostly little kids there, so it’s not particularly attractive to the teens he wants.”

“Makes perfect sense to me. The zoo can’t be twenty minutes from Sea World, even on a bad day.”

They drove the rest of the trip in silence. Jim pulled into the restaurant parking lot and glanced at his watch.

“I’m thinking we need to get the girls to give us a hand on this. What say we get a couple of hotel rooms down in the general area so we don’t have to spend half the day going up and down the freeway? Good God, with the gas this beastie uses, the rooms will be cheaper, not to mention easier on the nerves.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Let’s see if we can sell it.”

“They won’t be able to resist. A week in San Diego? Not a chance.”

They got out of the Suburban and entered the back door of the restaurant, Tony at heel.

Ella sat behind the desk in her office, going over the lunch receipts, preparing the deposit and making out the cash drawers. She no longer played a hands-on part in the daily operation of the restaurant, limiting herself to taking occasional care of the books

and reassuring Chef through his endless predictions of impending doom.

With the hiring of Kelly Adams, Food and Beverage Director, extraordinaire, and Barry Walker, the drop-dead gorgeous, mouth-watering new host, her only responsibility was to be available in case of emergencies which thus far had not happened in almost eight years of operation.

The changes at *ELLA'S* happened slowly as she came to terms with the required adjustments. Once she and Terry decided they wanted to play more significant roles in the operation of Sessions & Browning, Private Investigators, the restaurant had to take a back seat.

They sealed the deal when they helped Lenny and Jim foil a harrowing terrorist plot that threatened the lives of thousands of Angelinos. Two million dollars in reward for recovering stolen art did much to influence the turn of the tide.

Still, *ELLA'S* was her baby, her personal success story and it was hard to let go. The choice was her's, one way or the other, but that didn't make it any easier. She couldn't have both and that's what she really wanted.

Her mind went back to the day she first saw the empty cavern of a place and chuckled. It's only boast, huge though it might be, was the excellent location which promised success for even the most dubious enterprise and an oversized parking lot. She and Terry designed the restaurant around a Classic Rock theme and the lounge was the talk of the neighborhood.

A solid oak, guitar-shaped bar filled the large room. Comfortable padded barstools lined the neck and body of the guitar, flowing along the graceful rounded sides. On the walls in oak-framed posters, the greats of Classic Rock performed. Half-round booths lined the walls.

Jim's greeting pulled her from her reverie. "I'm in the office," she called, smiling as he walked in the door.

"Hey, you tasty morsel." They embraced then pulled apart as a cold wet nose thrust itself into Jim's side.

"Hey, Amy." He reached down to pet the sleek black head then turned again to Ella. "How would my girls like to go to San Diego for a couple of days?"

“Go? As in stay there?”

“Yeah. This case we’re working will take a lot of hands-on time and I hate to spend half the day on the freeway, it’s such a waste of time and energy. We figured somewhere down in Old Town, or maybe over at the Coronado Hotel if they have any rooms left. This time of the season, I doubt it, but we’ll check. Sound good?”

“Sounds wonderful. Are Lenny and Terry coming, too?”

“Yeah. He’s talking to her about it in the bar. I saw her with Al when we came in. Anyway, we need you girls to drive your own cars down. We don’t want to have to use the Suburban more than necessary. It’s a bitch to maneuver, but we have to take it because of the dogs. This will be Cricket’s first official case.”

“Her debut. I bet Lenny’s tickled. I know he’s had a ball learning with her. He tells Terry the funniest stories. Evidently Cricket has some tricks he’s quite impressed with.”

“That’s Rudy’s fault. He can’t leave well enough alone and just train them for service or attack. He has to dig around for what he calls an unusual *talent*. Tony was the first one he did that to. Rudy had so much fun with him, now he tries it with all the new pups. Most don’t have a clue what he’s after, but the pleasers, the ones that really want to work with you, they figure it out. Take tracking. I mean, that is so not a Dobie trait. It’s virtually unheard of; they use their eyes, not their noses. She’s like Tony, I guess.”

“Is it the same stuff they alert on? I know Tony does drugs and bodily fluids. Is that what she does?”

“She does so much more. In addition, she seems to recognize regular human scents when they’re somewhere else. Like if I give her your scarf to sniff and then that’s it. We take a walk around, go shopping, stuff like that. Next day, say, we go to the loft. She’ll immediately alert that your scent is there. Tony doesn’t do that. He just locates whatever’s in the room he’s told to search, but he doesn’t differentiate one person from another. She’ll actually track a remembered scent. It’s incredible.”

“Wow. So you think that if you give her Beth’s stuff to alert on, she might be able to tell you where the girl is?”

Jim chuckled. “Well, not unless she learns to talk.” He bunched up, protecting his ribs from her anticipated and well-

delivered jab and then drew her into his arms and kissed her. “So, girlie, ya wanna go to the beach?” He nibbled on her ear, chuckling all the while.

“Oh, Lenny, sounds good to me,” Terry said after listening to his invitation. Pushing aside the pile of napkins she’d been folding, she scooted over and patted the bench.

He sat next to her and took her hand. “I’m glad you feel that way. I think this might take a week or so and I’d love your company.”

“You got it, baby. I think that’s a great idea. San Diego will be a wonderful break. I’m sick of the smog.” She pursed her lips, expression anxious. “Has there been any more news about Beth? It’s gone on too long, don’t you think?”

They sat a moment, quiet, retrospective. “I appreciate the chance to see you and Cricket on your first assignment. What a challenge, especially thinking she might lead you to that poor girl. Is it hard having your first assignment with Cricket be so dire? Lord, that poor kid.”

“It’s terrifying, especially since the odds for a good result are so slim. It’s statistically unlikely at this point that we’ll find her alive, but if Cricket can do it, how wonderful that would be.” Eyes alight, he shrugged. “I’m excited, I’d be a liar to deny it, and she’s perfect for this kind of job, too. Just pray for a good hit, some kind of lucky charm to lead us to Beth.”

His face sobered then as he remembered the point of the quest. A young girl’s life hung in the balance if they weren’t already too late. He kissed her fingertips and slipped his arm across her shoulder.

“How long do you need to pack? It’s going to be about a week, but the shopping down there is great, so you can always fill in the gaps.”

“An hour, I guess. Are we taking the Jag? I just got it washed and filled the tank, so she’s ready to go.”

“I’m going to ride in the Suburban with Jim and the dogs. We’re going to work up a game plan on the way down, make an itinerary and a list of bases to cover. He wants Ella to take her car,

too, so we can get around town easier if we have to split up. Anyway, you don't mind if we caravan down, do you?"

"No problem. I can pack a suitcase in no time flat. Plus, all my clothes just came back from the dry cleaners, so I don't have any last-minute stuff. I'll be quick."

"Okay, let me go tell Jim we'll be back here in an hour or so. Meet ya in the parking lot."

Suitcases, garment bags and carrying cases jammed the Jag's trunk to full capacity.

"You couldn't squeeze a fart in there," Lenny said, eyebrows arched. "All right, the trunk *did* close; I didn't believe it would. Okay, Cricket?"

He turned to the dog at his side and pointed at the back seat of the Jag and snapped his fingers. The Dobie glided into the car and sat, head, neck and a good portion of her chest visible above the low-slung lines of the sports car. Her short liver chestnut coat glistened in the late afternoon sun; round eyes the color of topaz fixed on Lenny.

"Good girl. Stay."

The large dog stretched herself across the back seat, hind legs hanging off to one side. Once they got underway, she rose again, stuck her muzzle in the air and let the wind rattle her jowls. The tips of her pointy ears vibrated like hummingbird wings.

Ella and Jim waited in the back of the restaurant parking lot with Amy and Tony.

Although it was still early, a dozen or so cars took up position in the lot, proclaiming the beginning of the best hour in the day ... happy hour. Word circled about the clubs that a new gal in town entertained in *ELLA'S* lounge with nothing but an acoustic guitar and the voice of an angel.

Jim saw the Jag turn into the drive and park next to the SUV. He leaned over, gave Ella a kiss and got out of the car. He called Tony to his side, walked across the parking lot and opened the back of the Suburban. He gave Tony the signal to get in. Lenny joined them and Cricket jumped up to join Tony.

Amy refused to look at Jim. Instead, she turned around in the back seat of the Mustang convertible and stared off into the distance, ears clamped to the sides of her head. She did not want to ride in the van with the other dogs.

Jim shot a stiff glance at the dog, turned to Ella and shrugged. "Your call."

"Oh, she's fine with me. Besides, she prefers a convertible. Likes the wind in her hair."

"That's ridiculous, Ella. It shouldn't be her choice and you know it as well as I do."

Jim glared at the dog.

They got lucky with the traffic and managed to get to the Bayview Inn in just over two hours. The trip was uneventful as Terry had been cautioned to keep her foot out of the carburetor. Last in the caravan, she followed them down the freeway at a sedate seventy.

Every once in a while she'd fall back, always aware of what and who might be lurking in her rearview mirror. When it was safe and she'd dropped back just far enough to give her an excuse, she'd zoom up on Ella's tail, laughing with delight.

Through a good net search, they found a delightful bed and breakfast just off the main section of Old Town. They agreed to accept the dogs as long as it included a not necessarily refundable deposit to seal the deal.

They requested adjoining, ground floor suites that included having private and exclusive use of a sumptuous and fragrant garden with a covered patio rather than the preferred and truly outstanding sea view from the suites above.

Convenience more than made up for it, and they let the dogs walk around the yard before setting out in search of a restaurant.

They ended up staying in the hotel as delicious aromas floated to them from the nearby dining room. Tiny lights edged the large outdoor patio and a soft breeze, fragrant with ocean salt and

roses washed over them. Tables set with white linens and beautiful candles in hurricane lamps beckoned. They chose a table in the corner and settled into the fluffy cushioned chairs.

The tuxedoed waiter approached with menus and a smile. After greeting them and getting their order for cocktails, he leaned forward ever so slightly and almost whispered.

“Tonight’s special is Veal Oscar, and it is....” Dramatically, he raised the tips of thumb and index finger and kissed them. “To die for; I highly recommend. The veal is so tender and the crab with the asparagus makes the taste buds bubble. Our Chef makes a hollandaise sauce you could drink. Definitely my suggestion for tonight, although we have three other entrées to choose from, all of which are guaranteed to delight the palate.”

He continued to recite the dinner choices which included a range-free, cage-free chicken ala fricassee and a pasta de la Mar that got Lenny’s attention. They chose the recommended wine to go with each meal and leaned back in expectation. Lunch had been ages ago and stomachs grumbled.

Ella chuckled. “That reminds me of the DJ the other night... ‘we have’em all here tonight, ladies and gentlemen. Eagles, Byrds, Stray Cats, Beatles and Monkees, all cage-free and running wild.” She tittered again. “Always gives me the chuckles.”

Terry ended up ordering the veal special, Ella picked the Ciopino and they all promised to share.

Lenny pulled his notebook out of his pocket and flipped it open.

“According to the witnesses, the clown had a mad, scary face. She said its eyes looked maniacal, like starbursts, and very hostile. The mouth was round and wide open; he showed sharp, pointy teeth in a snarl. The rest of it was what she called, ‘regular clown’ which I took to mean a red and white checkered outfit. No hat. She said no hat, but she didn’t mention hair.”

Jim cruised through his notes as well, nodding. “You’re right, Lenny. She just says no hat. I figure that means he was bald. Maybe?”

Terry nodded at Ella, grinning. “Remember when I was a kid and collected all those different masks? Mostly they were porcelain but I found some that were plastic. Unless you looked at

them up close, or touched them, you couldn't tell, not really. Is there any way of knowing if the mask we're looking for is plastic?"

Jim shook his head. "Not at this point. Why?"

"Just wondered. The porcelain ones are really pricey and very often the shops that sell them also carry fancy character dolls like the Madam Alexander's. Those dolls are collector's items and I'm thinking that a company like that might also make clowns or masks."

"I remember," Ella said with a chuckle. "You had one of Scarlett O'Hara. Looked exactly like Vivian Leigh ... red gown with those white lacy sleeves. Never could figure out why they didn't use the gown design from the movie, though."

Terry nodded. "Exactly. If we could find a shop down here that carries original stuff like masks in porcelain or ceramics, they may recognize the clown's description from its clothes. It's funny, but in retail, you find a lot of common ground." She turned to Ella, eyebrows up.

"It's like at the restaurant. When I buy replacement dinnerware or barware, the vendors show me a variety of other stuff, just in case. We don't need it, but if you ever want to find one of those fountains you pour punch into and it flows endlessly down three tiers, I know where to get one."

They chuckled as the waiter arrived with their dinners. Terry and Ella, properly impressed with the presentation of their opted meals, thanked the waiter for his suggestions. The guys dove in, more interested in hunger pangs than art. Conversation lulled as they ate in companionable silence, commenting on the case from time to time and their hopes of finding where the clown came from.

Terry turned to Ella with a chuckle. "I know what you're doing ... always business. So, is it as good as Chef's Cioppino? It looks great and it has lots of the broth I love."

"Different, a tad more spicy with the Cajun sausage, but out of this world." She dipped a crusty piece of bread into the broth and offered it to Terry. "That remark you made earlier about suppliers carrying a huge variety of merchandise is true. They look at present customers like a potential sales conduit, and you never know," Ella said with a chuckle. "We may need that fountain yet." She glanced at the large emerald on her finger and smiled.

Terry finished the crust, chewed a moment longer and took a sip of wine. "This is very good, but I like Chef's better. Now this veal," she sliced off a bite and dipped it in some sauce. "You could truly rub this in your hair it's so good." She handed the fork to Ella.

Jim and Lenny rolled their eyes at each other. Jim reached for Ella's hand as she was about to give a full blown description of Terry's veal.

"Darling, could you girls do the food show later? I know it's important, I do, really, and you'll remember every nuance tomorrow, but in the mean time, we really have work to do."

The girls leaned back in their chairs, somewhat embarrassed. They glanced at each other and Terry nodded.

The chuckle began to rise. "I've never been told to shut up in a nicer way before in my life. Sorry, and you're right. Okay, where were we? Finding out what kind of shop is likely to know the vendor we're looking for, even if they don't carry the clowns." Terry chuckled. "Did that make any sense at all?"

Ella shrugged. "Did to me. Dolls shops, of course, any little curio shop, antiques, especially the ones with handmade lace hankies and real girly things."

She glanced at Jim, who had returned to his deep conversation with Lenny, and placed her hand on his thigh to get his attention.

"I figured after the local shops here, we could head over to Coronado and check out the stores over there. As close as everything is, it shouldn't take more than an hour or two."

"I think you girls have a point," he said. "That's the kind of stuff you find at a specialty shop."

Lenny sighed and glanced at his watch. "We have an appointment with Sea World security first thing tomorrow. Molly gave me a scarf Beth left in the car the day she got nabbed. I also have a shoe her mother gave me. Between the two, Cricket might be able to get something. We'll check out the area around the restaurant. I can't imagine after this much time there's anything left, but we'll let her take a sniff. And pray."

Ella leaned forward. "You don't expect him to go back there, do you? I can't imagine he'd return to Sea World. How about if Terry and I check out the zoo, or do you guys want that one?"

Jim shrugged. "I thought maybe we could all do it together. It's so big and spread out we could easily miss him if that's where he is." He glanced at Lenny for agreement.

"How about if we tentatively plan to meet the girls at the front gate at noon? By that time we'll have whatever we can find at Sea World and the girls will have swept the local shops; we can do the zoo in teams. If something comes up, a change of plans, we can use the cells."

"What say we start at opposite ends of the parking lot and cruise back and forth until we meet at the top? I have two pairs of walkie-talkies so we can keep in contact. Once the parking lot is swept, one of us has to stay by the front gate and screen folks as they enter." Lenny rubbed his eyes then shook his head. "What a monumental task for only four people."

Jim raised his hand at the waiter, indicating he wanted the check.

He brought it over, along with a selection of exotic teas and a half-a-dozen individually wrapped chocolate truffles, nestled in a multicolored cellophane-filled box.

"Did you enjoy your dinner, sir? I hope the quality of the food met your expectations." He turned toward Ella then, a grin lighting his dark eyes.

"Considering the quality you present at your restaurant, madam, I hope we compared favorably with your usual fare. Please tell Guy that Charles sends his regards." He smiled, took the check and Jim's card and left the table.

"God, talk about a small world. Half the time I forget his name is Guy. To me, it's always *Chef*. It's like a royal title or something, nothing more need be applied."

"I hope those are to go," Terry said, only half listening as she helped herself. "Umm, Earl Gray. Love that. And Jasmine. Check it out, El."

The girls emptied the tea caddy as well as all the portable desserts.

Jim added an additional five dollars to the tip.

Chapter 5

Beth wedged herself into the corner of the bed, covering her naked body as best she could. With her ear pressed up against the wall, she heard Audrey crying, begging Sam not to hurt her any more. The sobbing escalated and snatches of sentences came clearly. Audrey started to scream.

“That wasn’t good enough, you bitch. You know what I want and you better make it happen, now do it.” He continued to yell at her, voice audible through the walls and amplified through the TV. Slapping punching sounds came as well, and always the crying.

Through it all, the porn movies continued to play, the sound turned up to maximize the impression, to perfect the fear and heighten the violence.

The abrupt end of the tape produced a profound silence; the TV screen went black. They’d come to the end of the line, finally. Darkness filled the room but there was no comfort there. Now the sounds were real, not the illusion of a porn film, and the cries were familiar. The thin walls masked nothing. It went on so long Beth feared she’d faint from horror.

Slumped into the corner, heart beating like a trip hammer, she knew any moment now he’d come for her. He’d open the door and throw Audrey into the room like a piece of trash. Then he’d grab Beth and drag her into the living room.

Sure enough, she’d barely completed the thought when the door burst open again. Audrey lurched into the room, legs wobbly, and staggered across the floor into the bathroom.

Sam stared at Beth a moment, panting hard. He started to reach for her and then pulled back.

“Nah, I’ll save you for tomorrow when I’m fresh.” He started to laugh, a harsh, braying sound. He continued to cackle as he slammed the door; he went on like that for some time.

Audrey continued to vomit into the toilet, crying, gagging; the sounds went on until Beth thought she'd scream. That act, more than anything she'd heard or seen, made her insane.

After what seemed like forever, silence came.

"Are you okay, Audrey?"

"As soon as I can stand I need a shower."

Without even a moonbeam to assist, Audrey inched her way across the bathroom floor and entered the shower. Next came the sounds of water pattering on the dirt floor and finally, silence. Her teeth clapped together like castanets as she turned the hose off, shook herself dry as best she could and wobbled back to the main room.

Beth sat in the corner of the bed, her back against the wall like a cornered animal.

"We gotta find a way to get out of here."

"There's no way out. We don't even have a frickin' window. And how far would we get naked without shoes?"

"There has to be something we can do. We need to make a plan." Beth paused a moment. "Is there anything around here we could use for a weapon?"

"The room is virtually bare. Except for the bed and the hose in the bathroom, we don't have anything."

Silence and despair filled the room and for a moment, they barely breathed.

"What does he do to you? When he takes you in there, what happens?"

"He's a sick son of a bitch, that's for sure. Into a variety of shit, mostly depending on what tape he turns on. He's wild about oral sex, all guys are, but since he can't get it up, he never gets off. Which ends up making him more and more frustrated with me, like it's my fault; then he starts to hurt me."

Shaking like a leaf in a wind, Beth pressed both hands to her mouth; hushed, whimpering sounds slid between her fingers. "Like what?"

"Oh, God, Beth. There's probably some big long word for it, but he's hardly got any balls and his wiener is about the size of my little finger." She paused a moment and shuddered. "And since he can't, you know, it goes on for hours, but he's never satisfied. He

jams things inside me just to make me beg him to stop. He's out of his frickin' mind ... totally insane."

"Well, I mean, if he can't, er, like why even bother?"

"Because he *wants* to, Beth. The desire is there, he just can't; that's what drives him. He impotent and it makes him madder than hell ... it's what pushes him to so much excess. He keeps pointing at the guys in the porn movies 'cause they're all hung like a horse and yelling about why he got the short end of the stick. That's when he bites me the hardest."

Audrey ran her hand gently across her thighs, feeling the welts and fiery pain and started to cry again.

"He bit me so deep this time I feel like he scraped the mussel or something. I can't see it, but I know he broke the skin 'cause it's still bleeding. I'm just numb right now; I can't feel anything."

"*Bit you?* He bites? Oh, my God. We gotta get out of this place, whatever it takes. We need to overpower him or something. He's not really all that big."

"He's strong enough to take both of us out. We need a weapon, but I don't know what."

"Does he live here, do you know? Does he work or something?"

"He's rarely here during the day. At least, he never bothers me until night and I don't hear him moving around either."

"Do you know whether any of our walls are external?"

"I think that one is." Audrey pointed at the far wall. "It gets warm in the afternoon, that's for sure."

"This place is so old some of the boards just have to be rotted. First thing in the morning, I'm going to check it out. If we can find a loose board, we might be able to pry off a piece of wood we could stab him with, you know, like a dagger or something."

"If we could figure out a way to get out of here that would be the best."

They clasped hands in the dark.

"Tomorrow."

Old Town, San Diego, dappled with shade on this early summer morning, sparkled with dewdrops.

By eight, shoppers, browsers and tourists strolled past the shops, many not yet open. Just about everyone but the littlest kids held Starbucks cups and their preferred breakfast treat. Sweet smells from the many bakeries tempted them with mouthwatering aromas; there was so much to choose from.

Ella and Terry cruised the shops, barely glancing at the clothiers or leather products. They were on the hunt for a specialty shop that just might carry clown dolls. They paused in front of a shop with a variety of antique pieces, including heirloom jewelry and a display of porcelain masks.

“I’ll wait on the sidewalk with Amy. Go in and see what you can find out.”

Terry approached a little lady who stood behind the counter. “Hi, I’m interested in those masks. They’re beautiful.” She strolled to the wall, noticing the tiny signature on the bottom of the masks.

“Oh, my, they’re signed. How exciting. Do you know the artist?”

“No, I don’t. I haven’t worked here very long, but I think they’re done somewhere local. They sell pretty fast, so the owner keeps restocking.”

“Do they do dolls or clowns, things like that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have room for stuff like that. I need to hang most of my merchandise on the wall.”

Terry thanked the woman for her time and joined Ella on the sidewalk.

“I don’t think these masks are what we’re looking for. First of all, they’re originals and really expensive ... hundred bucks and up. They’re hand-painted and exquisitely detailed, but I doubt our perp would spend that kind of money on something he keeps in the back window of his car.”

They’d just about finished the Old Town shops when they saw a second-hand store on the corner. Two long tables lined the walls displaying a wide variety of items.

“This won’t take long,” Terry said as she walked through the door. Her eyes scanned the merchandise, most without merit.

Disappointed, she was about to turn and leave when she saw the clown. It sat propped up in the corner, looking similar to the one described as being in Sam's car window.

She lifted it from its spot for closer inspection. The face of a typical happy clown grinned at her. The mask, rather than fragile porcelain was plastic, although the exceptional artwork showed rare talent. His fringe of yellow curls skirted his bald head and everything about him was round: eyes, cheeks and lips.

"This is just darling." Terry nodded to the clerk and smiled. "I'll take it. How much is it?" She turned the doll over, looking for a price tag.

"It's forty-five dollars." The clerk took the doll and began to wrap it in several layers of tissue.

"Do you know who the artist is? Who makes these dolls? I'd like to see the rest of their stock. I collect them."

"Actually, I do. The place is called Poppy's Creations; it's owned by a couple out on Mission Gorge Road. They make all kinds of dolls and sell them at little street fairs and swap meets. Simple to find their place; just take the 8 to Interstate 5, get off at Mission Gorge and drive about ten miles into the hills. You'll see this little strip mall on the right, Palms to Pines it's called, with all kinds of shops and stuff. You can find them there."

"Thank you very much. I'll check it out."

"Tell them I sent you. I could use a discount on the next order." She chuckled, placed the tissue-wrapped doll in a signature bag and waved at Terry.

Ella paced around on the sidewalk as Terry hurried toward her.

"Bingo! I think this was done by the same artist." She drew the clown out of the bag and pulled the tissue away from the head.

"Oh," Ella said, "but it's a nice clown, a regular face. I thought you got a match."

Her disappointed tone slightly accusatory, she glanced at her twin. "What's so big about this?"

"Take another look at the face. No hair, just that little fringe that rides the back of the head from ear to ear. Same shape cheeks, right, form of the face the same? I think maybe we need to

check these folks out. The clerk said they do a wide variety of stuff, so, maybe they do special orders?"

"Special orders? What's that mean?"

"Well, you have to admit there probably isn't much of a market for clowns that look like Sam's. Maybe they take special orders." Terry pushed the clown back into the bag and they continued walking.

"Where's the shop?" Ella asked as they waited on the corner for the light to change.

"It's probably thirty miles inland from here. She said to take the 8 to the 15 ... she wrote down the directions and all." Terry fished around in her purse for the business card, flipping it over. "Here. You know anything about this area?"

Ella gave it a quick glance and handed it back to Terry. "It's all Greek to me. I've never done much exploring down here; when I have the time or inclination, I like the LA area better. In fact, except for Old Town and Coronado, San Diego is just something I go through on the way to Mexico."

"Well, the drive looks easy, anyway. Do you want to go up there and check it out or wait for the guys?" Terry shrugged, gazing at her twin.

"They could be tied up at the Sea World security office for hours, especially if Cricket is able to pick up something. I don't want them to break off for us if it ends up being nothing. If they're working on a lead or found something new, they might not be able to meet us anyway, so how about if we check it out first? If we find anything concrete, something they should know, we can have them meet us up there. Sound good?"

"Yeah. Let's head back to the hotel, pick up the car and cruise out there. I can't believe we're going to find anything this easily, but you never know."

"I wonder how Cricket and Lenny are doing. He looked so excited when they left this morning. Is he enjoying working with Jim?"

"Oh, yeah. He loved being a detective, thought it was very fulfilling, but he likes PI work even more and working with the dog is such a plus. He's crazy about her."

“I remember when Jim first taught me to work with Amy. It’s absolutely fascinating. Do you know she can climb a chain link fence?” Ella spread her cricked fingers and wiggled the tips. “Something in their nails.”

Terry led the way to the Jag, clicked the remote and waited for the responding all-clear horns. They pulled out of the garage, heading towards the SR8. Noon hour traffic crawled along city streets at a snails pace, but once they entered the freeway, things picked up.

Their trip on the I15 went even faster and in less than an hour they turned onto Mission Gorge Road. It didn’t take long before the suburban sprawl turned rural and then remote. Huge trees and wild scrub filled the land on both sides of the road. The radio played and the wind blew through their identical burgundy colored hair.

Almost before they knew it, a small sign proclaimed *Palms to Pines Shopping Mall, next right*. Terry slowed her speed, ready to make the turn. After miles of rural ranches and undeveloped acres, the little mall surprised them.

They had no trouble finding a nice shady spot to park the Jag. Amy hopped out and stood next to Ella, muzzle lifted as she drank in the strange smells.

A huge farm wagon loaded with local vegetables drew quite a crowd. Long wooden tables held bins full of sweet corn and boxes of peppers, avocados and ripe red tomatoes were artfully displayed along with jars of homemade pickles, relish and preserves. The aroma of freshly baked donuts filled the air, making the girls salivate.

“Oh boy, look at that. As hungry as I am, I’m sure glad they have an outdoor café. Let’s go check out the shop first and then have lunch here. Something smells great.”

Polly’s Creations occupied the large corner suite, its windows filled with unique merchandise. Although the display contained many other items, the focus seemed to be on clowns. Everything from Clarabell to Emmett Kelly, clowns took center stage. The girls stared at each other as goosebumps rose on their arms.

Ella nodded. “This has to be where he bought the clown.”

Voice pitched so low it was barely audible, Terry said, "I'll go in and see what I can find out."

She entered the store, acutely aware of the alluring scent of patchouli oil, drew a deep breath and smiled at the girl who approached her.

"Hi, my name's Amanda. Is there anything specific you're looking for?"

"Oh, hi, Amanda. I just love the clowns, they're outstanding. Do you do them here?"

The girl's smile expanded, full of pride. "Oh, yes, my parents make them. Dad paints the faces, does the hair, stuff like that. Mom makes all the costumes. Each one is different. Aren't they fabulous?"

Terry picked up a clown dressed in black. The face was a ghostly white, as befitting one unable to see the sun. Three little drips of blood fell from a corner of his mouth.

"Whoa, a Goth clown. Now that's different. I know a couple of people who'd really get a charge out of this one." Terry chuckled lightly under her breath while trying to keep the expression on her face placid.

Amanda laughed. "What a funny take. That's cool, really funny. Actually, it's a vampire clown. We have werewolves, zombies, and all kinds of scary clowns. Let me show you something."

Amanda motioned Terry to the other corner of the room and pointed at the rows of masks. Pride in her parents work clear, she pointed with satisfaction at a series of existing fright masks that could be purchased and made into a clown.

Freddie Kruger, Chuckie, Jason and just about every evil character in movie history ranged before them, row after row.

Somehow, as disturbing as those masks were, they did not compare with the other exhibits.

Another row of masks lined the narrow shelves and above them, the photo the artist had used to make the replica. The finished mask looked lifelike to a surreal extent, distorting the visage of the real person into whatever horror the purchaser desired.

Faces once placid, even smiling, now contorted into expressions foreign to the reality of the person they depicted and yet the likeness could not be mistaken.

Terry blinked and took a reflexive step backward. It was a shock seeing them in such tight formation. “Wow. That’s something else. Do they take requests?”

“Anything or anyone you want. Dad is a genius. Give him a picture, tell him the expression, how you want the face to look and he’ll make you a mask from it.”

The phone rang just then, requiring Amanda’s attention. “Feel free to browse around. I’ll be over by the cash register if you need me or have further questions.”

Terry continued to look around at the rest of the merchandise. She selected several packages of incense and the clown she felt most closely resembled the one Sam had.

“What are your hours?” Terry placed the incense and doll on the counter and reached into her purse for her credit card.

“In season, ten to six. Winters we don’t open except on weekends. That comes to a total of twenty-one dollars even. Come back and see us again.”

“Oh, I can promise that. My fiancé just loves stuff like this. We’ll probably see you again soon.”

Terry walked out of the store, her stomach bunched up in knots. “Man, I guess it’s me, but that was downright creepy. Take a look at this.” She pulled the clown from the bag and handed it to Ella.

“Good grief!” Ella glanced down at the angry face and shivered. “Enough to give you nightmares.”

“I think that’s the point. And they’ll make any face you want. All they need is a picture. You can personalize the clown’s outfit, too. Like Build a Bear or something.”

“I have to admit it’s beautifully done. Once you get past the expression, you can see the artist is skilled. Did they have many like this?”

“Man, they had vampires, werewolves, all the TV horror characters, as well as some just nice, regular pretty faces. Very strange.” She chuckled. “Smelled like a head shop.”

Ella examined the doll a moment longer then handed it back to Terry. "Let's go to that little restaurant and get a bite to eat."

"Sounds like a plan to me. While we're at it, I'm gonna call Lenny and tell him what we discovered. With any kind of luck, they may want to drive up and meet us."

"I think we found out where Sam got the clown," Terry said. "Yeah, we just sat down at a restaurant right next door. Super, sure, we'll meet you here." She gave him the directions then said goodbye.

"The guys will be here in half an hour or so. Maybe we could have a drink and wait lunch for them? Lenny said he's starved."

Before Ella could respond, a waitress appeared bearing a tray with a basket of lavosh and two glasses of water. They accepted the menus and ordered two glasses of white wine.

"I love lavosh," Ella said, grinning. "I'll just nosh on these until the guys get here."

Terry pulled a package of incense out of her bag and handed it to Ella. "I bought one for you, too. I couldn't resist. It reminded me of our seventeenth birthday, when Mom and Dad took us to Manhattan and we spent half the week walking around Greenwich Village." She sniffed again and smiled. "Fun memory, remember?"

"Fifteen years ago. God, it's hard to believe, isn't it?"

Chapter 6

Audrey stood next to the door, trying to peer through the tiny crack between the jam and the wall. She shook her head several times and balled her hands into fists.

“I haven’t heard anything since the door slammed early this morning. I think we’re alone.”

Beth pressed her ear against the wall in a vain attempt to hear something that would tell them of Sam’s whereabouts. She shrugged, glancing at Audrey.

“Get off the bed, Beth. I have an idea.” She waved her hands to the side.

She picked up the lumpy mattress and with Beth’s help, flipped it over onto the floor. The ragged box spring beneath, rusted and broken in some places, revealed both a weapon and a tool.

“Oh, my God, look at the springs...look.” Beth pointed a shaking finger and drew a deep shuddering breath. “Several of them are broken and just hanging off like that, see? Do you think we can pry them out?” She bent over for a closer look and nodded.

“We can do it, Audrey; I know we can, if we can just get hold....” She reached for what looked like the loosest one and gave a tug. Speckles of rust came away in her hand as she worked the part back and forth until finally, a piece of the spring, about four inches long, broke.

“Sweet.”

Thus encouraged, Audrey grabbed another, worked it back and forth until it broke off, then another. She sat down on her haunches, panting from fear and exertion and glanced at the door. “I’m weak from hunger. I haven’t had a bite to eat since the morning before you got here. Makes me woozy.” She covered her face with her hands and took long, deep breaths.

“I know, I’m starved, too. We have to make a plan, and it better be a good one; we won’t get a second chance.” Beth rose from the bed with five pieces of the metal spring clutched in her hand and walked to what they felt was an exterior wall. Already the morning sun warmed it in spots, reaffirming their earlier suspicions.

Beth knelt on the floor and began scraping down the edges of the vertical boards that made the wall. Unfinished, without benefit of drywall, the exposed wood crumpled with age. She continued to scrape, optimistic by her earlier success.

With several springs in hand, Audrey knelt beside her and got to work on a board about two feet over.

“If we ever get these guys pried loose, we can squeeze through the crack. Then we can get away.”

“Do you have any idea where we are?” Beth glanced sideways at Audrey. “I managed to see trees, lots of big tall trees, so we’re in some forest, I know that. Otherwise....” She shrugged, continuing to dig away at the boards.

“I don’t have a clue, either. I’m from Costa Mesa, down near the beach in Orange County. I was so out of it when we got here, I never saw a thing.”

“I live in Del Mar, up the coast a ways from Sea World. One thing for sure, even when we get out of here we’re still in trouble. It’ll be a big improvement, but still. Are there bears or mountain lions this close to San Diego?”

“I don’t know how far we are from the city, but even if we’re up in the hills, it’s just coyotes and bob cats. We’ll still be safer out there than here. He’s never going to let us go alive. I don’t mean to scare you, Beth, but that’s just the truth.”

“I know. If this were a TV show, we’d already be dead.”

They continued to dig and pry at the boards. Hours passed and two very distinct cracks filled with sunshine and began to widen.

“Move out of the way, Beth, I’m gonna lie down and give it a kick.”

Audrey rolled over on her back and with one quick, sharp motion, jammed the ball of her heel into the center of the board. The screech of protest was ear-shattering, at least to the girls. Gasping, they both stared from the broken board to the door and back again.

“Oh, my God, thank you, Lord. Oh, I’m so outta here.” Audrey pushed and shoved, further weakening the board. Puffs of lovely fresh air wafted into the room.

“Take a rest and let me do some, too.” Beth took her place, strong athletic legs pushed hard. Several more blows from her heel

widened the space with another sickening shriek, the board moved farther out. Almost there.

“Stop!” Audrey grabbed the leg in mid air. “Listen. Oh, no, it’s a car. Oh, God, he’s back. If he sees this board, he’ll kill us right now.”

Petrified, the girls huddled together, staring at the door.

Lenny and Jim drove into the large lot and parked next to the Jag. They glanced with interest at the brisk business the produce market did as housewives bickered and bartered for the juicy red tomatoes, crisp onions and other homegrown jewels offered by the local farmers.

The Village Sweet Shoppe and Soda Fountain boasted they made the best milkshake in the world and everyone in sight held either an ice cream cone or a beverage container, wide smiles of satisfaction pasted on their faces.

“Terry said they’re sitting on the back patio of a little café around back. They have Amy with them, so I guess we could bring the other dogs.”

“They need to get out and stretch their legs anyway. If it’s too crowded we can bring them back to the SUV.”

Ella waved as they approached the table. “Hey, that was fast.” She returned Jim’s kiss and scooted over to make room under the table for Tony.

The waitress approached bearing menus and a grin on her plump face. “Oh, my goodness, we have a pack of Pinchers.” She chuckled at herself, and nodded to Jim. “I have one. Absolutely the most intelligent dog in the world. Is there a dog show in town or something? Cause if they don’t have to be AKC registered, my Lady would do great.”

“Nah, they just love to travel. No dog show.”

With a shrug of disappointment, she took their drink order, soon returning with two bottles of beer and a carafe of white wine. “What can I bring ya? Everything’s great.”

They ordered sandwiches and began to catch up.

Terry took the clown out of the bag and showed it to Lenny.

“Man, that’s incredible.” He turned it over in his hand, checking out the back of the head. “I can’t imagine there are too many artists of this quality out here that are into clowns.” He handed the doll to Jim. “What do you make of that?”

“Intricate detail here,” he said, pointing at the beautifully drawn although frightening features. “You’re right. I can’t see all that many folks specializing in producing stuff like this, but I bet there’s a huge market. The workmanship is excellent. Very talented artist.”

The waitress served their lunch which they wolfed down in record time. Twenty minutes later they stood outside the curio shop.

“Jim and I have to go inside and we don’t want to bring the dogs, so can you girls wait with them here while we go in and find out about Sam’s clown?”

The girls nodded, accepting the leashes.

Ella shrugged at Terry. “You notice how I’m going to end up being the only one who won’t get to see the inside of that shop?” She handed Terry two more leashes. “I won’t be long and they won’t move. I want to see the stuff, too.” With a grateful grin, she followed Jim and Lenny into the shop.

Lenny advanced on the clerk with a smile. “Hi, I’m wondering if I could speak to the owners? We’re looking for someone who might have bought one of your masks. He’s the owner of a special clown we think was made here.”

Before the clerk could answer, a middle aged woman entered the shop and waved at the girl. “Hi, Amanda. Is Dad here yet?”

Lenny turned toward the woman and grinned. “Do you paint all these incredible masks?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head and returning the smile. “My husband does that. I make the costumes.” She placed a brown paper bag under the counter beneath the cash register and nodded. “Are you all looking for anything in particular?”

“Actually, we are. We’re wondering about a specific clown. It looked angry, like a fright mask. The eyes were shaped

like starbursts and the mouth opened in an O showing pointy teeth. Does that sound familiar?"

"Oh, yes, we did one like that for a young man. He gave Harry a good idea of what he wanted and when he picked it up, he seemed very pleased ... said he wanted it for his girlfriend."

Jim leaned toward her, green eyes narrowed. "Do you happen to know his name? How about a description?"

The woman hesitated, lips pursed, deep in thought. She turned toward her daughter and shrugged. "He was very good looking, remember, Amanda? You commented on it every time he came in." She returned her gaze to Jim, talking in an easy, comfortable tone.

"His name is Sam and I'm not sure, but I think he lives fairly close by. I remember Harry got the mask done ahead of schedule and when he called and told Sam he could come by and pick it up in the morning, Sam asked how much longer we'd be open. Harry told him twenty minutes and he was here in no time, five minutes max." She leaned up against the counter, eyes speculative.

Lenny approached Amanda, soft, friendly. "What was he like to talk to? Did you spend much time with him?"

She hesitated a moment then shrugged and rolled her eyes. "No, not really. He was nice enough, y'know, but kinda quiet, not really my type. I only talked with him once or twice." Her giggle self-conscious, she shot a glance at her mother and nodded.

"He sure was cute, though. Dark brown hair and eyes, very dark eyes. Not real tall, maybe 5'10", maybe a bit less, even. Regular build but very athletic, y'know. Not muscle bound, more like fit. Can't really remember much else."

"How about you, ma'am? Do you remember anything more?"

Her demeanor had changed considerable in the last few minutes and she stared at him, eyes cold, body language clear. "Well, I just remembered I didn't ask you why you want to know, for one thing." Her face took on a strange expression. "Are you cops?"

“I’m a retired LAPD homicide detective.” Lenny handed her his card. “Now I’m a private investigator. I work with Jim, here.” He turned to his partner and nodded.

“We’re trying to find the guy who ordered this clown because he’s a suspect in a kidnapping case. We’re conducting a search on behalf of the missing girl’s parents.”

Both women gasped, air leaving their lungs like deflated balloons.

Amanda stared from Jim to Lenny and back. “You have to be kidding. Kidnapping? My God, you can’t be serious.”

“Yes, we are, and we need to find the girl as quickly as possible. Her name is Beth Chapman. She’s fifteen. She went to Sea World with her best friend’s family. Along the way, they met this guy. He lured her out of the park and we haven’t heard from her since.”

Jim glanced from Amanda to her mother. “You can see why any information you have that might lead us to him is very important. Time is of the essence. Statistics show she’s running out.”

“Oh, Mom, I recognize that name from the TV. She’s an Amber Alert.” Amanda’s eyes widened and her jaw went slack.

The older woman nodded, reaching out both hands in appeal. “I think he lives close by, maybe in the hills around here. Lots of places hidden away in the hills, dirt roads off both sides of the main route. Oh God, that poor child ... like I said, he got here in five or six minutes that one time, but really, that’s all I know about him.”

“How about a car? Did you ever see it?” Jim glanced from mother to daughter. “It’s really important.”

“I did.” Amanda nodded several times. “’98 Honda, dark gray, the back wheel on the driver’s side is missing a hubcap. At least it was the last time I saw it. The license plate ended with two eights.”

Lenny left Jim to conduct the questioning and walked to the far side of the shop to inspect the rows of finished masks. He bent over to peer at one when his cell rang. He pulled it from his pocket and opened it.

“Browning here.” He nodded. “Dana. What’s up?” He leaned against a counter, his face suddenly pale. “Shit. Where from?” He listened for a while longer, nodded and snapped the cell shut.

Lenny walked over to Jim, shaking his head. “Dana called a moment ago. The bastard just got another girl.”

“Call her back. Tell her we got a make on the car. ’98 Honda Accord, left rear wheel missing a hubcap, last two numbers on the plate are eights.”

The girls huddled together on the bed, holding their breath, straining to hear Sam’s entrance to the barn; they waited, motionless.

“I don’t hear him walking around, do you?” Beth’s voice, barely audible, whispered in Audrey’s ear. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know for sure. Wait here.” Audrey crept over to the door and put her ear against the little crack. *Nothing*. She closed one eye and peered through the gap. *Still nothing*. Where was he? “I swear I hear someone knocking, Beth.”

“What?”

“Listen.”

Holding their breath, both girls waited for another knock, prepared to yell their heads off. Just then they heard a car engine turn over followed by sounds of the car driving away. Realization swept over them like a tidal wave, swamping them with despair.

“Oh, my God, it wasn’t him. That was somebody else, Audrey. It wasn’t him!”

“Son of a bitch.” Audrey leaned against the wall in defeat while tears streamed down her cheeks. “We were that frickin’ close to being rescued.” She rattled the doorknob several times in fury then banged small fists on the wall.

Silence descended on the building.

Sam chuckled as he pulled onto the access ramp to the I5. His newest acquisition, presently secure in the trunk, promised

hours of enjoyment. "I can get rid of Audrey, now. She wasn't any good, anyway; way too old."

The traffic flowed at an easy fifty, slow for the freeway, but steady.

Off to his right, the huge sign began to pulse with that unique *Amber Alert* beat. Staggered, he blinked as he saw his picture appear, along with a description of his car, including part of the plate. He stiffened and glanced out the window to see a blue convertible pull up next to him. The passenger spoke on the cell phone, excited. She made direct eye contact with Sam and grimaced in recognition.

The look said it all. Sam jammed the accelerator to the floor, shot in front of the convertible and charged down the freeway, weaving in and out of lanes. In the distance, he saw the flashing red and blue lights of the California Highway Patrol in his rearview window. What he did not see was the chippie ahead of him, sitting on the top of the approaching viaduct, waiting.

As Sam came abreast of the overpass, the souped-up little Mustang tore down the ramp, hit eighty before it even accessed the freeway, and charged after the Honda, sirens wailing, lights flashing.

Sam took the next exit, the trooper right on his tail. He ran the stop sign, narrowly avoiding a UPS truck, turned right, and took the first side road he came upon. Lost now, he wavered, unsure what to do next. The winding road climbed higher and higher while the trees and dense undergrowth crowded both sides of the road.

The cop, closely followed by two more sheriff's deputies, remained on his bumper, repeatedly bellowing through the car's loudspeaker, "Pull over, pull the vehicle over."

Sam accelerated even more. At speeds exceeding sixty on mountain roads he did not know, the ending was inevitable. The road made an abrupt turn to the right.

Sam never had a chance. The car leaped the ditch coming face to face with a giant old oak. The tree groaned on impact; the car, at least the front end, virtually disintegrated.

The cruisers pulled to the side of the road and in the distance, another wail of a different tone drew nearer. The cops

jumped out. One ran to the car while the other pulled a medical box out of the back of the cruiser. He joined the first cop who took a cursory look at Sam and shook his head.

They set to work on the trunk, where feeble tapping sounds told them the girl was still alive. They pried the trunk lid open to find the missing child, red-haired little Melissa Kruger, curled in a ball.

“Hey, little lady, are you alright?”

She shook her head at the cop several times as tears slid down her cheeks. “I want my mommy.”

“Oh, sweetie,” the cop said, gently slipping his arms around Melissa. “The back of your head is bleeding. The ambulance will be here any minute. Can you hear the sirens getting closer? They’re coming for you.”

The girl whimpered for her mother again, tears flowing in earnest as she started to snuffle.

“Don’t worry, honey, you’re okay. We’re gonna get her right away. Did the man hurt you? Are you okay?”

“I want my mommy,” she repeated, turning huge tear filled blue eyes to the cop. She extended her arms. “My back hurts. I think I’m going to be sick.”

He picked her up and placed her on the ground next to the car. “Do you need to sit down?”

“No, I’m better now.”

The ambulance pulled up to the cruisers and a female medic jumped out of the driver’s side, medical bag in hand.

“Bring all the stuff, Ken, I’m going to see if the child is injured.” She hurried down the incline, squatted next to Melissa and reached out a tentative hand. “Can I help you? Are you hurt?”

The child reached for her head and drew back a bloody hand which began to shake. She stared at it then shook her head softly back and forth, eyes huge. “Where am I? Is my mother coming for me?”

“She’s not coming here, Melissa. She’s going to meet us at the hospital. Would you like to take a ride in an ambulance? I’ll get your mom on the phone so you can talk with her while we drive back to town. Does that sound good?”

Melissa nodded, took the offered hand and walked up the slope to the stretcher and waiting ambulance. She glanced over her shoulder at the wreckage, unaware of the peril she'd avoided.

"Are we going to have to wait for the bad man? He's stuck in the car, huh?"

"No, sweetie, we won't have to wait. There's another ambulance on the way to pick him up. This one is all for you."

"Whoa, that's sweet. Are we gonna make the sirens go? That'd be way cool."

They sat in the hotel lounge, sipping drinks, when Lenny's cell rang.

"Good grief, it's like every twenty minutes," Terry said, nodding at Lenny with a wry smile. "No rest for the weary."

"That's wicked," he said, fishing the cell out of his pocket. "Brown ... yo Dana." His face blanched and a little film of sweat popped up on his forehead. "Son of a bitch."

Several monosyllables later, he closed the cell. "You are not frickin' gonna believe this one. Sam's dead."

They sat there in stunned silence a moment, staring at Lenny.

"Talk about cutting to the chase. Anything more?" Jim stared at his partner, eyebrows clear to his hairline.

"The chippies took him out. They spotted him on the 5, he took off and they chased him up into the mountains. He actually tried to outrun them. Idiot ran into a tree. DOD, dead on discovery. The little gal he snatched, she's fine, small flesh wound on her head and a backache. They're taking her to the hospital just to check her out."

Lenny pursed his lips, shaking his head. "That's about the only good news. We still don't have a clue where he took Beth and that other girl. Man."

"Well, it isn't hopeless, is it? We know he couldn't have lived too far away from that shop. Maybe we need to check that area out." Ella glanced at her cohorts and shrugged. "He had a car,

just a regular car, not a four-wheel drive truck. That means the roads he took couldn't have been *too* bad. Right?"

Terry nodded. "What else did Dana say, Lenny? Are they impressed with what we found out?"

"Oh, sure. I imagine they'll have someone up there to take statements tomorrow if they haven't already done so. And Ella's right, Jim. He couldn't use a fire road or a logging trail with a car like that. It'd be beat to shit in no time."

Terry finished her drink, caught the eye of the waitress and twirled her finger over the glasses. Shortly, another round arrived. They ordered dinner and then resumed conversation.

"Looks like Cricket gets to save the day, huh?" Ella glanced from Lenny to Jim. "Well, she can track Beth's scent, right?"

"Yeah, but she won't be able to track the car. It'll be when Beth walks, that's the best we can hope for. First we have to find the house they're in."

"Amanda said it took him, like, what? Ten minutes, did she say? I mean, unless he was in the car already, that's pretty quick."

Ella nodded at her twin. "Five. It was the mother who said that, actually. I figure maybe the best thing to do is go back up there early tomorrow and once we get within the proper time-distance thingy, lets scope out any roads that come up off either side of the main road. We can search them, then come back to that major road and carry on, past the mall, to the ten minute range in the other direction."

She stared at her partners, and then shrugged. "I'm making it sound like a piece of cake, which I agree, it's not. But it could be way worse."

Dinner arrived, slowing but not stopping their search plans.

"We need to take two vehicles, but Terry, I'm thinking you should ride with Ella. The Jag is so low to the ground you might get hung up and then we'd have that to contend with. Lenny and I'll take the van. If we find those girls, they'll need a car to ride in."

Terry nodded in agreement. "Sounds fine with me, and I agree. We don't need the distraction. Plus Ella's car is bigger, for sure."

The waitress cleared the plates, laid the check on the table and bid them good night.

Chapter 7

Amanda drove into the mall parking lot and parked in front of the store. She picked up her coffee cup and a small bag, clutched her purse under her arm and climbed the stairs. She strode across the porch, unlocked the door and stepped inside. The closed sign now read open.

She flipped on the lights and headed for the back of the store, deep in thought. She slid her breakfast out of the bag and laid it on a napkin. She'd barely taken a bite of her sweet roll when the buzzer rang, indicating someone had entered the store.

"Amanda?"

"I'm in back, Mom."

"Morning, sweetie, how are you?"

Eyes downcast, Amanda shrugged, taking small sips of her hot coffee. "Okay, I guess. That thing with Sam ... Arnold. Whatever; man, that really blew me away."

"Wilcox. Yeah, it got me, too. Imagine knowing someone like that, even just as a customer; dear Lord, think about being his mother or sister." She took several sips from her coffee cup and shivered. "Gives me the damned creeps. Did ya catch the news last night? Looks like he kidnapped another girl. He ran with her when the cops chased him and they treed the bastard, in a manner of speaking. Freak. That little girl he kidnapped was lucky to survive. Did you check out the car? Shit."

Blue eyes hooded, Amanda shivered. "It's just so crazy, Mom. He just seemed like such a nice guy to me."

"What's that mean?"

"Well, I saw him a couple of times besides here."

"Get outta here! When? Where?"

"The first time was the night he came in and ordered the clown. I'd just found an old Koontz book, *The Watchers*, and I had a yen for pizza, so I decided to go over to Freddie's. I'm, like, knee-deep in the book ... scary, man, don't know how I missed it. Anyway, all of a sudden there he was, just standing right next to my

table. When I looked up he said hi and asked if I would like company.” Amanda hunched her shoulders.

“I said sure, why not, and put the book away. We shared a pitcher of beer, ate our food when it came, and split the bill. We talked for a little while about all kinds of stuff, and then I left and went home. There was really nothing to it.”

“Good grief, girl.” Her mother stared at her, eyebrows raised. “What was he like? Did he say anything weird?”

“No, not at all. Tell you the truth, I thought he was gay. Not even the slightest interest in me, in going out. Nothing. We sat there for an hour or so and just chatted like old friends. He seemed very nice, said he loved living in the *woods*, as he called it. Sam, er Arnold, said he’d just moved here; I can’t remember where from. He might not even have mentioned it.”

“Did he say where his property is? Any mention of that?”

“No, not exactly, but it’s close by. He said he went to Freddie’s for dinner a lot. I met him there a couple of times, actually.”

“Oh, Amanda, you should have told the police or those PI’s that came up yesterday. You have no idea what you might be able to tell them.”

“I know. I don’t have a clue why I lied like that. I just didn’t believe he had anything to do with kidnapping those girls. And in the end, I still don’t have anything more to tell them than I already did. Even though I saw him outside here, he never said a word about anything strange.”

“Did he say anything at all that might give you a clue where his place is?”

“No, nothing much at all except it’s local. He said he’d inherited a barn and a couple of acres from an aunt, but he never said exactly where, just that it’s in the neighborhood. He talked about renovating it slowly since he didn’t have a lot of money. It was just chit chat, y’know? He talked about how he bought a windmill and a generator and made his own power. Felt like he was self-sufficient.”

The buzzer came again, interrupting their conversation and both women returned to the store, not really surprised to see Jim and Lenny standing by the cash register.

“Ladies,” Lenny said with a nod, “we stopped by to see if there’s anything more you can tell us about Sam.”

“Arnold Wilcox,” they replied in unison.

“Yes. I wasn’t sure you’d seen the news. We’re about to canvass the neighborhood and I’m wondering if you have any more info to share.”

Lips pursed, Amanda shrugged, eyes darting around the room. Finally they settled on Lenny.

“I do, I guess. I should have told you straight out, but I knew him a little better than I first let on. I’m sorry, but I didn’t think it would matter. Anyway, the reason I knew about his car is I had dinner with him a couple of times. It wasn’t any kind of a date, y’know, we just met up for pizza, but anyway, I saw it on several occasions.”

A little ball of muscle popped out on Lenny’s jaw. He cleared his throat then stared at Amanda with cold blue eyes. “Where does he live?”

“Honest, I don’t know anything but what I heard from him. He said he’d inherited an old barn and some acres from an aunt. He just moved here to claim it. Sam ... whatever, he told me he’d installed a windmill and a generator and was self-sufficient, like a survivalist or something. He got off on that, thought it was neat, y’know?” Amanda hesitated, glancing from Jim and Lenny to her mom.

“After the newscast, I got to feeling really bad about deceiving you and all; spent a little time last night driving around, and going by what he told me, I think I might have found it. He talked about killer sunsets, which means he’s probably on the left side of the road. There are only two side roads to the left anywhere nearby, and I think I found his place. Of course, no one was there. I knocked on the door, but got no answer.”

Jim’s face flushed with ill-concealed anger. “Which road is it?”

Amanda grimaced at his tone and sighed. “Turn right out of the driveway here and go maybe two miles or so. There’s a marked hiking trail that goes forever. I remember playing around there when I was a kid. It eventually leads to the Loveland Canal. Anyway, not far after that there’s a regular road running adjacent to

the trail. It's dirt and doesn't have a sign, but it's in real good condition. Take it all the way to the very end, maybe another two miles. You can't miss it."

The girls took turns hammering the loose board with their feet. The ancient wood, unable to withstand the force of the blows, began to splinter. Faster now, harder, Beth knelt, pushing her shoulder against the board. With a rending screech that sounded like a tortured bird of prey, the board ripped.

It came straight down in a flurry of wood pieces and fell forward onto the forest floor. Audrey poked her head out and looked from side to side. She glanced at Beth.

"Coast is clear."

The girls shimmied through the hole, scratching their backs and legs on the projecting nails and jagged wood slivers.

"Shit," Audrey said as she reached around to touch her shoulder. "Man that smarts." A quick trail of blood seeped through her fingers.

"Me, too. Crud, look at that." Beth pointed at a four inch slice along her thigh. "Well, we can deal this later. We gotta run."

"Where to?" Audrey glanced frantically from side to side.

"I don't know ... anywhere away from here. Come on." Beth grabbed her hand and they hurried across what passed for a lawn and disappeared into the thick underbrush.

The girls waited in the parking lot while Jim and Lenny interviewed Amanda again.

Ella shook her head, glancing about at the surrounding forest. "I can't believe those girls are out there all alone and we have no idea where to look. That bastard took their whereabouts to his grave. It's possible they haven't had food or water all day, maybe a couple of days. TV news said this morning that the kid with him in the car, I can't remember her name, had been released from the hospital after diagnosis of a sprained rib and a flesh wound

on her head. That was one lucky little gal. The front end of the car was, like, smooshed flat against that old tree.”

Terry nodded, an expression of dismay on her face. “I hate looking at stuff like that, y’know? I get nightmares. He so deserved it, really had it coming. It’s just, y’know, dying like that. Gives me the willies.” She fanned herself with a map, causing her hair to stand away from her head in burgundy fringes.

“Man, it’s hot, and so dry my hair is like electrified or something. Talk about static.” She glanced into the mirror behind the visor and chuckled. “Talk about a life of its own. Watch.” She ran her right hand down her head then held it a couple of inches from her hair. Curly strands rose from her head and reached for her hand like a magnet.

“I wonder if we have any humidity at all.”

The fire warning stood on high alert and signs prohibited campfires of any type as well as every sort of smoking, even inside vehicles. The breeze that seemed to play quietly in the treetops increased in velocity. Gusts of hot, dry air formed dust devils that danced in the parking lot. Soon the tall trees began to sway, foretelling a coming condition that put fear into the heart of every Californian no matter where they lived. *Santana’s*.

The blowtorch from the desert, capable of incinerating everything in its wake now headed their way.

Lenny and Jim stomped across the parking lot, their expressions grim.

“We know where they are,” Lenny said. “At least, we’re pretty sure. Follow us and be on the lookout for anything unusual, scan the area for something out of place or odd, especially in the ditches.”

The girls followed the Suburban out of the parking lot and up the winding road, glancing from side to side for anything strange. When they turned down the dirt lane, Terry scrutinized the woods and areas near the trail. Layers of parched, lifeless foliage and heaps of dead and dying brush rose a foot or so above the ground. No likely trail ran through that dense undergrowth.

Just as Amanda told them, they found Sam's lair at the end of the road. The large barn, flanked by a windmill and a big yellow generator, rested in the dappled sunlight, benign, silent.

"This has to be the place," Jim said. "Windmill and it's the only building I've seen, so I have to agree this is Sam's hideout."

They got out of the car, tooting the horn several in short, sharp blasts. The silence returned, the birds began to chirp again, but no sound came from inside the barn. They knocked on the door several times then returned to the SUV. Lenny took Cricket out of the back, allowed her to sniff Beth's shoes and scarf again, then made a circular motion with his hands and said, "Find."

The dog paused a moment, muzzle lifted as she sniffed the strong breeze. For a moment, she stared off into the woods behind the barn.

Cricket whined lightly and trotted up to the front door, where she paused, again raising her muzzle in the air. She glanced at Lenny then, gave one sharp bark and disappeared around the side of the house; Lenny waited for her next response. Shortly, more short sharp barks told them she'd found something.

"Hey, Jim, let's go around back and check out whatever's got her attention."

He turned to the girls. "Wait right here. We don't want any more footsteps than necessary ... could foul the trail. I'll be right back."

The broken boards told the story. Jim lay flat on the ground and wiggled as far into the hole as possible.

"It's dim in there, but I see a raggedy old mattress and a TV screen, not much else. We have to get inside."

Jim rose, brushed his clothes off and nodded. "Let's go."

Lenny pulled his packet of picks out of his pocket and grimaced at Jim. "I thought we just might need these."

Moments later, they opened the door to the unbelievable.

Southern California sweltered under the onslaught of Santa Ana winds. Temperatures topping the century mark and non-existent humidity created the perfect setting for disaster.

The ferocious winds tore in from the desert and down the canyons with gusts exceeding sixty miles an hour. The mountainous terrain created its own ecosystems, feeding on itself and giving life to the most fearful word in a Californian's vocabulary. *Firestorm*. Even more than earthquakes, they feared wildfires.

Helicopters patrolled the vast wildernesses of the Cleveland National Forest and the San Bernardino National Forest as well as fire-prone areas like Malibu and Laguna Hills, looking for that first wisp of white smoke.

The entire state, tinder dry from long sustained droughts, poised, hardly daring to draw breath.

Beth and Audrey, lost and with no idea where to go, decided to head west. By early afternoon their feet bled and a variety of bugs insisted on attacking their naked bodies, gnawing on bleeding wounds. It was by accident that they stumbled on a trail in decent condition. They stood in the middle of the path, absently swatting flies.

"Wow, you don't look so good, Beth. You feel okay?"

"No, I feel awful, actually." She worked her mouth, trying in vain to bring up some saliva. "I'm so thirsty I could die, and when was the last time we ate?"

"Way too long ago." Audrey glanced around, tilting her head, birdlike. She turned to Beth, eyes wide. "Do you hear anything?"

"No. Like what?"

"Like, um, like a rushing sound, but not the wind. Listen."

Both girls stopped breathing, bodies tense, straining to hear.

"Oh, my God, is that a ... is that water? A creek or something?" Beth shook her head. "That's crazy. It's California in the middle of summer. We don't have creeks running after a three-year drought, and yet..."

"We sure do! Maybe we didn't get any rain down here, but the mountain snow pack all winter long was great. I know because I ski. Maybe..." Audrey nodded several times. "That's gotta be what I hear. Water. Come on, let's check it out."

The trail, complete with deer tracks, wound its way through the forest, straight for the most part, occasionally rerouting around huge piles of rocks or a fallen tree. The clear sounds of flowing water told them what lay ahead.

They walked into the sunshine, cheered by what they saw. A small waterfall, perhaps ten feet high, carried the little stream to a natural pond below.

“Oh, dear Lord, thank you.” Audrey began to shake as they approached the lip of the small feeder stream ahead of the falls. She put her arm out, stopping Beth.

“We need to give this some thought. We don’t want to foul the water before we figure out how to do this.” She pointed at the surrounding ground where the forest animals came to drink.

Beth shook her head, lips tight, compressed. “I’m no outdoorsman, but I know you can get very sick if you drink water that the animals crap in. Do you know whether the body absorbs any water just from being in it? Like spraying water on plant leaves?”

She walked upstream to another small pool and checked the ground. There were no signs that the animals used this area to water, perhaps due to the steepness of the bank edge. No reason to go to any trouble when easy access was just steps away.

“Check this out, Audrey. Looks like the spring just starts there.” She pointed above them. “See, it kinda bubbles out from that rock area, so I guess it’s pretty clean. I’m not going to swallow, but even just rinsing my mouth will feel good.”

Cupping her hands she withdrew water and smelled it; odorless and clear. She turned away from the little pool and rubbed her hands together to clean them, making sure the dirty water didn’t foul the little pond. She cupped her hands again and brought the water to her lips.

Eyes closed, she sighed, delighting in the soothing feeling, overwhelmed with an urge to swallow. Turning away, she spit the water on the ground then tasted what little remained. She repeated the process several times as Audrey joined her.

“Oh, that’s so good.”

Audrey squatted next to the water, carefully cleaning her hands several times before she brought the water to her lips. Eyes

closed, she bathed her face with the remaining water then brought another handful to her lips.

“I know, but don’t swallow. It’s our new motto. What do we do next, Audrey?”

“I don’t have a flippin’ clue. I live in a high-rise condo near the beach. I don’t know squat about surviving in the wilderness except for one thing. Searchers can’t find us in the woods, and believe me, they’re looking. My father must be parked on the Mayor’s desk, screaming. Really. How about yours?”

“Same here, for sure and I see what you mean about being hidden in the woods, but if we get out in the open, Sam could track us, too.”

Audrey nodded. “That’s true, but I don’t think it’s likely. Now there’s two of us to contend with, out in the open and not drugged. Plus, unless he just wanted to kill us here, how would he get us back to the barn? Nah, I don’t think he’ll bother. It’s too easy, at least for him, to get another girl.”

“Just to be on the safe side, I’m going to look for something I can defend myself with. What kind of critters do you think live out here? Bad ones?”

“They probably don’t think so, but yes, I guess. I know we have coyotes and bobcats, for sure. Maybe a bear? A brown bear, not the great big ones.”

“Oh, that’s a consolation. It’ll take him a couple of bites to kill us, huh?”

Audrey glanced around, shaking her head. “Well, a weapon is a good idea no matter what we might meet up with. I wish I could find something to lean on. My feet are killing me. Let’s follow this path down, take a plunge in that little pond and figure out what to do next. What time do you think it is?”

Beth squinted into the heavens, a hand shielding her eyes from the sun. “I’m not sure, maybe around two? Way past lunch, that’s for sure. I’m so hungry it’s making me sick.”

“Me too. Just try not to think about it. We’ll get out of this soon. Come on, let’s wash off. That’s gonna make me feel better for sure. I stink, for one thing, and I want to get these cuts cleaned out.”

They continued to walk down the hill, sometimes losing sight of the creek. They found the path to the water’s edge,

shuddering at the feel of ice cold water on their torn and battered feet.

“Holy cow, that’s cold.”

“I told ya. Snow melt, and thank God for it. It’s cold, but oh, man, so good.”

Audrey fell forward into the little pool, submerging herself. Her head popped up and she chuckled. “We won’t be in here long, that’s for sure. Man.” Her teeth began to chatter.

Some five minutes later, they emerged from the water. The sun dried them quickly and they set off down the trail once again.

Chapter 8

Jim pushed the door open ready for anything. Lenny moved ahead into the room, gun drawn. A quick glance around confirmed they were alone.

“Dude must have lived on pizza,” Jim said, pointing at a tower of boxes stacked in the corner. “God, what a variety of smells. Stinks in here.”

They undid the hasp and opened the door to the room where the girls had stayed, quickly verifying what they already knew; they had escaped.

Centerfold photos of the raunchiest kind lined the walls of the main room. Porn of every imaginable variety and subject matter displayed Sam’s inclination and appetite toward violence.

Handwritten captions, mostly in red, caught Lenny’s attention. Shaking his head in disgust he said, “He was a frickin’ comedian, too. What a pig.”

He pulled out his cell and dialed. “Dana, hey, we just found Arnold Wilcox’ hideout.” He gave her directions, nodded once and closed the cell. “They’re on the way.”

Jim walked to the TV and checked out the piles of tapes. “Real winners here, too. A collector, for sure.”

Littered across the bed, vibrators and every imaginable sex toy, some smeared with blood, told a grim tale of sadistic and ritualistic abuse. He swallowed, closing his eyes for a moment while his stomach roiled.

Lenny picked through the pack of CDs with gloved hands. “Oh, this one again, a real best seller. Takes me back to my LAPD days.”

“Don’t miss that stuff, huh, buddy?”

“Not for a minute. Well, the boys in blue will be here in a minute. We’d better give Cricket a chance to do her stuff. Pretty soon a bloodhound wouldn’t be able to find anything.”

Lenny encouraged Cricket to hunt and before long, the dog found the scent. She sat at the top of a faint trail, as taught, waiting for Lenny to give her the signal to continue.

“What now?”

Jim pursed his lips and glanced at what little sky managed to show through the treetops. “I think we have about six hours of light left, max. Let’s follow the dog for a while. Those kids could be very nearby, especially since we have no idea how long ago they got out. On the other hand, they could have escaped during the night. If that’s the case, they could be anywhere.”

“I don’t want Ella and Terry sitting here when the cops come. Time to pow-wow.”

They walked out of the barn, grimfaced and anxious, telling Ella and Terry what they found and of their plans to track the missing kids.

“Sounds good to me.” Ella turned toward Terry for a moment. “We’ll drive back down to the shopping center and wait for their call. I’m starved anyway.”

Jim nodded. “Keep Amy with you, hon. I’ll take Tony. I’d like to see what his reaction is to Cricket’s tracking. Anyway, he’ll love the run.”

Lenny handed Terry the keys to the SUV. “We’ll call you on the hour.”

Cricket moved through the underbrush with the ease of a rust-colored eel, alternately sniffing the floor of the trail, the shrubs beside it and the increasing wind above.

Tony followed behind her, eyes gleaming, on the alert to his surroundings and ready for whatever adventure came next.

The trail ended at a clearing near a waterfall. Lenny, Jim and the dogs walked into the sunlight squinting, eyes scanning the area for the lost girls.

“Would ya look at that,” Jim said, pointing at the little pool. “At least they have water to cool off with. I hope they know enough not to drink it.”

“The time will come when they have no choice. They had access to water in the barn, so at least they didn’t start out dehydrated.”

Lenny gave Cricket the signal to continue the track. She charged down the trail to the water’s edge and stopped. She whined slightly and sat.

“Okay, they got in the water,” he said and stuck his hand in the pool. “It’s freezing, by the way. They didn’t stay in long.”

They allowed the dogs to drink their fill and then gave Cricket the signal to hunt again.

Just before three, Jim called Ella. “We’re on the trail and Cricket is just amazing. Rudy will be so pleased.” He paused then turned to stare at Lenny, already disappearing around a bend in the trail. “*What? Where?*”

He turned around, scanning the horizon. To his left, and perhaps five miles away, plumes of white smoke fluttered above the trees. Nodding, he said, “Okay, Ella, keep on top of this, huh? Things can change in a matter of moments, so be alert.”

Jim started down the path after Lenny, nodding from time to time as Ella updated him. “I’m glad they have a TV in the restaurant. If the fire gets close or you hear any updates we should know about, call me. We’re heading in a southwest direction along a canal that I think is going to end up at the Loveland Dam. That’s a lot farther than we planned to walk, but there’s nothing for it now. We’ll keep in touch, babe. And Ella, if there’s a call to evacuate, you and Terry get out of there. We’re right next to the water, so we’re in no fire danger.”

Jim spent the last few moments consoling Ella and promising not to get hurt; finally, he put the cell away and called to Lenny, who was several yards farther down the trail with Cricket. “A brand new wildfire just started up the road about five miles behind us. The way the winds are now, blowing away from us, we’re out of the danger zone for the present, but that can change in an instant.”

“Shit. When did it start? Y’know, I thought I smelled smoke a while back.”

“Ella said it started about half an hour or so ago, but it’s up the canyon quite a ways. We’re fine for now.”

Lenny waited until Jim got closer. “I figure we’ve hiked about five or six miles from the barn, don’t you? We’re probably abreast of the mall where the girls are, maybe we’ve even passed it. Cricket’s still going strong and I’m fine. Shall we carry on?”

“Oh, yeah, what the hell. We really don’t have any choice. Tony isn’t even panting, so I’m doing it for him. I’ll just spend the rest of the week in the hot tub. Lead on, McDuff.”

By three-thirty the fire had consumed eight hundred acres that hadn’t seen a burn in fifty years. Balls of dead tree limbs shot into the air like meteors, hurling burning embers in all directions. Some flew on the wind, landing acres away and igniting new fires. In creating their own ecosystems, the firestorms often reversed their course and burned in a new and unexpected direction thus trapping firefighters and residents in the middle of the inferno.

Terry and Ella sat in the restaurant lounge, eyes glued to the neighborhood TV coverage. Half a dozen locals sat at the bar, faces grim at the news of the fire’s size and strength. Veterans of more than one fiery onslaught, they shook their heads and downed their drinks in dogged determination.

“Oh, my God, would you look at that?” Terry nudged Ella as a TV close-up shot showed trees exploding, sending showers of burning embers in all directions.

Fanned by the strong winds and feeding on a rich supply of fuel, it spread at a rapid pace. Thanks to the tons of combustible material on the forest floor, the firestorm grew exponentially.

It was now just a bit past five, and the number of acres consumed had doubled. Two additional fires, offshoots of the original, caused firefighters to split into individual battalions, further stressing available personnel and assets.

The newscaster droned on, calling out the names of towns involved in mandatory evacuation of the area. The bartender shook his head.

“Here we go again, ladies. Drink up. We have to leave.”

Terry hurried to the SUV, keys in one hand, cell in the other. “Lenny, yes. Look, we have to get out of here. They called for a mandatory evacuation. Where are you? Along the Loveland Canal, right? Okay. I’ll do that, yes. Any sign of the girls? Okay, I’ll call when we get down the hill a ways. God, honey, be careful.”

Ella hurried to her car, Amy hot on her trail. The smell of fire set off the dog’s nerves and for the past hour or so, she became more and more agitated often nudging Ella’s hand and whining. They approached the Mustang and Amy leaped into the back seat of the car, not waiting for Ella to open the door. She sat there, quivering and sniffing the air.

The deafening wail of fire trucks roaring up the steep road filled the afternoon with chaos and ended all conversation. Unable to hear, Ella pointed down the hill, made the telephone gesture with her hand and waved at Terry.

They turned out of the driveway and hurried down the road, on the lookout for frightened wildlife. Terrified creatures tore across the roads, sometimes zigzagging back and forth, frantic with fear.

Terry’s cell rang and she picked it up, not taking her eyes off the road for a moment. “What?”

“I figure the guys are to the right of us. Jim said they’re following along the canal, so I suggest maybe we take the next big road to the right. You with me?”

“Just like always.” Terry closed the phone and started to pray.

“Okay,” Lenny said, snapping the cell closed. “We’ve got a bad one this time and now its split up. There’s a mandatory evacuation underway so the girls had to leave that little mall. From what they could find out, the fire started about two miles above them, then spread out in two different directions as the winds swirled. They’re going to call us when they get down the hill a bit. We’ll figure out something then.”

“God, where the hell can those kids be? We should have found them by now.” Jim raised his hands to his mouth again and

repeated the calls they'd made throughout most of the afternoon. "Aud..rey! Beth! Halloo, are you out there?"

Jim shook his head. "This is really strange. I guess they escaped a lot sooner than we thought. I mean, figuring they could have broken out of the barn early in the morning, that's a four to six hour start and there's no telling how far ahead they could be but at least we know we're on the trail. Cricket is still on her track so I guess we better step it up a notch."

Lenny glanced over his shoulder. "Shit," he said succinctly, "the fire's a lot closer than I thought. Son of a bitch, would ya look at that?" He pointed at the clouds of smoke and sniffed. "Damn wind turned. It's heading our way."

They picked up the pace as the smell of smoke grew stronger.

Beth followed Audrey down the trail, only dimly aware of her surroundings. She concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other and maintaining her balance. She hadn't eaten anything since the ice cream waffle at the park Saturday morning and her stomach rolled in angry protest, keeping her on the verge of vomiting.

For the first time she began to consider the real possibility that she might not make it home alive. Her numb feet no longer felt pain, which made walking a bit easier but allowed her to step down, unawares, on thorns and dry brush, inflicting damage she couldn't feel.

When she thought at all, her admiration for Audrey grew. She'd suffered through horrors beyond comprehension, her body battered and beaten, tortured by a maniac, but she never gave up. Beth wished she could marshal up some core strength, an iron spine, something to fall back on, but there was nothing.

The girls came around a bend in the trail and what they saw made them cry out in glee.

A large redwood sign hung suspended between two tall pillars that spanned the trail.

Welcome to Cuyamaca Trail Campsite, cleaned and maintained by the California State Parks.

“Oh, my God, we’re saved,” Beth murmured.

“Oh, look over there, Beth, there’s a water fountain, drinking water ... and bathrooms.”

They hugged each other, weak with relief and delayed reaction while tears flowed down their gaunt cheeks. Battered feet carried them to the center of the clearing. They took turns drinking from the fountain and crying.

Beth dashed a hand across her eyes, panting, and blinked several times followed by a deeply drawn shuddering breath. “Why is it so quiet? Where is everyone?”

She bent over double, turned her head away and promptly threw up the water. Slowly, then, she rinsed out her mouth and took smaller, slower sips. This time her outraged stomach did not revolt.

Closer inspection found the campgrounds empty. No cars, no people, no sounds of any kinds. The girls, naked and feeling vulnerable, crept forward, cautious and fearful at the inexplicable events before them.

“Look over there,” Audrey said, pointing across the clearing. “Let’s go check out that tent, see if maybe they have something to eat.”

“I wonder where the owners are. It’s like really creepy here all of a sudden, don’t you think? I mean, where is everyone? It’s a beautiful day, why aren’t people cooking and playing games ... kids, where are all the kids?”

“They’re probably hiking or something, maybe swimming in the lake. God, let’s see if they have extra clothes and something to eat.”

They limped over to the site, feet on fire, and called again. “Hello?”

Audrey bent over and opened the flap. Inside were two air mattresses, pillows and blankets and in one corner, a duffel bag and a cooler.

“Food,” Beth said, opening the lid. Despair filled her voice. “Wouldn’t ya just know it.”

Three cans of beer and three bottles of Mike’s Hard Lemonade nestled in the ice; a little more welcome, a huge turkey sandwich and a package of hot dogs and buns.

“Ugh, I hate beer,” Beth said. “I’ll have a lemonade.”

Audrey started to say something then lapsed into silence. They shared the sandwich, wolfing it down so fast they weren't sure what it was. For the next several moments they concentrated on keeping the food down. After a forty-eight hour fast, their stomachs revolted at the shocking onslaught of food.

Long deep breaths helped and they rested a while, gathering strength again before digging into the duffel bag.

Audrey gave a sigh of appreciation at the contents. "Oh, Beth, look at this. Pullovers, shirts and pants, along with socks and undies."

Delighted at being able to dress for the first time in ages, they pulled out the clothes and continued to root around. No shoes, but they found a bottle of bug repellent.

"Y'know, Audrey, it's so strange. I've never been particularly shy about my body, but I don't think I'll ever walk around nude again, not even when I'm home in my room. It's such a strange, helpless sensation."

Beth pulled a tee-shirt over her slender frame and shook her head, black hair a mass of ringlets. "Talk about vulnerable; it's a terrible, really scary feeling, isn't it? I think that was the worst part of all, being naked like that."

Audrey stared at her a moment, heaved a deep sigh and nodded. "My friend, you lucked out. If he'd done to you what he did to me, being naked would be the least of it."

Tears welled in Beth's eyes as she gazed at Audrey then shook her head. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry, you're right; I didn't realize what...." She took another swallow from her bottle.

"It sure wasn't your fault. No need to apologize." She watched Beth down the last of her bottle and reach for another. "That's enough for now; it's going down good, huh? Ya better ease up."

"Best lemonade I've ever had," Beth said, chuckling. "Better than Mom's."

"Yeah, well, we're still a long way out of town, so save some back. One beer was enough for me." Audrey stuffed a beer in each front pocket and adjusted the shorts. They managed to jam the package of wieners in the oversized back pocket of her shorts.

“I only have front pockets,” Beth said, the neck of a bottle protruding from each. “I’ll carry the buns. We may have to eat them soon, though.” She glanced ahead and nodded. “Looks like a long walk.”

Energized physically by food and drink and relieved of their nakedness, their spirits soared. A thorough scavenger hunt of the surrounding campsite revealed a decent pair of loafers in a bag that fit Audrey perfectly. Beth found a serviceable pair of tennies, minus laces, which were just a tad too big for her, but beat hiking barefoot.

By late afternoon they’d made considerable progress. They hiked along the trail that ran parallel to the lake, spotting another abandoned campsite. This one yielded a tent, sleeping bag and down quilt.

“I figure we don’t have much daylight left. We need to think about where to sleep tonight. Why not just stay here? My feet are killing me.”

“I don’t want to quit yet, Audrey. Let’s carry that stuff; we’ll need it later, for sure. But let’s keep walking. We have at least two more hours of full daylight left, don’t ya think?”

“I guess. I’m just beat. Let’s check out the area, see what else we might find.”

They continued to walk, increasingly aware of the strange solitude, disquieted by the lack of normal sounds.

“It’s really bizarre being up here all alone, isn’t it? Where do you think everyone went? I mean, that’s two camping grounds deserted so fast people left stuff behind, and on this beautiful day. Creepy. Y’know what else? I don’t hear any birds chirping.”

They continued down the trail single file, ever watchful for rattlesnakes or other aggressive critters. Snatches of glitter told them they were nearing the lake edge. The late afternoon sun slipped behind the horizon, turning the tops of the mountains red and purple.

“I need to sit for a minute,” Audrey said, pointing at a huge fallen tree. “My feet hurt so bad.” She slid one shoe off and pulled her bloody sock away from her heel. “Shit, that hurts like hell.” She peeled the sock away and inspected her throbbing foot.

“Oh, man, Audrey, your heel looks terrible. We need to get that splinter out. It’s all red and swollen and stuff.”

They sat on the tree a moment, staring at the splinter and trying to come up with a way to get it out.

Weary, Beth clasped both hands around her knee and leaned back, eyes half closed. She took a deep breath, then another. Her eyes flew open, searching. “Do you ... oh, God, I smell smoke.”

Audrey raised her gaze from her injured foot to the horizon. “I don’t smell anything.”

She put the sock back on and grimaced as she slid her foot into the shoe. Nodding once, she heaved herself to her feet.

They continued down the trail, sniffing, unsure. As they rounded a bend, they stopped dead on the trail and scanned the horizon behind them; two born and bred California girls knew what they saw.

“Oh no, my God, it’s a fire.” Beth glanced frantically from side to side, searching for an escape route.

“It’s to the left and behind us. I bet that’s why the people left so fast. It probably was a mandatory evacuation. Oh, God, what should we do?”

Chapter 9

Ella led the way down the hill, Terry on her bumper. By then, grey wisps of ash floated on the air and the smell of smoke made breathing uncomfortable. Ella increased her speed, putting distance between them and the fire. They reached a road that branched off to the right and took it.

Amy refused to lie down in the back seat. Instead, she sat upright, constantly sniffing the wind and whining. Before long they got ahead of the fire, but even though the smell of smoke dissipated, the dog would not relax.

Ella pulled into an almost empty gas station and convenience mart and parked. The SUV pulled up right beside her and Terry hopped out of the van.

“I’m going in there and see where we are and what’s going on. Call Jim and get their location. See if we can meet them.”

Terry hurried into the little store front and picked up two six-packs of bottled water. The lone man standing behind the counter watched fire coverage on the TV.

He glanced at her and smiled. “You looking for a boat rental?”

Terry’s jaw went slack. “You have boats?”

“Sure do, lady. For fishing on the lake ... and you’re lost, right?”

“Yes sir, I certainly am and I need help. We’re trying to hook up with our friends. They’re hiking along the trail next to the lake and now, with this fire all around, we’re scared to death that they might be in trouble.” Tears filled her eyes and she sniffed.

“Oh, lady, no, don’t you go doing that,” the man said, hand extended. He pushed his baseball cap farther back on his head and leaned forward. “Can I help you? What’s wrong?” He grabbed a box of tissues and offered it to Terry.

Ella burst in the door, cell phone held high, Amy pasted to her thigh.

“Holy shit,” he said as he saw her face. He turned back to Terry. “What the heck is this?”

“Twins. Listen, my fiancé is coming down the trail, but we don’t know exactly where. It’s their first time hiking here. Can you talk to him, figure out where he is, how we can find him?” She thrust the cell at the man, nodding. “Jim. His name is Jim.”

“Travis here. Tell me where....”

The girls stood there holding their breath while the man continued to nod.

“Okay, that’s cool. I have a pretty good idea where ya are. Best thing for you to do is get as close to the lake edge as possible. There’s a nice little campground where people bring their boats into shore to fish. It has a couple of port-a-potties and some barbecue grills and water faucets. You’ll see it as you come around the big bend. Stay there and wait. I’d come for you guys myself, but I’ve got a family I gotta see to. I’ll send your ladies looking for you in a boat. You can’t be more than five miles away. They’ll find you.”

He snapped the cell closed and handed it to Ella. “Follow me, ladies.”

They hurried down a steep path to the lake. A long dock protruded into the water and a dozen or so aluminum outboard motorboats bobbed gently, rocking together in the shallow water.

“We need the biggest ones you have. We’re searching for two missing girls and the guys have two more dogs like this one.”

“They’re all the same, fourteen footers, seat six. Two should fill the bill. They’re simple outboards, lookee-here.”

He gave them the condensed version as he repeatedly glanced into the sky. He straightened up, pointed at the horizon and shook his head. “I gotta run, girls, my family needs me. The boats have my name and number on ‘em. When the fire is over, give me a call, we’ll meet up. Good luck.”

Travis waved then turned and hurried up the path. Moments later, a black truck roared out of the parking lot and headed down the road.

“I’ll go first, I guess. Follow a little ways back so you can talk to Lenny and get him to listen for the motors, okay? I’m going to start hollering as well. They’ll hear something.”

Terry nodded, allowing Ella to put a good bit of distance between them. She dialed her cell. “Lenny. Okay, we’re in little motorboats and we’re hoping you can hear us. Ella is ahead of me,

shouting for Jim. When you hear her, let me know, 'cause we're moving right along now."

The pungent smell of smoke increased as the women motored up the lake, staying as close to the edge as possible. The upper levels of the sky filled with high, hazy smoke, blocking moon and stars from shedding light. Closer to the ground, huge black puffs told of houses and structures that had succumbed to the blaze.

Their visibility, obscured by the deadly noxious haze, limited their speed and they throttled back, fearful of hitting a submerged log.

They came toward a cove, hoping to see the guys standing on the shore, waving. Instead, as they made the turn and pulled out farther into the lake to avoid huge, overhanging trees limbs, the next sight stopped their hearts.

Ahead of them a solid wall of fire danced on the floor of the forest, gobbling tons of dry woodland debris. Like a genie undulating above a bottle, the intense heat roared, deafening in its ferocity. It shot giant arrows into the treetops that exploded like flaming missiles, mesmerizing, alluring and deadly.

Due to the hard winds and the never ending supply of fuel, the fires grew exponentially. Sizzling chunks of wood shot into the air like some macabre form of fireworks, landed on the other side of the lake and promptly gave birth to new fires.

Had it not been so frightening, the fire might be fascinating to watch. As it was, panic ensued in the eyes of the observers.

In moments, the infant fires grew as the hot winds fanned the advancing inferno. Competition provided an added starter as flames engulfed the top of the lake on both sides and raced toward them, neck and neck.

"San'tanas," Terry murmured, black eyes glittering with fear. "Oh, dear Lord, help us."

"Jim!" Ella's screech split the air as she called his name over and over.

Beth turned to Audrey and grabbed her arm. "Did you hear that? Someone, listen, is that woman yelling?"

They ran to the water's edge, waving their arms.

"Here!" they screamed over and over. "We're over here."

They stepped into the water, still calling and waving, just in time to see a boat go by. They screamed even louder, Amy barked and Ella cut her engine.

Terry did a bit of fancy maneuvering, slowing to a crawl as she neared Ella.

"That's got to be our girls. All of you start yelling and keep it up. I'll see if Lenny can hear you. Back soon."

Terry continued up the lake alone, talking with Lenny on the phone. "Can you hear me, babe?"

"You're close, honey. Slow down ... *Terry*. Whoa, girl, you just passed us. Here we are." He moved out into the lake, waving his arms to get her attention.

Terry made a sharp turn and then grinned wide as she cut the motor. The prow of the boat bumped against the bottom of the shallow lake. She relinquished the wheel to Lenny and moved to the passenger seat while Jim and the dogs jumped in the back.

"Holy God," she said, nodding in the direction of the fire and starting to sputter. "What a freakin' nightmare. It just makes me crazy with all the wind, and the smoke smells terrible. Oh, but we have good news. You guys won't believe it, but we found the girls. They're just down the lake a ways, and Ella is picking them up in her boat. Looks like we're heroes again."

Lenny embraced her, drawing her close in a tight, fierce hug. With her head burrowed in his shoulder, he opened the throttle and retraced her path back down the lake. "God, I've been so scared for you I thought I'd lose it. How are you, babe? You doing okay?"

She nodded twice and hugged his arm. "I'm fine, Lenny, just scared to death. This is really bad, isn't it?"

They came around the bend just in time to see Ella, Beth and Audrey pull away from the shoreline. They hollered back and forth to each other. Ella waved at Jim then cut her motor again. The boats bumped against each other, gently rocking on the quiet surface of the lake as Ella and Jim hugged.

“You okay?” He sighed and gave her a big kiss, his expression relieved when he saw she was unhurt. “Oh, honey, it’s so good to hold you.”

They hugged a little longer then Jim glanced over his shoulder. “You two had us scared to death.”

“We’re fine now,” Beth said. “You know who we are, huh?”

“Oh, yes, we sure do. Your father employed us to find you, Beth. We’ve been on the hunt since you were kidnapped. And you must be Audrey Simms.” He handed her his cell. “I bet you’d like to talk with your parents. They’re frantic.”

“Oh, thank you.” Audrey dialed, eyes already brimming with tears. “Mom? It’s ... yes, yes, it’s me. We’ve just been rescued....”

Beth used Ella’s cell to speak with her parents as well. “Yes, we’re on Loveland Lake, in little fishing boats. I guess we’ll stop for the night on the other side of the lake. One of the ladies who rescued us is talking to the police now. We’ll be home soon, probably tomorrow morning. And Mom, please call Molly. Tell her I’m okay.”

The early evening winds picked up, adding more force and fanning the flaming inferno. Hours ago it had consumed Sam’s barn and burned the little mall to the ground. The fire reached the creek, hopped over and began to burn on the other side as well.

Sparks and embers flew through the air, fell and caught, igniting new areas. Soon the forest on both sides of the channel blazed clear to the water’s edge. With nowhere to go but straight, it roared down the hill, consuming everything in sight.

“What are we going to do now?” Terry glanced at Lenny, eyebrows elevated. “Have you made any plans? Are we going back to the cars and make a run for it?”

“I don’t know yet, hon. How much farther is it to the dock?”

She shrugged. "I'm not sure, but it can't be much farther, why?"

"Well," he looked around, shaking his head. "Where is the fire now? I can see it across the lake and it's going like ninety, but what about this side? It's like we're in some kind of pocket or cove or something here. Look up the hill to the left. I can't see even a flicker of flames, can you?"

"Strange. Could it have stalled out or turned in another direction?"

"That's what I'm asking. Until we get to the dock and check things out, we won't know, but the one thing that could stop it is if the wind shifted. The problem is, I can't feel any wind at all now. Really weird."

Terry glanced from side to side, eyes wide. "Wouldn't it be safer to stay in the boats? At least the fire can't get us here."

"We may have to do just that, although I'd sure rather get out of here if we can.

They continued down the lake, hugging the shore as closely as they dared.

Chapter 10

Smoke hung in the air like a shroud. The eerie stillness, after hours of sustained winds hammering their eardrums, drained their energy with edgy silence. Without winds to drive it, the fire pattern changed from one of a racing, roiling inferno to a straight up, almost leisurely burn. The forest sighed in momentary relief.

With reduced visibility, it took longer than expected to reach the dock. They tethered the boats to the two end rings and began to make plans.

“What’s in the store? Flashlights by any chance? Food?”

Terry nodded at Lenny. “They had all kinds of stuff. It’s like a little country store.”

Ella twisted in her seat, trying to see where the fire was. The trees in this area towered so high above the lake they hid the flames from view. The steep bank from the store down to the water further masked the fire’s location.

Jim stepped onto the dock and waved at Lenny. “Let’s get up the hill real quick and check out that store. I have a couple of knapsacks in the van as well as some blankets and jackets. We can pack the knapsacks with food and supplies.”

Jim glanced over his shoulder at the fire burning across the lake and nodded. “You girls stay put. Don’t get out of the boat unless we call you.”

Lenny stepped onto the dock and then turned to Terry. “Seriously, stay here together and wait for us. We’ll be right back. Cricket, stay.”

The men climbed up the slope side by side, panting by the time they reached the top.

“There’s the van. I’ll get what we need from it. Go on into the store, see what you can find.”

Jim unlocked the Suburban, opened the glove compartment and pulled out two handguns and a transponder device. He turned the OnStar switch to emergency, pocketed the tracker and unlocked a built-in compartment behind the driver’s seat. The laptops were

first on the agenda and he pulled them out, along with another handgun.

The tricked-out van, complete with cloaking device, fuzzbuster and the latest Intel options OnStar offered was worth almost a hundred grand. Leaving it was a last resort and though he toyed with trying to make a run for town, the last place they needed to be was on a strange road in the middle of a firestorm.

Jim pulled two empty knapsacks from under the driver's seat and crammed the stuff inside.

Lenny grinned at the unlocked door and hurried into the store. He picked up three big flashlights, extra batteries and several six-packs of water. A dozen or so sandwiches and every package of health bars he found landed in a plastic tote bag. He was in the process of cramming candy bars into his pockets when Jim entered the store. He sighed with relief and nodded at his partner as they quickly filled another plastic tote with more food and water.

In a heartbeat, everything changed. The silence that had reigned for almost half an hour ended in an earth shattering bombardment of sound so loud it caused both men to duck into instinctive attack mode. Furious gusts of wind rocked the little store, slamming the door against the wall and shattering the glass inset.

"Oh, God, Jim, look!" Lenny pointed at a wall of fire bearing down on them.

They grabbed their stuff and raced out the door, taking the path at a speed far beyond safe considering the poor visibility.

Jim followed Lenny down the trail, fear making his hair stand on end. He glanced over his shoulder and redoubled his speed as the fire licked at their heels. Flaming debris fell around them now and more than once they brushed fiery embers off their heads and shoulders.

The girls froze in place as the tableau unfolded before them. Eyes wide, screams high-pitched, they jumped around in the boats as Lenny and Jim tore down the hill. Hungry flames bore

down on the men, consuming the van and the Mustang in a series of explosions. Above them, the little store blew up like a bomb.

Tony stood in the stern of the boat, watching his master, under orders to stay. He began to tiptoe in place, all the while whining.

Lenny thundered down the deck, several steps ahead of Jim, screaming at Terry to untie the boats and get ready to go.

Jim missed his footing, caught his toe on the lip of the dock and sprawled head first into a pillar. He lay on the dock, almost invisible in the smoky darkness.

Tony saw him fall, leapt out of the boat and charged down the dock, snarling in defiance at the flames that challenged him. Embers fell on his short coat but he never hesitated. Skidding to a stop next to Jim, he nosed him once, then grabbed hold of the knapsack strap across Jim's shoulder and pulled.

Short, sharp, vicious jerks slowly but surely began to pull Jim closed to the edge of the dock, but not fast enough. One foot hooked on the pillar, halting progress. Tony raised his muzzle and gave a short, unearthly howl, then increased the force of the jerks.

Amy hurtled down the dock, grabbed Jim by the back of the collar, and now both dogs pulled. The flimsy fabric of his jacket shredded and she traded her hold for the other strap.

Fire licked the end of the dock, just inches from his toes. With one more massive jerk, Amy lost her footing and fell off the dock into the water. She tightened her hold on the strap of the knapsack and hung on. Her weight, coupled with Tony's valiant struggles tipped the scales, and Jim, Tony and the knapsack crashed into the water beside her. Jim sank like a rock.

Meanwhile, a frantic Lenny bent over the snarled tie rope, jerking hard, trying to unloose Terry's boat.

The booming, hissing sounds created by the fire rose to a crescendo, blotting out all individual sounds. He never heard the dogs bark, never heard Terry screaming at him, unaware of anything but the need to untie the boat and move out onto the lake. She shook his shoulder, frantically pointing at the thrashing dogs. It was the first he even knew there was a problem but it didn't take long to figure it out.

Ella already floated a fair distance from the dock and worked frantically to paddle the boat toward where she last saw Jim.

“You girls get the boats farther into the lake,” he shouted at Terry, then finally jerked the tie rope free. “Go on!”

Flames lapped the end of the dock, little racing lines of fire inched their way up the old wood, widening as they gained strength. It had no effect on the waterlogged pillars but the planks above began to smolder; the flames continued to lap, refusing to give up. Tenacious, they took a better hold and crackled anew.

Lenny tore down the dock and jumped into the water, hitting the lake bottom with a resounding thud. What he thought would be at least five or six feet of water was barely four. He landed between the dogs, stood up and wrenched the strap from their grasp.

Amazed at how heavy the bag was, he put his shoulder into it and hauled the knapsack over Jim’s head. Relieved of the weight, his head popped up and he remained on the surface, gagging, spitting water and coughing violently.

Jim gasped for breath and vomited several times, purging himself of the swallowed water. Lenny held him under both arms as his friend slowly recovered his breath.

“It’s okay, buddy. I got ya. Are you okay?” He noticed the trickle of blood dripping down Jim’s cheek

Still unable to speak, Jim leaned back into Lenny’s chest and pointed to the end of the dock where the fire now lapped at the pillar that not long ago pinned his foot.

“I know, looks bad, but we have time. Just relax and catch your breath.”

Jim fell into another convulsive spasm of coughing, spewing more water back into the lake. His head lolling on Lenny’s chest, he glanced at the dogs and feebly patted the dock several times.

“You want me to put them up there? I’m going to have to let go of you to do that.”

Jim reached for the pillar, hugging it, while Lenny gave the unwilling dogs a boost up on the dock. Still using the pillars for

support, he rolled over on his back and towed Jim into deeper water and the waiting boats.

A nervous Tony paced above them, whining continually and attempting to jump back into the water in his desire to be near Jim. Slowly, Jim raised his hand toward the dog, made a fist and then opened his palm and raised his index finger. Tony sighed once and relaxed at the signal.

In the interim, Terry and Ella had maneuvered their boats along the dock on either side of a crude sort of ladder. Constructed of boards nailed across two pillars, it provided the only way out of the lake to the dock above, especially for an injured man.

They held the boats on either side of the ladder, eyes rapidly shifting from the roaring inferno bearing down upon them, to Lenny and Jim. Screaming, Ella stretched her arms toward Jim, hands rapidly opening and closing.

As the men approached, Beth and Audrey climbed out of the boat and held it tight to the dock. With Ella pulling and Lenny shoving, they managed through their combined efforts to drag Jim aboard. Tony hurled himself off the dock, landing next to Jim and threatening to sink them all in his eagerness to touch his master. He buried his muzzle under Jim's arm and whined in relief.

Amy stepped into the boat with as much dignity as she could muster then pounced on Jim, giving his face a vigorous licking all the while muttering and whining under her breath; although no longer her god, he'd been her first love.

Ella rapped both arms around him, crooning in low tones. In a hoarse and raspy voice Jim assured her that his injuries were minor. He had a large bump on his forehead, he admitted, but nothing to worry about. Tenderly she drew his head down and pillowed it against her chest. Amy lay on one side, Tony on the other.

They anchored the boats in the middle of the lake and Lenny tied them together, reducing the drift and allowing everyone to talk. He sat next to Terry and the kids, handing out bottles of water, sandwiches and health bars. His hopeful assessment of their situation raised their spirits.

"At least you girls spoke with your parents so someone knows we're out here. No doubt the CDF will be along to pick us up

at first light. Both our cells are ruined.” Lenny glanced at Ella. “You have any power?”

She shook her head. “I’m out of signal.”

“Me, too,” Terry added. “How about the satellite tracker in the van? I turned it on before I went into the store.”

“It was working when I last saw it,” Jim said in slow, halting tones. “I flipped it to emergency.”

“Good.” Lenny stared at Jim. “At least the OnStar folks know where we were when the van exploded. Once the fire ends, there will be all kinds of people out here looking for us. Just a matter of waiting it out.”

Nodding, Beth said, “My dad told me the same thing, and firefighters are on the lookout for us, too. In the morning, if it ever comes, they’ll send helicopters to get us.” She started to cough again.

“Nothing is ever that easy,” Audrey said, wheezing. “Nothing.”

Mesmerized by the heat and the bobbing boats, they stared at the unbelievable conflagration surrounding them on all sides. The wall of flames had burned passed them during the endless night, flanked the dam well before sunrise and continued its voracious path toward the sea.

The long night finally ended as the sun peeped between the trees, sending pale shafts to poke around in the thick air.

They finished off the last of the health bars and stared at the remaining six pack of water.

Overhead in the distance they heard the whooping, thwacking sounds of a helicopter approaching. A moment later the blades swept their way through the smoke and a booming microphone cut through the air.

“This is the California Department of Forestry. Help is on the way.” They dropped two sacks into the lake near them and flew away.

The waterproof bags bobbed next to the boats. Inside they found more water, a cell phone and a dozen sandwiches. The other contained first aid supplies.

“Hey, Ella,” Lenny said, leaning toward her. “Trade places with me. I want to check Jim out and then maybe put some first aid on his cut. It’s still bleeding, but whatever it is, it’s covered by his hair.”

Eyes wide, she turned toward Jim, but Lenny shook his head. “No, Ella, please let me check him out first.”

His tone broached no discussion as he reached his arms forward, steadying her as she traded places with him. The flat bottomed boat barely moved as he sat next to Jim. Even though the majority of the blood had dried, the center of the stream remained wet with fresh flow.

Lenny pulled a long swab out of the medical bag and with great care began lifting hair near where he figured the wound was. Instead of finding the expected hole he found a raised, jagged lump. Closer inspection revealed a wood shard embedded in Jim’s skull.

“Not good, huh?” Jim murmured. “Don’t tell Ella.”

Just then they heard a commotion on the far bank next to the dam and looked to see several people in white waving their arms and hollering.

In record time, Lenny untied the boats and started his motor.

“Follow me,” he called and increased his speed to top throttle. They skimmed over the lake to the waiting ambulance, leaving Terry and the girls way behind. As they approached the shoreline, Lenny cut the motor and jumped into the water, dragging the boat to the edge.

“He’s got a piece of wood stuck in his head,” he said to the paramedic who bent over Jim for a quick analysis. “Call for a medivac. It’s been in there for at least twelve hours.”

As though by magic, a helicopter appeared and set down in the middle of the country road. Two men bearing a stretcher jumped out and ran toward them. They lifted Jim out of the boat, secured him to the stretcher and carried him back to the waiting helicopter. It lifted off while Lenny helped Ella out of the boat.

She glared at the disappearing helicopter, hands on her hips. “Why didn’t they wait for us?”

He hesitated a moment and then spoke. “He has a large splinter stuck in his head. He’s on the way to the hospital, but we’re not far behind him. Come on.”

By that time, half a dozen vehicles pulled into the clearing to offer assistance. Lenny grabbed Ella’s arm, ran to the closest car and hopped inside. It made a U-turn and tore down the road heading out of the forest and back to Los Angeles.

Chapter 11

Terry and the girls approached the bank of the lake, all talking at once. She threw the tow line to a man on shore and waited while he pulled them to the water's edge. The dogs jumped out first, edgy, upset at being abandoned and unsure what to do.

The girls went next and finally Terry. The man holding the rope extended his hand to her in assistance.

The paramedic behind him led Beth and Audrey to the ambulance. She sat them down on folding chairs, removed their shoes and socks and began to examine their feet for the aftereffects of wandering through the woods barefoot.

Satisfied that the iodine and salve would be sufficient for the moment, she pulled thin, sterile footsies over their feet, followed by heavier, cushioned slippers.

The man secured the boat to a submerged tree limb and turned to Terry, noticing her trembling hands. "Are you hurt, lady? Do you need medical assistance?"

"Oh, I guess I'm okay, y'know, but I'm scared to death. Those poor girls need to be looked after, they need medical care. But me? Oh, I'm fine." She glanced at her arms and drew a hand across her brow, hesitating at a small lump. "Just a scrape, couple of cuts, nothing big, but one of our group, Jim Sessions, was injured. They took him away in that helicopter and my sister and my fiancé just drove off down the road...." She waved her hand in the general direction, eyes glazed with tears. "Left without me and I don't have a car and what am I supposed to do with all these dogs? Do you know where everyone went?" Her voice continued to climb. "My cell is out of juice, but I have no one to call anyway because they all just left me flat. What do I do next?"

"I'm not sure. Follow me, please."

He took her arm and led her back to his car and the waiting girls. All three dogs followed close on Terry's heels.

He nodded at Beth and Audrey resting on the back of the ambulance ledge and grinned. He opened his trunk and removed a gigantic thermos and several cups.

“Coffee anyone?” He handed round the cups, nodding at their expressions of appreciation.

Beth wrapped both hands around her cup, sniffed and took a sip. “Oh God, that’s good. It’s been so long. It smells just like my mom’s.” Her lower lip started to quiver and shortly, tears began to flow. She turned to the medic, expression hopeful. “Are my parents coming to get me soon? I really want to go home.”

“It shouldn’t be much longer. They’re talking to the Highway Patrol down the hill. Once the fire passed and they declared the roads safe, they let me through. It shouldn’t....”

A white BMW tore up the road and pulled into the clearing, puffs of ash and silt rising in its wake. Beth dropped her cup on the ground and ran toward the familiar car, wailing, arms outstretched. It skidded to a stop and Connie and Rob threw open their doors and lunged for their daughter. Crying, hugging, they merged into one, a tangle of arms as joyous cries of relief and love rose in the air.

Audrey burst into tears as her parent’s car pulled into the clearing just moments later. She hobbled over to them, sobbing, shaking and collapsed in their arms. Moments later, they left, following Beth and her family down the road.

Terry smiled in relief as a familiar SUV ground to a stop behind a police cruiser. Rudy Banks sprinted across the ground toward her, arms extended. He covered the distance between them in moments. The dogs mobbed him, happy to see a well-known and much loved former boss.

“I got a call from Lenny. He told me that Jim is injured and they’re on the way to USD hospital. He sent me up here to get you and the dogs. Come on, we need to get to Jim.”

Snapping his fingers several times he got the dogs attention. They followed him to the back of the SUV and jumped inside. He tied them quickly, gave a special pat and hello to each one and shut the doors.

“Let’s go, we’ll catch up on the way, but I really ... let’s go.”

Rudy turned the large van around and tore back down the hill, heading for San Diego.

"I talked with Jim yesterday and he told me that he and Lenny were up here searching for those missing girls and expected to come out at the Loveland dam. He wanted me to meet you and Ella at some mall around here and take the dogs. When the fire turned, I knew you'd have to run and the only likely place was to the lake. Man, I've never had such a miserable night in my life. The cops blocked all the roads and the direction of the fire was so unpredictable, even the fire crews came back." He paused, drew a deep breath and continued.

"What happened to Jim? Were you there?"

"We were all together by that time. We found the girls before the guys did, actually, and figured the best thing would be to go back to the dock. We all waited there with the boats while Jim and Lenny went up the hill to check out the vehicles and get whatever they could from the store. All of a sudden, the wind came back like a tornado and next thing we saw, here come Lenny and Jim tearing down the hill, just ahead of the fire." She shook her head, remembering.

"It was so loud you couldn't hear yourself think. Anyway, Lenny made it to the end of the dock, and he's like tearing at the tie rope and trying to get the boats loose when Jim tripped. The fire was right on him, and Tony and Amy managed to drag him off the dock into the lake, but then he almost drowned.

"Lenny jumped in, pulled the knapsack off Jim and stood him up. We got Jim into one of the boats and spent the night in the middle of the lake watching the fire burn."

"Do you know what's wrong with him?"

"Lenny said he has a splinter stuck in his head. He tried to be calm about it, but I know he's scared. We have to get to the hospital, fast."

Rudy sped down the freeway, cloaking device and fuzzi-buster giving the all clear. Twenty minutes later they pulled into the emergency entrance of UCSD Medical Center and parked in the short term area. They hurried through the doors and down the long corridor to the check-in area.

“We’re looking for Jim Sessions. Do you know where he is?”

The nurse nodded, glancing at the sheet. “They took him up to surgery about thirty minutes ago, but that’s all I know right now. If you want to have a seat in one of the waiting rooms, we’ll let you know whenever the doctor’s report is released. His other friends are in that one.” She pointed across the hall and nodded.

They entered the quiet waiting room and saw Lenny and Ella sipping coffee and watching fire coverage on the TV. The twins embraced while Lenny updated Rudy on what little he knew.

“They flew him in on a medivac and he was already in surgery when we got here. I talked with the nurse at the front desk and she promised to send the doctor in to talk with us when he comes out of the operating room. All we can do now is wait and pray.”

The doctor approached them, clipboard in hand, and the look on his face made them sigh with relief. He introduced himself and gave a brief rundown of Jim’s condition.

“It looked much worse than it was, we’re pleased to say. The width of the end of the splinter fooled us. Thank God it wasn’t even as long as it was wide. Plus, it split upon entry and followed a parallel line under the skin rather than penetrating the skull. That’s why the lump was so large. He’s very lucky because the original point of entry wasn’t more than an inch from his eye socket. Even with a short splinter like that, at the very least, he’d have lost the sight in that eye. He’s recovering nicely, and barring any signs of infection, we can release him tomorrow morning. I’m concerned with pneumonia from ingesting water in his lungs, along with the smoke, but he’s breathing normally.”

Ella swayed toward Terry, hand at her throat. “Oh, my God, I think I’m gonna pass out.”

Lenny took her other arm and led her back to the row of chairs, thanking the doctor as he walked away.

Rudy followed the doctor into the hall, still not satisfied. “Will there be any residual effects, doctor? Will he be okay?”

“There won’t even be a noticeable scar. He should be coming out of the anesthetic before long. I’ll send a nurse down for you as soon as he’s awake.”

Jim leaned back against his pillows, still a little groggy and in a good bit of pain. He held Ella’s hand, reassuring her again that he’d be just fine. Once she calmed down he turned his attention to Rudy.

“Do you have the dogs? How’s Tony?”

“Royally pissed and worried to death. He’s definitely not a happy camper, although Cricket and Amy are fine. The doctor said you could leave tomorrow if you don’t develop some kind of respiratory infection. Do you want me to come down here and pick you up?”

“Nah, that’s not necessary, buddy. If you could take Lenny and the girls home to pick up their cars, that should about do it. Tony’s okay with Ella.” Jim slanted a gaze at Rudy and pursed his lips. “The frickin’ van blew up and the damned computers are at the bottom of the lake. I’d stuffed them in one of my knapsacks along with my Glock and the OnStar transponder. Damned things were so heavy they almost drowned me. If they’ll let you, see if you can get back to the scene and find them. The hard-drive should be salvageable, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I’ll check around as soon as I leave here. You never know what we can recover from the van either. I’ll do my best, boss.” He paused a moment then grinned. “Can I trust you to stay out of trouble?”

“Count on it. I’m gonna get some sleep.” He smiled at Rudy and then drew Ella to him for a kiss. “Will I see you later?”

“You bet, big boy. Right now, you need some shuteye.”

He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 12

The Chapman house rang with cries of joy as Molly stormed in the door and threw her arms around Beth. They cried for a bit, both talking at once, still hugging. Dave, Susan and Danny Kramer stood there as well, thrilled at the unbelievable miracle of finding Beth unhurt.

The adults finally went into the family room for drinks while the kids remained in the kitchen, making steady progress through a plate of still-warm chocolate chip cookies and a pitcher of icy cold milk.

Never known for his tact, Danny said to Beth, “Did he hurt you?”

“No, we got away before he had the chance. I wasn’t there alone. Before he got me, he kidnapped another girl, Audrey. He took her from down at Disneyland, several days before me.”

“Did he rape her?”

“Shut *up*, Danny!” Molly glared at her younger brother, aghast. “You have the sensitivity of a flippin’ flea. Shut the hell up.”

Danny had the good grace to hang his head, but not for long. “I knew you’d be okay, Beth. I remember the day it happened and your folks were all freakin’ out and stuff. I told ‘em you’d be home again; I never had a doubt, never gave up on ya. I’m glad you’re not hurt.”

“Oh, just get out of here, would you? Beth and I want to talk.”

Danny composed his face in the ugliest expression he could imagine, stuck his tongue out at Molly and walked out the back door.

“You want to talk about a candidate for a good ass-kicking.” Molly glared at the door then back at her best friend. “Are you ok

She nodded several times. “I will be. I know I will, but right now I’m feeling all weird and stuff. Do you think I could spend the night

here? I want to talk with you first, before my parents. I know they're gonna freak out, but I really want that."

"Good grief, of course you can. That sound's fine with me. And listen, if they pitch too big a fit because they're still scared and all, I'll stay at your house. Either way, we'll spend the night together."

They sat at Terry's kitchen table sipping wine and talking about the last harrowing couple of days. Lenny had a couple of loose ends to tie up with the Chapman case, so the girls sat alone, chatting.

"I still can't get over how courageous those kids were. You can only imagine what they went through at the hands of that madman, and then to be thrown into the middle of a forest fire. Sure are a couple of brave girls."

Ella shrugged, expression grim. "What a miserable, frickin' couple of days. I still can't believe my damned car burned up. Shit, I was just getting used to it. I'm going to buy another just like it tomorrow. At least I'll know where everything is. Anymore, they look like the inside of an airplane cockpit. Takes a week to figure out how to turn the lights on. And the windshield wipers? Forget it."

"Go ahead and use the Escalade until you get a replacement." Terry snickered. "If I didn't have the manual for the Jag at my fingertips, I wouldn't know how to tune in the radio. Seriously, the battery went dead the other day 'cause I didn't close the trunk tight. Well, it's some silly Brit safety feature, I guess, but after you juice up the battery, you have to do this whole reprogramming thingy with the radio so that all the systems function correctly. Our code is in the trunk where you'd never think to look. I guess they figure if someone hotwires the car and steals it, at least they won't have music while they outrun the cops."

"Does that happen much," Ella asked with a titter, eyebrows arched.

"Oh, once or twice so far. The first time was a riot. I had no idea the battery lived in the trunk and Lenny'd already left for work, so I'm like rooting around in the engine area, under the *bonnet*,

mind you, not the hood. Never did find the battery, but there's a ton of other stuff under there. Anyway, AAA had to come out and give me a jump and a quick run-through, including the news that the battery, which is humongous, by the way, hides in the trunk behind an unmarked panel. I mean, never in a million years would ya think to look there. They also suggested I get jumper cables and a big battery charger."

"That car gives you no end of pleasure, Terry. Bob must be rolling."

"I'd imagine; hope so, anyway. Man, talk about rolling ... poor Tony. Has he settled down yet?"

"He's so attached to Jim it really upsets him to be separated. Plus, with all that went down, I think he's still wondering if Jim is trapped in the wildfire. Sad, actually. Thank God for Amy; she keeps him plenty busy. Total segue, but I have a favor to ask. Would you mind going to the restaurant for dinner tonight, kind of check things out? I wouldn't ask, really, but it's already been four days and I don't want the staff to feel abandoned. Tell them I'll be in for lunch tomorrow."

Terry chuckled. "Big favor, for sure, but I think we're up for it. I'm in the mood for some of Chef's haute cuisine ... oh, and it's Friday. Crab night. Yes, you can count us in."

Ella chuckled. "You guys are always such good sports. I really appreciate the sacrifice and all." Her laughter rippled like tinkling bells. With Jim out of danger, her mood soared. She rose from the table and headed for the door.

"I'm going to spend the night in his room, so I need to get over to the loft and get us both some fresh clothes, not to mention a shower. See you tomorrow."

Fred Hartz and Audrey Simms sat on the back patio of her parent's house in Newport Beach. As her fiancé, childhood sweetheart and best friend, no one knew her better. He clasped her hand in both of his and held his breath, waiting for her to speak. Solemn eyes the color of caramels gazed at her in sympathy and support.

He'd been in Maine, finishing up a project for his company when he got word of her kidnapping. Frantic, he'd boarded the next available plane and rushed home to wait for details. Seeing her sitting there next to him made his heart race at a peculiar tempo.

She stared at him, biting her lips in dismay. "I know you're wondering what happened to me, I'm just not sure I'm ... we're ready for it."

He drew her to him, encouraging her to put her head on his shoulder. Slowly they rocked, watching the clouds turn pink as the sun set. "Honey, I'm not sure this is what I'm supposed to say, but we never went by a script before so, here it is, still no script. I love you more than anything in the world. Nothing has changed for me. You're still the girl of my dreams and you always will be. Nothing will ever change that." He kissed the tips of her fingers and felt his throat catch.

"I couldn't live without you, it's as simple as that. If you want to talk about what happened ... all of it, little bits, or not at all, that's fine with me. I'm always here for you with no pressure, I promise. We can do it now, later or never. I just want you to be comfortable." He stroked her long silky hair in silence as tears of sorrow and compassion dampened his cheeks.

"I know that, and I love you for it, but there are a couple of things I need to explain, Freddie." She gave the porch a gentle push with her toe. The rocking motion of the swing coupled with the salty smell of the ocean set them both at ease. She took a deep breath.

"They tested me for a whole raft of stuff at the hospital, including HIV, and the results should be back by the end of the week. They put a rush on it." Audrey paused a moment then continued, candid. "I'm no doctor, Freddie, but I know I'm not pregnant and the chances of AIDS are slim. He couldn't get it up so there was no intercourse, y'know, but there are still other diseases he could have given me. I just want you to know that I understand if you have reservations...."

He turned to her then, gentle and kind as always. He took her face in both hands, gazing deep into her eyes. "Audie, I have no reservations, not now, not ever. You're the love of my life. We'll do whatever it takes to get through this, and when it's over for you, it's

over for me. Just one thing. Can we set a date for our wedding soon? I can't wait to marry you."

Knowing full well how Jim would view hospital food, Ella gave him an unnecessary but cautionary warning about dinner.

"I can do better," she'd promised just before leaving. "Count on it, huh?"

She came up the back elevator which was conveniently located near his room, and once ensuring the coast was clear, scurried across the hall and into his bathroom, dragging a large knapsack behind her.

Ella stowed her gear, peeked up and down the hall to ensure they were alone and closed the door. She strolled into the room and leered at him. "We seem to be alone."

Jim moved around on his bed, trying to get more support for his bruised lower back. "That we are, wench. Pray tell what contraband lies in yonder bathroom? Luscious comestibles of the finest kind, I presume. Chef's handiwork?" He leaned forward as she adjusted his pillows and drew in a deep appreciative breath. White gauze bandages covered his forehead and part of one eye, giving him a rakish look.

"Has the fair maid exceeded even my highest expectations? Does the nose deceive? Do I smell lasagna?"

"Ah, you know what they say: the nose knows. That's pretty good for the nose, too, 'cause it could have been ciopino or ravioli. For the adult taste buds, we have a bottle of that great merlot you raved about ... the one with the good legs? And for the waistline, a Caesar salad with."

"*With?*"

"Double portion of *with*." She glanced at the foldaway bed, aware of it for the first time. "I see they brought something in for me to sleep on. So, does that mean we're alone for the rest of the night?" She leaned over and gave him a kiss.

"In a manner of speaking, my love, I dismissed the servants earlier. What do you have in mind?" They both started to chuckle. Jim winced, still smiling. "I'm starved."

“Dinner is coming up.” She hurried across the floor to the bathroom.

“Woman,” he replied with glee, rubbing his hands together and grinning. “Feed me!”

“Wait until you get a load of this. We have these new *to go* boxes and Chef promised they’ll keep food hot for half an hour.” She dragged the heavy bag over to his bed, grinning. She pulled a small linen tablecloth from the bag, shook it out and draped it over the hospital serving tray. Tight, but workable.

“First of all, salad.” She placed both bowls on the bedside serving table and popped off their lids.

Jim grinned, green eyes crinkling with delight as he saw the anchovy filets criss-crossing his salad. Freshly grated parmesan cheese, homemade croutons and ground pepper combined to put forth a hearty, mouthwatering aroma.

“Bless you child; definitely with.” He plucked an anchovy from the bowl, popped it into his mouth and chewed a moment, eyes closed in delight. “And look at those croutons.” He popped one in his mouth and made exaggerated chomping sounds at Ella.

“Indeed, my love. We aim to please.” The lasagna bowls followed, steaming hot and thick with cheese and meat.

Ella popped the cork and produced two glasses from the side pocket of the knapsack. She poured him a glass, then one for herself.

The menu fit their mood to perfection; comfort food was in order. She sat on the bed, cross legged, facing him as they enjoyed the first hot meal they’d had in what seemed like forever and thanking God for the miracle of their survival.

“Rudy’s already working on getting your van replaced. He told Lenny he ordered all the surveillance equipment and asked the guys to put the rush on it, so it shouldn’t be too long. He’s also going up to the lake and see if he can get your computers back plus whatever he can salvage from the remains of the van. My car is toast. Burnt up just like yours, but easier to replace. I’m going out tomorrow and get an exact duplicate. Like I told Terry, I don’t want to have to go through the learning curve with another new car. I guess you and Lenny will have to double up for a while.”

“We do a good bit of that already, so it’s no problem. Good old Rudy. He always comes through in a pinch.” Jim nodded several times. “As for him going back to the lake for our stuff, that’s the best news I’ve heard in a while. If he got them quickly enough, he might be able to salvage the hard drives. As for my Glock, I’m sure it’s not happy, but I kept it well oiled so I bet I can get it back to good as new. But your poor car. Oh, honey, I know you really liked it. Let’s do that right away. The insurance company always takes its good sweet time, but we don’t need to wait for them. How about tomorrow after I get out of here?”

“You got a date.”

She watched the expressions on his face for signs of fatigue. Rest was the first order of business. Jim’s eyes began to droop with the combination of rich food, alcohol and exhaustion. He reached for her hand, kissed the palm then rested it on his cheek.

“They’re releasing me tomorrow at eight. They’re just doing a very smart CYA by keeping me overnight. Man, the world is so sue-happy, you can’t blame them, but I’d rather be home in bed with you.”

“Tony sure agrees with that one. He didn’t want to stay at the loft tonight. I really felt sorry for the poor dude.”

They were silent for a moment, lost in thought.

“I...”

“Say....”

They glanced at each other, reading their minds; they nodded.

“I’m so tired I’m gonna be asleep here in a minute, anyway, so I won’t know whether you’re here or not. But if you don’t come home tonight, Tony’ll have a total fit.”

“I know, you’re right.” She rose, packed the empty plates and glasses into the knapsack and zipped it closed. “You feel fine, though, right. No pain?”

He pulled her to him then, running his hands through her silky hair. “I’m fine. They should have let me go home this afternoon, but they just want to check the lungs one more time. You aren’t going to get a minute of sleep on that dumb bed, and that’s going to keep me awake worrying. Tell ya what. Stop by Starbucks

on the way in for two double doubles, and I bet you I hop out of here.”

A snicker rose in her throat as she continued to pack the remnants of their feast away. She poured the last of the merlot into his glass. “Drink up, sweetheart, and get some sleep. I’ll be here first thing and then we’ll get you home and get our lives back on track.”

He finished the wine, nodded once and beckoned her to his side. He took her face in both hands and rubbed the tip of his nose against hers. “Love you muchly.”

“Back at ya.”

Juggling two large coffee containers and a brown paper bag, Ella marched into the room the next morning, amazed to see Jim dressed and ready to go. She glanced at her watch and kissed him hello. “It’s not even seven yet. Aren’t you the early bird? I brought you a double double and a really great Danish. Almond paste, your fave.”

He popped the lid on his container and took an appreciative sniff. “Hospital coffee is so much worse than it’s cracked up to be, I can’t tell ya. It makes the LAPD stuff Lenny serves taste great, but this?” Several swigs later, he raised the container to her and grinned. “Now *that’s* coffee.”

The hospital doors opened to sunshine and a deep blue sky.

“So, I forgot to ask, what are you driving?”

“Terry lent me the Escalade. Ever since Lenny got his van, it just sits in the garage. I really like it, actually. If she wants to sell it, I might buy it. Talk about spacious. It’s great if we want to take the dogs with us. I hate the Suburban, y’know. Always makes me feel weird, all cloak and dagger or something. What do you think?”

“Well, it’s about as far from a Mustang convertible as you could get, but it’s spacious and the dogs are a consideration; still, it’s up to you. I like it just fine.” He settled in the passenger seat and gave an appreciative look around. “Sure is roomy, comfortable, too.”

They accessed the freeway and headed for Hollywood and home. The drive passed in easy chat as Jim asked about Beth and Audrey. He'd spoken on the phone to the Chapman family, and Lenny mentioned that Audrey called as well.

Instead of turning into the parking garage of the loft, they went down the street a little farther to *ELLA'S*. The parking lot seemed overly full at first, until he realized he recognized most of the cars. The smirk on Ella's face confirmed his suspicions. A party was at hand.

They walked into the restaurant arm in arm. The first partygoer to see them was Tony. He launched himself across the floor of the lounge and skidded to a stop at Jim's feet. Wagging his butt in frantic joy, he made woo-woo sounds and licked Jim's hand.

He bent down and stroked the dog several times, roughing up his coat. He glanced at Ella then, eyebrows raised. "You work fast, for heaven's sake. What's this all about?"

"I don't really know. It just grew on its own or something. Ask Lenny; he started it."

The long tables pushed together gave everyone the opportunity to join in the festivities.

Audrey, radiant in her engagement glow, introduced her fiancé and her parents. Beth led Molly and her family over to meet Jim and Lenny as well, blushing furiously at the expression on Danny's face as he stared at her in unabashed lust.

"So," Audrey said to Beth as she took in Danny's expression. "So this is Danny." She continued to stare but it was lost on the boy. He couldn't pry his eyes off Beth.

Just then Rudy came in the door, jubilant. He'd achieved unheard of success, exhuming several boxes of DVD's that had survived the fire thanks to the steel compartment where they had been stored. The knapsack hadn't moved an inch, although it took Rudy more than one try to pry it from the lake bottom. He approached Jim and clapped him on the back, grinning.

"I got started on ordering the retrofit for the new van. Caught the guys at an off time, I guess. They figure they can have the stuff installed one week from the time they get possession. Good, huh?" He gazed at Jim, eyes hooded. "You're one lucky

dude. That knapsack weighed a ton. You're damned lucky Lenny saw you go down."

"No doubt about it. The whack on the head had me out just enough I couldn't move. How about the rest of the stuff? Anything else saved?"

"The satellite transponder was fried, but the Glock's fine and I'm confident both hard drives are okay." His laugh sounded more like a bark. "The insurance company is going to pitch a fit. The van and the car in one fell swoop."

Danny eavesdropped on Jim talking with Rudy about being a PI and training the dogs, and from that moment on, he was determined to hear more. When Jim left Rudy and walked over to the bar to refresh his drink, Danny followed.

"Hi, Mr. Sessions. I'm wondering if I can talk with you a minute." He stuck out his hand and shook Jim's. "I'm Danny Kramer," he said without giving Jim a moment to respond. "I'd love to talk with you about being a PI. Man, that's just so cool, and I'm crazy about dogs ... all animals, actually, but especially dogs. Doberman dogs are my favorite, although I like the German Shepherd and the Rottweiler, too.

"You guys train them for all kinds of police work, right, like finding drugs or bomb sniffing? Do you do bomb sniffing? And then, there's the attack and guard dogs, that's what these are, right?" He paused a moment to point at Tony and Amy. "And there's a difference between them, right? Attack dogs. That's what you guys specialize in, right?"

As Jim's eyes began to glaze over, for some insane reason he remembered the O'Henry story, *The Ransom of Red Chief*. The boy continued to ramble on about being a PI and dog training and breeding and how much he'd like to be involved in something with dogs ... on and on he droned.

As Danny paused to draw a breath, Jim lifted his index finger in the age-old signal to wait. He turned his head, raised his voice and called, "*Rudy?*"

The End

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