

LETHAL INTENT



Gayle Farmer

*LETHAL
INTENT*

Gayle Farmer

To Jeff,

You never let me down, not once

You always lift me up

You are my inspiration in all things

Thank you for loving me

Gayle

Other Books
by
Gayle Farmer

The Sessions and Browning
Detective Series

SECRET LIVES
FIRESTORM
COLD FUSION

The Doubletree Kids
Young Adult Series

FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS
COUPLES/ ALL IN THE GAME TWO BOOKS IN ONE
HIGH HURDLES
RIDING HIGH
RIDING BLIND

Omega Publications Palm Springs

Copyright © 2008 by Gayle Farmer

All rights reserved. This book, or parts thereof,
may not be reproduced in any form without permission.

ISBN-13 978-0-9822303-2-9

ISBN-10 0-9822303-2-X

Visit Gayle's website is at
www.GayleFarmer.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover design and page layout by
Omega Publications
www.OmegaPublications.net

*LETHAL
INTENT*

Gayle Farmer

Chapter 1

“Palm Springs for the week? The whole week? Sounds like a ball.”

Ella Russell pored over the brochures, eyes wide with anticipation.

Her fiancé, Jim Sessions, gave her a broad smile. “Well, not exactly. The club we’ll stay at is in Indian Wells. It’s gorgeous, but poles apart from Palm Springs. All the towns in the Coachella Valley have a unique flavor of their own; very different. I think you’ll have a good time.”

“What do you mean? I’ve never been there. Tell me what it’s like.”

“In its original state, the desert is beautiful in a savage kind of way, I guess; surreal. Pour a little water on it and something will grow. In the spring, after a rainy winter, the whole valley erupts in a carpet of wild blossoms. It’s incredible. And the flower and citrus smells are almost overpowering.” He glanced at the brochures she read, smiling.

“They settled Palm Springs first, which is why the tourists refer to the whole valley that way. The village of Palm Springs maintains that old movie colony feel, very quaint and different from the rest of the valley, like old Hollywood. They saved many of the original buildings and much of it is so unique they use it for settings for movies. They used Tahquitz Canyon for that old film, *Lost Horizon*. It’s a theatrical town, very artsy-fartsy, even today. Many of the old timers still live there.”

She pointed at one of the brochures. “Where’s this ... El Paseo? The shops look like Rodeo Drive.”

He chuckled. “Didn’t take you long. Very much akin, lots of similar boutiques. It’s in Palm Desert. Right next door to Indian Wells which makes it very convenient for us.”

Ella picked up another brochure and grinned, dark blue eyes alight. “They sure focus on their leisure time, don’t they? Tennis, golf and horses. Must be nice.”

“Pricey, to say the least, but cost never seems to matter. They have two things in common ... an obsession for golf and tons of money. Most of them are choking on it. They can’t seem to find ways to spend it fast enough.”

“I’m sure there’s a support group for that, or maybe it’s the heat,” she said with a titter. “Talk about a problem. Too much money ... must be hard to deal.” She pointed at a different brochure and grinned. “Well, I accept the challenge. Party time.”

Delightful nibbles of information enticed her to visit the finest selection of haute couture in the desert; a particular yellow sundress beckoned.

Yawning, she looked up from the pamphlet and blinked. “How’d you get invited to a charity golf tournament anyway? I didn’t know you played that well.”

He pushed his chair back from the table and stretched his arms high above his head. “I used to be a good amateur player, but it’s been a while. They’ll pair us up with famous professionals, give us handicaps and stuff like that. The news people will be there interviewing and taking pictures. You know how it is with charity events. It’s more like a circus stunt than a serious game, I guess, and it’s for a good cause.”

“But how did you get picked? Who sponsored you?”

“Being a PI has its perks. You remember last year with the porn ring and the runaway I found, Mary Jessup? She got involved in all that stuff, remember? Well, her dad, Mort, is head of the committee that chooses the amateur players. I mentioned to him once in passing that I enjoyed a game of golf and the next thing you know, here we are. They choose from what they consider worthy recipients who do pro bono work for the less fortunate.” He harrumphed. “Don’t you love that phrase?”

“Which one? Pro bono or less fortunate?”

Chuckling, they continued to plan their upcoming adventure. Ella had a quick thought and turned to him in question. “How big is the house we’re going to stay in?”

Jim grinned at her, green eyes crinkled at the corners. “Huge. Five bedroom suites, a pool and two private Jacuzzis. I don’t know how much more we could ask for in a free vacation home and yes, it’s fine with me if Terry and Lenny join us. We have the house for the whole week, but the tournament only lasts three days. We’ll start play early in the mornings, finish before noon and after that, we’re free to roam.”

“Cool. This is so exciting. We can visit all the towns, right, get a feel for their differences, check out the shopping? The restaurants? Which one is your favorite?”

“I guess if I lived there, I’d choose Palm Springs. Rancho Mirage is almost all country clubs. They call it the home of Presidents and movie stars. Size-wise, it has the largest number of country clubs, although Indian Wells is a close second. Palm Desert is more commercial, not only in the older sections along Highway 111, but it expanded El Paseo a lot so the shopping is world class. Hard to pick a favorite, really, they’re all so different.”

“I can’t wait to explore.” Ella pointed at the clock and yawned again.

“I’m with you, kid; beat complete. Let’s go home. You’re finished around here, right?”

Nodding, she moved into his arms, running her finger through blond silky waves. They rocked together a moment and she murmured, “You’re not all *that* tired, are you?” She cupped his butt.

“I’m never that tired.”

Arm in arm, the lovers walked down the hall. Two large black shapes padded along behind them, their nails clicking on the tile.

* * *

Terry Wagner sat in the lounge of *ELLA’S* supper club in Hollywood, chatting with her twin about their upcoming trip and making an itinerary of things they *had* to do in the desert.

ELLA’S would close for the week they’d be gone to undergo a much needed revamping. It would reopen upon their return with a facelift, a brand new menu and much fanfare.

Terry let her gaze drift along the wall from one framed poster to another. “I’m glad you’re keeping the musical motif. You wouldn’t believe how many customers comment when they see their favorite singer up there. I have dibs on that one of Clapton if you ever want to part with it. Rock never dies, I guess.”

She nodded at the bleached oak, guitar-shaped bar that dominated the room. “Talk about unique. I’m glad you decided to go for it; a real eye-catcher, for sure.”

Ella grinned. “New carpets and a paint job will make everything look clean and fresh and the changes will be subtle. I just want to spiff up a bit, not do a complete makeover.” She glanced around the room, proud of her decorating scheme.

“Oh, did I tell you? Amy and Tony will come with us on vacation. Poor Amy gets so blue if I leave her alone. Jim thought they might benefit from a week with Rudy at the training farm but she wouldn’t like it. Our other choice was leaving them at the shop to sulk all week long. This is much better.”

They heard a shifting, scraping sound, followed by a sigh. A sleek black head popped up from under the table. Sharp ears perked, bright inquisitive eyes darted from Ella to Terry. She whined lightly and placed a gentle forepaw on Ella’s leg.

“What a beggar you are, Amy. We aren’t really talking about you and you know it. You’re just spoiled rotten and looking for a handout.”

Amy stretched, fore and aft, ending with a yowly, sing-song whine of pleasure.

“What? What do you want, Amy?”

The dog sat again and offered Ella her other paw.

“Do you want to sing, Ames? Sing. Sing!” Ella made a wo-wo sound which the dog found irresistible, and together they raised their voices in song. As loud as one sang, the other sang louder. Soon they howled.

“You guys need to take that act on the road,” Terry said between giggles. “She must have a full octave.”

Amy ended on a high note and then barked as if to say, *feed me*.

Right on time, Al appeared at the kitchen door, plate in hand. “Amy, catch.”

The Doberman whirled at the sound of his voice, spotted the piece of flying meat and sprang into the air. Her jaws snapped closed with a click and she swallowed the scrap before she hit the ground. Amy turned to Al for another.

With a sigh of resignation, Ella said, “We’re just about to open, Al. Is the bar ready?”

“I got ya. Come on, Ames, let’s go in the back room and eat this. You’re not allowed to frolic in the bar. You must behave with decorum. Here, catch.”

* * *

Terry glanced at the scenery flashing past them as they sped along the freeway. The green vegetation of the valley turned sparse and brown. Sand dominated the grass and the air, now

invisible, smelled crisp and dry. The piercing, vivid blue of the sky stretched before them, cloudless.

“I’m glad we decided to drive up alone. I love my sister and all that, but I don’t feel like we’re attached at the hip. Besides, even as big as the Suburban is, they’re taking the dogs and that means, with suitcases and all, we’d be packed in like the proverbial pickles.”

She grinned at Lenny Browning, former homicide detective, boyfriend and long-suffering but mostly silent passenger. She patted the dashboard of her car. “Isn’t this so much more fun?”

“Not to me, frankly. I feel like we’re rolling along on the cement, waiting to be stepped on by the big guys. It’s worse with the top down.” He glanced uneasily at the dashboard and his eyes widened. “You’re doing about three hundred dollars over the speed limit.”

“Don’t be silly, Angel was made for speed.” Her laughter bubbled, snatched away by the wind.

“Tell that to the Chippie when he pulls you over.”

The miles rolled by in easy silence. Talking with the top down at that speed required intense use of the vocal chords. Whatever had to be said could wait.

Lenny shook his head and thought about his old Crown Victoria or his present ride, a Suburban like Jim’s ... vehicles that gave you a sense of safety and protection, some substance.

The little Jag purred in appreciation, cruising along at an easy ninety. The empty freeway invited the excessive speed and the newly installed fuzz buster showed that the coast was clear. They’d passed the SUV a while back.

Terry stopped at a prearranged place in Banning to refuel and stretch their legs. While they waited for Jim and Ella to catch up with them, Lenny tanked up. They arrived just as he removed the gas nozzle and replaced the hose in its holder.

Jim pulled up to the next pump, got out and began to refuel while Ella ran to the restroom.

“You have quite the lead foot, wench,” he said to Terry, a glint in his eyes. He glanced at Lenny and grinned. “You’re gonna be sorry one of these days. That gets expensive.”

“I told her, but she just ignored me. When it comes to that car, she just has entirely too much fun, don’t you think?”

Ever the coquette, she cocked her head and winked. “Why, kind sir, I was just letting the kitty run a bit. Sorry if your bus can’t keep up.”

Gurgles of laughter rippled from deep in her throat, parting her full lips in an infectious smile. The steady breeze blew her dark burgundy hair in all directions; glints of plum highlights glimmered in the sun.

Ella joined them, offering bottles of cold water.

Serious now, Jim said, “We exit at Cook Street and take it to the end. Just fight the urge to race me, Terry, or one day I’ll show you what’s under my hood.”

For a moment she stared at him. In unison, she and Ella turned their eyes toward the Jag.

“Yeah, right.”

Chapter 2

Terry followed the SUV down Highway 111, head turning from side to side, trying to read the signs, remember locations and keep the car on the road at the same time.

“Terry, pay attention here, would’ya? The traffic ... watch out!”

The Jag stopped on its nose, a mere three inches from Jim’s bumper.

Lenny glared at Terry and wiped the sweat off his brow. “Honest to God, if I were still a cop you’d be in deep caca, girl, very deep. And when we’re talking, *please* watch the road, not me. God.”

By the time they entered the massive gates of the club, Lenny’s face had a green tinge to it and his jaw clamped in disapproval.

“What in the world is wrong with you, Terry? Why are you driving like this? We’re about eight inches above the ground without even a roof, and you’re watching everywhere but where you’re driving. I’ve never seen you like this before.” Wary, he glanced from side to side, awaiting the next disaster.

“You have to admit it’s beautiful. So much to see.” Terry smiled at him, pointing at a famous hotel.

“You’re making me crazy. You act like you don’t get out much instead of a Hollywood resident. Get a grip, girl. You can check out the scenery once we get settled in. And I’m driving from now on.” He glanced around and nodded. “If we can get to the house in one piece.”

She stared at him, black eyes wide.

“Don’t give me that look. You’re a menace out here. *Blinker*, look, Jim ... he just God!”

Jim turned down a road that crossed a gorgeous golf course. The violet Santa Rosa peaks made a perfect backdrop as the sun perched atop the mountain, slowly oozing down the other side.

Bright, emerald green grass spread in all directions, primped and manicured like a wealthy woman sporting her finery. Silvery lakes shimmered, reflecting the shadows of huge palms towering above, lacy fronds swaying in the gentle breeze. Flowers

of different colors and sizes filled the borders, radiating their sweet aroma in all directions.

Magnificent houses nestled on elaborately landscaped lots lining the course. Similar in architecture, but each unique, like precious jewels in a necklace, they ringed the course, melting into the desert landscape.

Unlike the street fronts where the houses hid behind mature shrubs and tall shade trees, the back patios remained exposed to the golf course. Decorated with muted canvass shades to shield the interior from the harsh desert sun, they sported colorful hanging plants and spectacular outdoor furniture, many with complete kitchens for al fresco entertainment.

“Wow,” Ella said. “I mean ... wow.”

“You’ve heard of this club before, haven’t you? Top of the line. No doubt about it. As many millionaires per square foot as Beverly Hills.” He chuckled. “Hell, this is where they come for golf getaways and the winter season.”

Jim pulled into the driveway of a house perched on a hill, surrounded on two sides by huge rock formations leading into the mountains. They got out of the cars, speechless. The entire golf course spread below them. In the distance, the rugged San Jacinto Mountains hid the lowering sun, splashing shadows on the greens.

“They ought to call this club Fantasy Land.” Ella, born and raised amid wealth and plenty, shook her head. It took a lot to impress her and here it was.

“It’s not the houses, individually, it’s their openness. It’s the way they’re all lined up like that in full view of the course. Like a necklace made of one perfect ten-carat diamond after another.”

Terry nodded, extending her arm in a sweeping gesture. “It’s because you can see them so clearly like that. I mean, they aren’t as big or grand as our houses in Brentwood, let alone the big estates in Bel Air; it’s just that we hide behind walls or hedges for privacy. Out here, they want to be able to see the course, plus I guess you couldn’t put in tall shrubs or screens or ... shoot, who pays when a stray ball takes out some glass?”

She turned to her left and pointed down the hill at a glass door etched in vibrant autumn colors featuring a forest scene with a huge stag wearing a full rack of antlers.

“That’d be just my luck. How much do you figure that cost?”

“High five figures for sure. And that’s a good analogy about diamonds. I bet at night when the sun goes down, they sparkle. All the pools lit up and stuff.” Jim took ELLA’S arm, fished the door key from his pocket and chuckled.

“Wonder what we’ll find inside the palace.” On impulse, he scooped her into his arms and buried his lips in her neck. “Come viz me to zee Kasbah.” He carried her over the threshold as she giggled.

* * *

The American Parcel Post delivery truck approached the back gate of the club and waited in line to be admitted.

The guard smiled in vague recognition, nodding at the man behind the wheel. He took the offered pass, inserted it in the reader and handed it back to the driver. “Go on ahead. You’re cleared.”

The man waved to the guard, half-turned in his seat as he fiddled with a pile of packages in the bin next to him.

The truck lumbered up the steep road like a red, white and blue behemoth, throwing gigantic shadows in the last failing rays of sunlight. At the top of the hill it turned, backed down the driveway and stopped at the open garage.

The truck’s back door flew open and several men dressed in APP uniforms jumped out and disappeared into the dark garage. The driver put a box next to the garage door, hopped back into the cab and drove away.

In the garden above them, Ella watched in mild curiosity. The truck’s headlights splashed across the lawn as it topped the driveway. For whatever reason, she dodged behind a huge palm tree, bringing the dogs with her. The truck crested the driveway and turned onto the road, heading back to the gate.

“Well, that was strange, huh, kids?” She focused her eye on the now-closed garage door and blinked. “Man, they sure got that done fast. Guess I missed it closing in the glare of the headlights.”

She continued her walk around the property, the dogs ambling behind her, sniffing the fragrant flowers and shrubs. The stars hung close to the earth and the silence, limited to a distant coyote cry or the calls of a bird, lulled her into a dreamlike quality she rarely experienced at home. She couldn’t remember it ever

getting this dark. The sweet aroma of night-blooming flowers floated through the air.

A hollow, popping noise disturbed the serenity of the night and both dogs snapped to attention, eyes focused on the house across the street. Motionless, they stood like statues, ears up and cocked, waiting, and when nothing further happened, they began to relax. They resumed their sniff fest in the gardens, no longer interested in the house across the road.

“What the hell was that?” Ella watched the house for movement, not sure now what she’d heard. A gunshot? Maybe a car backfiring? Silence reigned again.

She stood in the dark listening, straining to hear whatever came next, but nothing happened. The sound either came from far away on the other side of the property or from inside a nearby house. Otherwise the echoes would still be reverberating against the rocky mountains that embraced this section of the club.

Still wondering, she entered the kitchen, both dogs right behind her. “Did you guys hear anything?”

Jim and Lenny sat on lounge chairs in the living room, feet up, glasses in hand and a plate of whatever on the table between them. Engrossed in the nightly news, they stared at the theater-sized plasma screen as world news coverage supplied a wide variety of background noise, including bombs and gunshots. Obviously, they never heard a thing.

Terry looked up from her magazine with a wide smile and poured Ella a glass of wine. “Did you have a nice walk? The stars must be incredible. Oh, over on the counter there’s a platter of cheese and crackers to hold us until dinner is ready. Can you bring it on over? I suggest the blue cheese crumbles.”

Distracted by her grumbling stomach, Ella brought the plate to the bar, scooped some cheese crumbles onto her cracker and winked at her twin. She took the stool next to Terry and grinned, glancing at the magazine over her shoulder.

“We’re off to a good start, I see.” She popped one in her mouth and grinned at the dogs as they tracked her hand from plate to mouth.

Before she could say anything, Jim said, “Tony. Come.” The dog walked to Jim’s chair, obeying the hand signal to lie down.

Amy cast a baleful eye at Jim, her expression changing to adoration as she gazed at Ella.

“Amy. Come.”

She ignored his words, but when Ella gave her the signal to go to the wall and lie down, the dog obeyed with a deep sigh.

In order to deflect any comments concerning the ongoing dispute she and Jim had about hand-feeding the dogs as well as her genuine concern, Ella said, "I think I heard a gunshot tonight."

Three astonished faces stared at her.

"Here?" They spoke in unison.

She shrugged. "Well, maybe just a backfire. I don't know for sure anymore, but when I went out with the dogs, we took a nice stroll around the property. The desert is so beautiful at night, you won't believe the stars. Anyway, I stopped in the garden near the pool to admire the flowers ... the gardenias are incredible, and noticed headlights coming up the road. It was an APP delivery truck. It turned around and backed down the drive across the street from us.

"I had a sideways view as it stopped at the open door. I'm sure a bunch of men, maybe three or four, jumped out of the back of the truck and ran into the garage. Thing is, they didn't come back out. At least I don't think so. The driver placed a box by the garage door, hopped back in the truck and left. By the time I could see the garage again, they'd closed the door."

"If they didn't get back in the truck then that means they're still inside, right?" Terry cocked her head then shrugged. "Doing what?"

"When did you hear the shot?" Jim asked. "Where were you?"

"I came inside soon after I heard it, so what, twenty minutes ago?"

"Let's go take a look-see." Lenny nodded at Jim and headed for the door.

"Lead the way, Ella, show us where you stood."

They walked across the pool deck, unaware of the millions of brilliant stars dancing overhead. A light breeze rustled the palm fronds high above them, carrying the sweet desert scents. Night blooming jasmine permeated the air.

They followed Ella along the edge of the lawn. She stopped, sweeping the area with her hand.

"I guess it was right about here. It sounded like a pop or a snap, only one. I think it was a gunshot, but it'd have to be from inside. It wasn't loud enough for outside and besides, everything

echoes so much, it's hard to tell where it came from. It sure got the dogs attention at first. They went on alert, fixed on the house for a few moments, but then they relaxed and started snuffling the flowers again. Maybe I confused the sound of a car backfiring for a gunshot?"

"Perhaps they used a silencer. The house is dark except for the perimeter lights. Can you remember interior lights earlier?" Lenny glanced at Ella, waiting.

"I'm not sure. Let me ... okay, the garage itself was dark when the delivery truck dropped those guys off, but there was a regular door going to the yard. I think I saw a light on in back of the house. Of course, maybe they were pool lights, but it could have come from inside. I think." Ella cocked her head, eyes closed. "Unless they have a lot of glass. Then again, it could be a landscape light. I just don't know."

Jim shrugged. "What say we take a walk up the road a bit farther, see if we can get high enough above the house to see the back? This road should take us high enough to do that."

The paved road ended several hundred feet above them, opening onto natural terrain and a hiking trail leading into the hills. They kept to the path, on the lookout for rocks and nocturnal critters. From their vantage point, the back of the huge house lay in darkness. Only the pool, glittering like an aquamarine, shed light on the surrounding patios.

The eerie desert silence disappeared as they heard the sound of engines turn over, first one, then another.

Lenny nodded at Jim. "Sounds like it's coming from that house. Let's see if we can get a look at the driveway, see what leaves."

They hurried along the trail and crested the hill in time to see a huge yellow Hummer and a smaller SUV pull out of the driveway and head down the hill.

"What do you make of that?" Ella glanced at Jim. "Guess I didn't hear what I thought I heard."

"I wouldn't be so quick to think that," Lenny said. "We don't have any idea what happened in there."

"But that shot, if it was a shot I heard, had to be an hour ago, maybe more. Who would shoot someone then hang around waiting to leave?"

“Maybe they weren’t waiting,” Terry said. “Maybe they were busy packing stuff up. These people must have doubles of every toy known to man. Maybe it was just a robbery.”

Three pairs of eyes stared at her then returned their focus to the house.

* * *

They sat at the patio table enjoying a bottle of merlot and rehashing the events of the night so far. Ella had brown-bagged a meal from the restaurant, rightly thinking they’d prefer to eat in after their trip. A few scraps of cheese clung to the sides of the dish; nothing else remained of their lasagna dinner.

The conversation turned to the golf game and their plans for tomorrow. Jim would attend the early morning celebrity breakfast and meet his fellow players and teammates. Their tee time was eight sharp and he expected to be finished by noon.

“Where do you want to go for lunch?” Terry waved an Indian Wells Dining Guide at Ella and grinned.

“Well, I haven’t given that much thought, but I want to go to El Paseo, that’s for” Her voice trailed off as headlights coming up the road grabbed their attention. The car turned into the driveway of the house across the street.

“Man, they sure get a lot of action over there. Anyway, I want to go to that super duper kitchen shop, what’s it called? I have a list from Chef and he’s very particular about the *tools of the trade*, as he calls them.”

“The Gourmet Chef. It’s....”

Shrill, piercing screams rang through the night, high-pitched and yet somehow muffled at the same time.

Chapter 3

Amy and Tony jumped to their feet, alerted to the sounds, ears up, heads cocked.

“Good God, it sounds like somebody’s being killed,” Terry said, her face stark.

They sprinted out the gate as the screams escalated, sending chills skittering down the backs of their necks. Jim took the lead, the dogs right on his heels. Lenny stopped at the Suburban long enough to get his gun and charged down the driveway after them.

The girls waited on the lawn with Amy and Tony while the guys rang the doorbell. The screams continued to rip through the night, even louder now and hoarse, raspy.

Jim pounded on the door again. A woman in her early sixties jerked it open so hard it slammed into the wall like a thunderclap. Something inside the house fell to the floor, shattering on the marble tiles. Hysterical, she continued to scream, pointing behind her.

Mascara made black tracks down her cheeks and her lips trembled. She pointed across the huge living room again, babbling, incoherent; she rolled her eyes toward the back patio, shaking from head to foot.

Jim and Lenny bounded across the room and onto the patio. They skidded to a stop in front of a spreading pool of blood mixed with gray matter and bone chips. The victim, unrecognizable, suffered the effects of a direct gunshot to the back of his head; it destroyed his face.

Lenny reverted to type and turned to the woman whose screams had subsided to convulsive sobs. “Have you called the police?”

She swung her head slowly back and forth like the pendulum of a clock, unable to speak. Eyes half closed, face gray, she succumbed to mute shock.

Lenny walked to the kitchen, looking for the phone. It hung on the wall not far from a roll of paper towels. Although it was unlikely that the murderer used the phone, he wrapped the receiver in paper and used the end of his pencil to dial 9-1-1.

“What is the nature of your emergency?”

“Homicide. I’m calling to report a fatal gunshot to the head.”

Lenny stayed on the line, answering the dispatcher's questions. An unopened envelope on the kitchen counter provided the requested name and address. In the distance he heard the high-pitched wail of sirens. They ended abruptly as a line of cars drove up the dark road.

The crime scene investigative unit took up a good portion of the driveway, doors open as the team did its thing.

Lenny stood off to one side with Jim and the girls, giving his statement to Detective Beldon. He identified himself as a former LAPD homicide detective, presently working with Jim as a PI.

"Jim's playing in the tournament tomorrow. We're staying in the house across the road." He pointed to his left. "We'd just finished dinner on the patio when we heard the screams. Probably a bit before nine. My partner and I ran to the house and Mrs. Chandler opened the door, still screaming. She couldn't talk, but she kept pointing to the patio. We went to the body and established the condition of the victim as deceased. I placed the 9-1-1 call."

Jim had little more to add, but the detective found Ella's testimony very interesting.

"What time did you see the APP truck arrive?"

"The sun had just set, so I'm guessing seven, give or take. I didn't have my watch on."

"You are positive you saw men run into the garage?"

"Absolutely."

"Did they carry anything? How many were there?"

She sighed. "I honestly can't say, maybe four. The truck parked right next to the garage and they darted inside, y'know, really fast. They were almost a blur, but they had APP uniforms on. If you want to know exactly what I could see, we can go to the garden. I'll show you where I stood."

The detective continued to write as he spoke. "We found a carton next to the garage door; it must be the one you saw them drop off. Is there any chance they got back into the truck without you seeing them?" He paused, checking his notes. "Is there anything else you can remember?"

Ella shook her head. "The driver left, but the other guys stayed behind. I'm almost positive. That's about it."

Detective Beldon pulled a card from his pocket. "Let's go up to your house and we'll check out the view."

Ella led the way back up the street, across the driveway and into the side yard. She stopped by a bed of fragrant gardenias and beckoned the detective. "I stood right here. Now, if you look down the driveway and think of the size of that truck, you can see I had a clear view of the back door. Anything is possible, I suppose, but it's highly unlikely they all got back into the truck without my noticing. I never took my eyes off them; it was weird, furtive. Besides, it was the only thing going on at the time." She shrugged and pursed her lips. "I'm from Hollywood; we're not used to it being so quiet."

Beldon nodded, appraising her position with regard to the other property. "If something comes back to you, I'd like to hear about it. That's my direct line, feel free to use it."

He nodded and bid them goodnight.

* * *

"I'm so wired I'll never sleep. Anyone else want a Grand Marnier?" They gave Ella thumbs up and she headed for the kitchen, returning shortly with a bottle and four brandy snifters.

"What a night. Talk about winds of the old days."

"Indeed." Lenny palmed his glass, twirling the amber liquid around the bowl. He took an appreciative sniff and sighed.

"That poor woman ... Mrs. Chandler." Ella raised her glass to her lips, staring at her sister. "I feel so sorry for her."

"What a shock," Terry said, nodding. "Imagine coming home to find your husband murdered on your patio deck. It's a miracle she didn't have a heart attack."

"I wonder where they took her, poor thing. She needs friends and family, that's for sure." Ella glanced at Jim and sighed. "And you, my love. I'm glad I don't have a breakfast date at seven followed by several grueling hours chasing a ball all over the lawn."

He stared at her a moment, rolled his eyes and chuckled. "No respect. You can call me Rodney." Then he turned to Lenny. "Did you get a chance to look at the house while you were in there? Did you notice the bare spaces on the walls? How much do you want to bet it was a robbery gone wrong?"

"That's what I thought at first. Did you see the rock on Mrs. Chandler's hand? What do you guess?"

"Five carats, easy. It's a good thing she wasn't home. She'd have lost that ring and her life along with it. They went to a lot of

trouble to eliminate witnesses, which makes me wonder. Why add capital murder to a simple robbery if they didn't have to?"

"Does seem a bit over the top, don't ya think?" Lenny shrugged, noncommittal. "Can't help speculating about whether there was more to it than robbery. I mean, going into the house the way they did, they should have been masked and gloved. They wouldn't even need to speak. The barrel of a gun pointing at your head shows the intent loud and clear. With no way to make an ID and no fingerprints, Chandler would have little if anything to give the cops, but they killed him anyway."

"What if Chandler recognized one of them?" Jim leaned his elbows on the table, eyes droopy with sleep. "We have a well-orchestrated crime, not the work of an opportunistic bunch of amateurs. It took a good deal of planning and coordination to pull this off. Shooting the victim in the back of the head for no reason like that is strange. So unnecessary, and yet that's exactly what they did ... took robbery and home invasion and bumped it up to murder with special circumstances. Why?"

"Maybe the robbery was a cover-up," Ella said. "Maybe murder was first on their agenda and the goodies, whatever they stole just put icing on the cake?"

"What could have been in the house worth killing for?" Terry shrugged, glancing from Ella to Lenny. "Maybe they didn't think anyone would see them. Maybe they expected the house to be empty. This club is as quiet as a tomb. The only lights or cars I've seen all night long came in or out of that house. Did you notice, even the cops turned off the lights and sirens once they entered the club. Nothing can be allowed to disturb the sleep of the rich, not even murder. I mean, where else in the world could you have a crime scene like that without one single neighbor coming over to check it out?"

"I agree," Ella said. "My spotting the APP truck was the biggest fluke of all. Consider the odds. If I'd been on the other side of the pool, I couldn't have seen the guys getting out of the truck ... might not have heard the shot either. It would have been a normal delivery from any other angle. I just happened to have the perfect vantage point."

* * *

Jim stood with Mort Jessup, his tournament sponsor and former client, deep in conversation about the Chandler murder.

“The police are playing things quiet, thank God. There was a short blurb or two on the news and a couple of pieces in the paper, but nothing huge. You can imagine that suits the club, the homeowners and the players just fine. Last thing we need is the notoriety, especially with the damn press already crawling around because of the tournament. Imagine them springing out of the bushes and demanding interviews.

“Most of the club’s residents work hard at keeping a low profile and they would not be amused to see their photo on the front page of some tabloid rag. None of our members are actors or rock stars, no political activists, no one with face recognition, although we did bend the rules once for a famous author. We send the politicians and actors over to Rancho Mirage. They love it.”

Mort chuckled, nodding to several men as they walked toward the dining room. He turned back to Jim. “By the way, Mary sends her regards. Hugs and kisses, actually.”

“How’s she doing?”

“In a word, fantastic. I don’t know how, but between you and Detective Browning she had quite an epiphany. She’s an A student again, back on the debate team and looking forward to college. It’s like that whole episode of her life never happened. She’s one lucky girl.”

He glanced over Jim’s shoulder and nodded. “Here comes Albert. I need to get into the dining room and take my seat. Let’s talk after breakfast.”

* * *

Jim parked the golf cart in the garage and entered the house. Tony met him in the kitchen, sharp ears up, stubby tail wagging his hips.

“Hey, dude, how’s it going?” He took the big dog’s head in both hands and rocked him back and forth. “Let’s go find Ella.”

He walked through the kitchen, liberated a beer from the fridge and called her name. A muffled response came from the back of the house.

“Keep talking,” he said, as he approached their bedroom. Her voice came clear now; she was in the spa.

“It’s really nice and warm in here,” she said, her voice soft and seductive.

Jim slipped out of his clothes and opened the spa door wearing nothing but a grin.

Chapter 4

“Absolutely mind-numbing. How can they do that all day long? I mean, the scenery is beautiful, and when you’re on the course like this you can see how folks decorate their back patios, but still. Crud, it isn’t even good exercise; just walking.”

Ella chuckled. “I couldn’t agree with you more, but Jim’s in heaven. When he first got the invitation to play in the tournament, he acted almost like he had a favor to do, a chore or something for Mr. Jessup. When he found out yesterday that one of his partners would be the illustrious Mr. Woods, I mean, it just blew him out of the water. I don’t think he slept a wink and he’s not over it yet. What a ham.”

“On rye,” Terry said as they turned their full attention to Jim.

They saw him return Tiger’s wave as the twosome moved on to the next hole. The goofy grin on Jim’s face made him look like a star struck kid. Wide eyes darted from one golf great to another, chatting, smiling; they included him as part of the group and there was just the tiniest hint of a swagger in his walk.

“I’m going to razz him about this forever.” Lenny snickered, a fond smile on his face as Jim teed off, sending his ball straight down the fairway, high and on target. Low murmurs of approval and a ripple of applause rewarded his efforts. His face, now a ruddy pink, glowed with pride. He glanced at Ella and gave her a thumb, followed by a toothy grin. The swagger increased as he got a high five from Tiger.

“We’re gonna hear about *that* one for the next ten years.”

In solemn procession as befitting such a ritual, Ella, Terry and Lenny followed the players to the next hole, groaning.

* * *

Later that afternoon they sat in the kitchen of the condo, perusing their purchases gleaned from several hours of diligent shopping.

“You think Chef will approve of the new equipment?” Terry chuckled as Ella packed the knives and utensils back into the bag. “I never realized how expensive good knives can be.”

“Oh, he’ll find something to complain about, something I missed. Y’know, we need to get him a girlfriend. Ever since Jolene left he’s all adrift, not to mention grumpy.”

“I really thought they had something going there. Just goes to show you the fickle finger. Besides, how could you tell? Chef’s always grumpy.” Terry chortled then and shook her head.

Ella hopped to her feet, shoved both bags in a closet and yawned. “I think I’m going to join Jim in a nap. We have dinner reservations at the Nest for tonight at eight, remember? They’re supposed to have a great dance band and I plan to party. I don’t want to be dead on my feet after traipsing all over the countryside this morning.”

“Oh, give me a break. You had a blast, especially when Jim and whoever that was came in first.”

“Tiger Woods. I’m still tired, Terry. Hiking all over the place like that, my feet hurt and the back of my legs are, like, stretched or something. No wonder the bunch of them use carts. I could’a used a cart. Crud, toward the last hole there, I could’a used a stretcher.”

Terry laughed, the sound light and musical. “Well, you can go have a nap, but I’m going to hop on that float out there and catch some rays. I have a darling little sundress for tonight and I want a bit of a glow. What a beautiful day.”

“I think there’s sunscreen in the guest bathroom; check the medicine cabinet.” Her voice drifted away as she disappeared down the hall.

Lenny sat in a shady part of the patio, deep in thought. He scribbled on the yellow tablet before him, engrossed. He hardly noticed Terry approach. A tall pitcher and two glasses rested on the black lacquer tray she placed on the table.

“Hey, sweetie. Want some iced tea?”

“Mmm, sounds great, thanks.” Lenny jotted something on the pad then took a long icy swallow.

“What are you working on? The Chandler murder? I haven’t seen much TV, but there’s hardly any coverage. I’m probably just missing it.” She refilled their glasses and leaned back in her chair.

“They seem to have a lot happening around here. Touristy stuff is more newsworthy than murder, I guess. Do you know that

the same time this tournament is going on, they're having a humongous tennis championship within a twenty minute walk from here? One of the biggest horse shows in the country just finished ... six weeks long; imagine that. And polo, too. They have huge matches during the season."

Lenny pursed his lips and shrugged. "What could be more newsworthy than the murder of a wealthy, local art dealer in his home in a supposedly high-security country club? Is the theft of over a million dollars worth of art just a ho-hum occasion out here?" He glanced at her, eyebrows raised.

"It is strange, isn't it? So what's wrong with this picture and why won't they cover this story?" She settled back in her chair and took a long swallow.

"Well, you can't control the media. If they aren't interested or if other stuff happens at the same time, something has to slide. Now, the cops? For whatever reason, they're playing this one below the radar. They don't seem inclined to share." He took another sip of tea and switched off his computer and turned toward Terry.

"We talked this over earlier, but I'd like to explore it further. Instead of Chandler dying because he discovered a robbery in progress like the cops suspect, I'm more inclined to believe the point was to kill him. The theft's a cover-up to throw us off the track. Whatever they stole was just an indulgence, something over and above the fee the gang made for the hit."

Terry sipped her tea in silence, mulling it over. "A million bucks is quite an indulgence, but I agree with your premise. I wondered from the start if robbery was a cover story, something to throw us off track."

Lenny nodded, scribbling again. "The oddest thing of all to me is using the APP truck. If this was a simple hit, they blew it. This club can't be *that* hard to get into. Why involve a bunch of guys, let alone an easily recognizable truck, especially since they stole two of the Chandler's cars to cart the stuff away? And what are they going to do with the goods? Sell it on eBay? Do they already have buyers?"

"Maybe they're holding the stuff for ransom the way pirates hijack ships?"

He paused a moment, staring into space. "Could be, I guess; we'll hear about it if that's the plan, but with a murder rap over their heads, I doubt it. Another thing is they shot Chandler in the back of the head at point blank range. His head exploded with

the force, taking a good bit of his face with it. Very messy. Now you have to admit, if they're sending a message, it's very effective. I know I'm impressed."

"Arrgh, too much information." Terry poured another glass of tea and cocked her head at Lenny. "Sending a message to whom? About what? Of course, maybe that wasn't Chandler."

* * *

Lenny and Jim walked across the street to the Chandler residence, deep in conversation. Three days had passed since the murder and Mort Jessup had phoned an hour or so earlier requesting a meeting on behalf of Mrs. Chandler.

Mort opened the door wide and beckoned them inside. "Thank you so much for coming over, Jim; hi, Lenny." He gestured toward the wall of sliding glass doors and nodded. "Come with me, please. We're having cocktails on the side patio."

Joan Chandler sat at a large shaded table, the stem of her martini glass clutched in both hands. Motionless, she stared at the distant mountains dappled with purple shadows. As though startled at their approach, she drew a quick breath then rose and extended her hand in welcome.

"I appreciate the quick response, Mr. Sessions. Please be seated." Her voice, husky from crying, reminded Jim of nails on a blackboard. She cleared her throat several times and turned dead, dark eyes to his. Their stunning expression made him shiver.

Jim nodded. "Please let me introduce my partner, Lenny Browning. Mort told me you aren't satisfied with the direction of the police investigation. Is there something specific?"

"That's just it. There's nothing, specific or otherwise. I don't believe the police even care. All I get is the runaround. I put my husband to rest tonight with no more idea why he died or who did this than the moment I found him. I don't know what the hell is wrong with the police, but I'd like to employ you and Mr. Browning to investigate this case on my behalf. I want to know who did this to my husband."

Her hands twisted the fabric of her slacks, knuckles white. Tears misted her eyes and she turned away from Jim. "I'm sorry."

Lenny leaned forward, his brow furrowed. "Have they given you any explanation as to possible suspects or people of interest? Any leads? Are they about to make arrests?"

"I've spoken several times to Detective Beldon and he says they have no clues. The men wore gloves the whole time, probably hats as well, so DNA evidence doesn't exist, at least nothing they've found so far. As it stands right now, the police are clueless."

"Mrs. Chandler," Jim said. "You are convinced the body you identified belonged to your husband?"

Her eyes flew open and her jaw went slack. "Good God, man, what kind of question is that? Of course it was Joe. We'd been married over thirty years, for God's sake." Her voice took on the elements of a rusty hinge.

"Well, I'm sure if he had a scar or some recognizable mark, the damage to his face..." His voice trailed off as he saw her wince. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Chandler. I don't mean to be insensitive."

Jim paused and slid a peek at Lenny. The former detective studied her face while the tape recorder in his pocket documented their conversation. Later they would study the interview at leisure.

Mrs. Chandler dabbed her eyes with a hankie, expression desolate. Her lips trembled and twice she opened her mouth to speak. Finally, "It's okay. It's just so hard ... I can't believe he's gone." She sniffed and then turned to Jim. "My husband had a small mole on his right thumb. I could never mistake it." She closed her eyes for a moment and nodded. "Without a doubt it's my poor Joe."

She drained the contents of her glass and held it in front of her at breast height. From nowhere, a man in a black suit appeared with a frosty pitcher of martinis and four fresh, chilled glasses. He poured for Mrs. Chandler then glanced at her guests, eyebrows up in question. When they shook their heads in a 'no thanks' shrug, he placed the pitcher on the serving tray and left.

"Can you tell me about the artwork they stole?"

Joan pushed several sheets of paper toward Jim, shaking her head. "Everything they stole is listed here. God, can you believe it, three Faberge eggs. They emptied the storage vault as well as removing all the art on display. They broke into the safe in my bedroom and took everything; cleaned it out."

Jim skimmed the list, amazed to see such a wide variety. "Rare coins, paintings, Faberge eggs, Egyptian masks, Aztec pottery; a diverse assortment, I see."

“Joe had a large, eclectic clientele, worldwide and voracious. We opened our first art gallery in Newport Beach right after we married and within six weeks we had enough commissions to travel the world. We searched for the exceptional, the unique, and usually found it. Those first years were exciting, so fulfilling. We had a glorious time.” She leaned back in her chair and stroked her throat as though something lodged in it; tears glistened in her eyes.

“Two years later we opened another gallery in La Jolla. We continued to travel, but our client list had expanded to such a degree we had to hire art scouts to help us. You can only be in so many places at one time. We kept on growing, expanding; we have six now.”

“Where are they?”

“We still have the one in Newport, plus La Jolla, Laguna Beach, San Francisco, Santa Monica and Phoenix; we bought them in that order.”

“Did your husband have enemies?”

“Joe? No, I can’t even imagine. Our business is very competitive and there’s a lot of rivalry for clients, but no one would do this. We were admired and respected throughout the art community and we never once had an unhappy buyer. That was Joe’s policy. He refused to acquire anything he didn’t feel had a sales market and if the original requestor did not like the piece, we refunded his money without question and sold the item to someone else. I think that happened once.”

“How about all the articles the gang stole? Who knew how much you kept here at your home? Was there anything unusually valuable among the loot, something substantially more expensive than you normally had here?”

“Well, the Faberge eggs, for sure. We had a couple of very valuable pieces brought in from the Santa Monica shop for a party I hosted last week for my charity. Actually, most of them were sold and we were about to gather them up and get them delivered. We planned to take the remainder to the Newport shop this weekend ... like a recycle, you know. We have to keep the showrooms fresh and new so we shift the works around for a new audience. As for who knew our inventory, we entertain on a regular basis and very often friends will bring someone with them who’s in search of something particular or maybe just looking to expand their collection. Thinking about it that way, the field widens.”

She took another sip and pursed her lips in thought. “My son, Devon, knows about some of our personal art, of course. He lives in Arizona and runs the Phoenix gallery.”

“Do you have a live-in staff?”

“Yes. We employ a butler, Stephens, who you just saw. His wife, Anna, is our cook and housekeeper. They live in the casita above the garage. We employ a young man to clean the pool and our gardener comes weekly. The only other regular help is Delia Rowen. She works here full time as Joe’s administrative assistant.”

“Was she here today?”

“No. She’s up in L.A. with her sister, Clarice. She and Joe were close and his death hit her hard. I told her to take a couple of days.”

“Do you consider her a friend or an employee?”

“She’s both, really; my husband depended on her to run the shops. Delia is our liaison between the galleries. She keeps inventory current, lets us know when one of the stores needs a replacement item and handles any special requests from clients.”

Mrs. Chandler picked up her glass, traced a line in the dissipating frost then took several long swallows. “Delia supervised the transfer of art from one gallery to another as the need warranted. She handled all of that for us.”

“What’s the security like at the club? Is it difficult to gain access?” asked Lenny.

“Very. It’s the major reason why we bought here rather than anywhere else. The guards all have police dogs with them and at least one man per shift is armed. Security is very particular about who gets access to the property and they don’t bend the rules for anyone. We have cameras at both gates and everyone, homeowners and workers alike, carries a personal transponder that identifies the holder and where they’re allowed to be on the club.”

“What happens if Delia leaves her card home?”

“She’d better hope I’m in a damned good mood because either Joe or I would have to go to the gate and physically identify her; that, or she’d have to drive home and get it.” She shrugged.

“It’s an imposition, but we like it that way and we don’t go anywhere without those cards. It’s why most people bought here. We thought it a fair tradeoff for that kind of security ... until a couple of days ago, which just goes to show you.” She drew a breath and slumped back into her chair.

“So then the transponder knows where the carrier is, where he’s allowed to be. What’s that mean?”

“Well, that’s not exactly what I said. It doesn’t track. It shows access areas only. Take the man who cleans my pool. When security inputs his card, it shows my name and address. Unless he cleans pools for other homeowners, he has no business driving around the club, for instance, or scoping out the other side of the property. If security catches vendors in an area they don’t have security access to, they’d better have a darned good reason.

“Homeowners, of course, are not restricted; we can go anywhere within the club. What it’s mostly meant to do is to keep the vendors and private employees of homeowners from deciding to cruise around. That’s a real no-no.”

“So the APP guy has a transponder?”

“Oh, yes, but his is a bit different, I would imagine. He undoubtedly has free access because he might make half a dozen deliveries or pick-ups throughout the club in a given day. He’s in here all the time. Like the garbage service or the mail delivery.”

“I only have one more question, Mrs. Chandler. Where did the cops find your cars?”

“In the mall parking lot, and no, they haven’t mentioned finger prints, but that’s unlikely, since they wore gloves in the house.” She stared into the distance for a moment and then focused on Jim. “Will you be able to help me out find out who killed my husband and why?”

Chapter 5

“Well, that was interesting to say the least. What’s your take on her, Lenny?” Jim slipped the key into the lock and opened the door. “It’s times like this when I’m so glad you’re my partner. I’ve never worked on a fresh murder case in my life.”

Lenny chuckled and closed the door behind him. “I’m not sure. She didn’t set off any alarms that gave me a reason to doubt her, but I thought she might be holding something back. You?”

“She seemed a bit dramatic, but then I guess she had her reasons. Finding her husband like that would send most women screaming, especially if they had the kind of marriage she portrayed. I’ll tell ya, what I want is to meet this Delia.”

Lenny grinned, heading for the liquor cabinet. “I don’t drink with clients, but now that we’re alone, I’m up for a cocktail.”

They mixed their drinks, talking about the lack of interest on the part of the police and tossing ideas back and forth like tennis balls.

“I’m glad we brought the laptops. We have hours of research to do so I might as well get started. Where are the girls?” Lenny booted up his computer, fished the tape recorder out of his pocket and set it on the table between them.

“Ella left me a note ... something about a spa day, whatever that means. Tonight is the formal goodbye dinner at the club so they’re playing it for all it’s worth.” He chuckled then glanced at Lenny. “It’ll be interesting to watch how folks act with Mrs. Chandler. She’s joining us at Mort’s table.”

“Really? I thought she’d be in mourning or whatever. That’s a pretty quick return to the social life for a grieving widow.”

Jim nodded, glancing at Lenny. “It does seem soon, but I think it’s because she’s the board representative for the charity that sponsored the tournament. Not much choice, maybe.”

“You know, we might get more than a rubber chicken for dinner tonight. Until the cops develop a person of interest, as far as I’m concerned, everyone on the property that night is suspect. And wasn’t Mrs. Chandler a clever girl, working in the club security angle, expanding on the ability of the transponder system to give an accurate and unbiased accounting of who was on the property and when, even if not where. She assured us of her alibi without even mentioning it.”

“Do you seriously suspect her?”

“You know what they say about the spouse: they’re always the prime suspect no matter how long the list.” Lenny paused a moment and shook his head. “On the other hand, when the spouse is a pushing sixty and doesn’t weigh a hundred pounds, it does spread the veracity a bit thin. But it’s still not out of the question. How big do you have to be to shoot someone?”

“Have you come up with a motive?”

Lenny snorted. “Just the top three ... perhaps Mr. Chandler had a girlfriend and wanted a divorce; or maybe he abused her. Maybe Mrs. Chandler had a boyfriend; a poor one, at least by her standards. Money often tops the list.”

Jim nodded, thumping his fingers on the table in a rapid beat. “I would love to get hold of the APP driver. I mean, the cops know he’s complicit, and yet not a word about his identity or if they got him. I wonder if he got away? The proper type of interrogation would make him sing. Maybe we can arrange to have him meet Tony in a dark alley.”

Lenny’s laugh sounded more like a harsh bark. “Just what I thought. Great minds and all, but no, he got away, count on it.”

His computer sprang to life and he began to input data. He sat back and stared at Jim.

“Do we know anything about the driver, his age or description? Mrs. Chandler never mentioned knowing him personally. She lumped him into the same group with the mail man. Hmm, now there’s another regular I’d like to meet.”

He typed some more then smiled as he heard the throaty growl of the Jag coming up the driveway. “The girls are home.”

They burst in the door, arms full of packages and boxes.

Ella dropped everything on the sofa, put her arms around Jim and kissed his neck. “We had a ball at the spa and wait until you see my dress. We’re trading in Hollywood hip for desert chic. Very different.”

Terry pulled a chair up to the table and peered over Lenny’s shoulder. “Did you miss me?” She drew her index finger along the nape of his neck.

“Yes, I did. Fun time at the spa?” He turned around and smiled. “I really like your hair that way; it’s very pretty. What did you buy?”

“Well, it’s dressy tonight, so we decided to go for it. I’m not going to tell you and spoil the surprise, but you’ll like it.”

“How did the meeting with Mrs. Chandler go? Anything new come up?” Ella perched on the edge of Jim’s chair, reading over his shoulder.

“Fascinating,” he said. “We learned a good bit of background information, but nothing earth-shattering, that’s for sure. Of course, we just started.”

“Are both of you going to investigate the case?” Terry glanced from Lenny to Jim. “We figured we’d go home tomorrow as scheduled. I have a good bit of office work to do and Ella has to check out the restoration and reopen the restaurant.”

Lenny glanced at Jim, eyebrows up and shrugged. “What do you think, boss?”

“Is your calendar cleared? If you’re free I’d like you to stay and work this case with me.”

“I’m clear.”

Terry nodded at Lenny then and kissed his cheek. “That settles it. Ella and I will drive back tomorrow. Oh, I already miss you. It’s going to be a while, huh?”

Lenny pulled her close, giving her a strong hug. “It won’t be all that long. Once we get all the interviews done on a local basis, the rest of our work is internet and calls; we can do that at home.”

Just then the phone rang.

* * *

Huge dignified palm trees lined both sides of the club entrance, continued their march up the street and culminated in the circular drive of the clubhouse. Landscape lights directed their beams up the tall trunks, throwing light and shadows on the fronds that waved in welcome. Thick flower beds full of impatiens, colorful mums and warm-weather plants filled the air with their sweet scent.

Gentle steps led to a marble terrace and the wide glass doors of the clubhouse. They opened on thick beige carpeting that muffled their footsteps and felt like walking on clouds.

Oil paintings depicting the game of golf since its inception hung on the golden oak walls of the country club’s main dining room. Colorful prints of legendary golf courses vied for prominence

with photographs of eminent professionals who had played and won at this club. They lined the walls showing the game as it evolved, from bashing round stones into rabbit holes with sticks, to the venerated and very lucrative sport it was today.

More famous golf faces smiled down from behind the bar, many in caricature, beaming as they held an oversized trophy or plaque aloft, proclaiming victory as the man or woman of the moment.

“I didn’t know Dinah Shore golfed,” Terry said as she glanced around. “Just goes to show you, huh?” Suddenly self-conscious, she nudged Ella and giggled. “I guess I’d better keep comments like that down to a minimum or all these well-bred and even better dressed people will beat me with a club.”

Terry continued, sotto voce, to narrate her opinion of the guests, sometimes to stunning reality. “That Mrs. Got-rocks over there, she’s definitely not a happy camper. I bet her husband cheats.”

Ella watched the line at the bar, an amused quirk on her lips. Jim and Lenny made slow but steady progress toward the bartenders who worked at an energetic pace.

Everyone spoke in low subdued tones, nodding on occasion, a light smile pasted on their faces. Piano music, mostly show tunes, kept feet tapping and the hors d’oeuvres, passed by waiters in tuxes, made a delectable dent in hunger pangs. A rubber chicken night was not in the offing.

“I think it’s like this at any elite function,” Ella said. “Hooray for our sport or club or whatever. We have special events at the restaurant like this. Very cliquey, but great fun to watch.” She gazed around the room as more people arrived. “Man, are you checking out the ladies? Talk about haute couture, and the shoes ... my God, I’m in heaven. Very different from how the in-crowd dresses in Hollywood.”

“And about thirty years older.” Terry elbowed Ella, nodding at her to take notice of a woman with a pair of Bruno Magli originals. “Oh, man. Look at the detail. Beautiful.”

Ella lowered her voice and pointed at a woman wearing a black silk cocktail suit. “I bet that little collar is real sable. What do you think, should I go up and tell her I’m from PETA?”

Terry clapped both hands over her mouth and swallowed her guffaw. Large dark eyes rolled toward her sister and then away as another fit hit her. “Jim’ll kill ya!”

Ella looked around the room. “I will say this; the gals here are well kept. There’s not a sag or a double chin, not to mention droopy eyes, in the whole place. Somewhere in the valley there’s a plastic surgeon who does some excellent work with wrinkles.”

“They found a personal fitness coach, too, and he’s getting great results. When you look that good at sixty, you’re working at it hard. Sometimes ... oh my God, there’s Mrs. Chandler coming in the door.”

Joan Chandler entered the room on the arm of a tall gentleman wearing a tux and a grim expression. His hand rested on the forearm she’d slipped through his elbow. Flawlessly coiffed silver hair gleamed. The somber black dress, relieved only by a rope of perfect black pearls, hung on her body.

She greeted friends as she approached the head table and took the chair her escort held for her. You couldn’t see the circles under her eyes until you got close, but their haunted expression caught the attention of people half-way across the room.

The woman seated next to her reached out a sympathetic hand and patted Joan’s arm. Obviously uncomfortable and unsure what to do next, she pursed her lips and ran nervous fingers through the bangs of her blonde hair. She took a deep breath, leaned toward Joan, took her by the shoulders and hugged her. It was a move noted by every woman in the clubhouse.

“Ah, that poor gal,” Terry said, blinking. “My heart really goes out to her. It’s a shame when a good marriage ends like that. Lenny’s holding out, but I don’t think she knows anything. What’s Jim think?”

“He said they need to find out about a whole lot of stuff before he’s ready to commit, but from what he knows, he thinks she’s innocent. It’s just plain weird about the cops, though, you have to admit. Like, they’ve got a bunch of stuff, we know that, but they’re just not ready to release it. Why?”

Terry slanted her eyes in Joan Chandler’s direction. She shrugged then glanced at Ella. “Well, when you think about it, we don’t know these people. He, or they, could have been involved in all kinds of nefarious schemes.”

“Oh, yes, I should have seen it sooner. She looks like the *nefarious* type to me.” A quick snicker and a straight face followed a light tinkling laugh. “Probably a terrorist.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Ella. I’m just saying it’s early to make a judgment. I mean, we don’t know ... and why not? We’ve had unlikely terrorists before.”

Jim and Lenny returned to the table bearing gifts.

“Hey, baby, thanks. I can use that.” Terry reached for the glass Lenny offered and took a sip. “Mmm, a lemon drop martini is the best. You know, ever since Al made me one, they’re my beverage of choice.”

Ella chuckled and raised her glass. “I know, he does the same thing to me. Flavored martinis are all the rage now, but I’m a purist. Give me an icy Stoli’s, straight up with two olives.”

Lenny took a sip of his scotch and gazed at Terry while she and Ella compared their preferences in alcoholic beverages. He watched the light bounce off their burgundy hair; Terry’s sleek, straight to her chin, all one length and Ella’s upswept do, curling tendrils adorning each cheek. He listened to the identical lilt in their voices and then ran a finger down Terry’s cheek, causing her to turn toward him.

“Are you having a good vacation, honey? Enjoying the desert?” He gazed into her eyes, so dark he couldn’t see the pupils.

A light blush tinted her cheek and she lowered her eyes. “You make it hard to breathe.” Bold now, she lifted her eyes and ran the tip of her tongue over her lips. “I can’t wait until we get home.”

“I have plans.”

“Me, too.”

A little before eight, Mort Jessup rose, tapped his glass with a knife and cleared his throat. All eyes turned to him as he raised the small microphone to his lips and began to speak.

“I’m honored to be with you tonight and want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who participated in the charity tournament this week. A special salute goes to the pros who donated their valuable time to help this most worthy effort.”

Enthusiastic applause greeted them as they rose took a bow.

“It is with deep gratitude we thank those who contributed so much to make the event a success. We exceeded our goal, thanks to your incredible generosity and are happy to present this check for one hundred thousand dollars to the Children’s Research Foundation for Muscular Dystrophy, represented tonight by its Chairperson, Mrs. Joan Chandler, who works tirelessly on behalf of those stricken with this deadly disease. We hope that one day it will be as obsolete as polio.”

Mort departed from the script then, simply placing the envelope next to Joan’s wine glass and kissing her cheek. Under normal circumstances, she would have delivered a speech, but not tonight.

Seated directly across the table from Joan, Terry and Ella watched with fascination as a variety of emotions flitted across the older woman’s face.

Light, inaudible murmurs swept the room and what happened next brought tears to every eye.

In solemn silence, everyone stood, raised their glasses aloft and said, “Joan Chandler! Hear, hear!”

She glanced around the room, eyes glistening, nodding to particular friends and then at the people sitting at the table with her. She took a deep breath and rose, one hand flat on the table, her glass in the other. Joan raised it and slowly turned to greet the room and smile at her fellow diners.

“Your generosity is incredible.” She turned to acknowledge the professional golfers, who also stood for her salutation. “Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedules to make this tournament such a success. I know you usually play for more than room and board.” A titter rippled across the room.

“Thank you all. To the cure for Muscular Dystrophy.” She nodded and then drained her glass.

Ella took mental notes of every morsel served and their individual presentation, determined to let Chef in on the menu at this most prestigious of clubs. With the physical changes to the restaurant in process, she wanted to add specialties and increase the range of food served. Terry had agreed to help and when the choice came for vichyssoise or French onion, they asked the accommodating waiters for one of each. The vichyssoise was outstanding if predictable, but the French onion made Ella sit up and take notice.

“That is to die for,” she said, swirling the cheese around the base of her spoon. “You know me, I’m not easy to impress. Shoot, after eating Chef’s food five nights a week for all these years, it’s almost impossible, but I’m impressed.”

Arranged on their plates, inch-thick medallions of filet mignon, finished with a brandy cream sauce shared center stage with succulent slices of lobster tail, glistening with a tarragon butter sauce. Tiny vegetables nestled between them on the plate, colorful and silky with an orange zest.

After the fantastic soup, Ella was a bit disappointed with the main course. The food was excellent as expected and the presentation superb, but not the creative, original dish she hoped for and expected.

“It’s great, no doubt about it, but filet and lobster? How in the world could you go wrong? I hoped for a signature dish, something special.”

“Well, considering it’s a banquet with so many tastes to please, I guess he took the safe way. God, it’s good. I cut my filet with the edge of my fork.”

Ella shrugged. “I’m most impressed with how good the little veggies are. Chef’s been haunting me to serve them, but the ones I’ve had are woody and tasteless. The orange zest is just the ticket. Help me remember all this stuff, Terry. I have a feeling dessert is going to be out of this world.”

It was. Baked Alaska is not an easy feat for four. Preparing it for simultaneous consumption by two hundred diners required an effort of Olympian proportions.

Terry stuck her spoon into the toasted meringue and scooped out some ice cream and hot melty fudge. She rolled her eyes and succumbed to culinary ecstasy. “Oh, I’m sorry, but that is sinful. What do you think the chef ... oh my God...” She swallowed twice, convulsively, and sighed. “What do you think the chef here makes a year? This is too wonderful for words.”

“Between special parties like this one and regular dining by the members, I’d think a hundred grand. If he does private catering in their homes, you could add half again as much. It’s a good living and very fulfilling. If he’s anything like Chef, he’s out there in the kitchen right now toasting his prowess with a good wine.”

The band played great dance music and the diners moved around the floor intending to work off their delicious meal. Jim got to his feet and whispered an invitation to Ella.

Before she could respond, Joan Chandler tapped him on the shoulder. “May I speak with you, Mr. Sessions? It won’t take very long.” He took her arm and walked with her to a quiet corner.

“I’m about to leave, but I brought something you might find interesting.” She pulled what looked like an ordinary wrist watch from her evening bag and studied it for a moment, briefly pressing it to her cheek.

“This is a memory flash-drive watch. Joe never let it out of his sight. Even when he wore his Rolex, he carried this in his pocket. The morning he died, he gave it to me to have the jeweler clean it.”

She gazed at it once again. “Anyway, it has Joe’s computer in there. It holds all his records, our trips, museum sales and our client list, like what they’re looking for, what they’ve bought in the past. I don’t know if it contains anything you can use to find out who killed him, but keep it as long as you need.”

Joan stared at the watch a moment longer then handed it to Jim along with an envelope. “Here is your retainer. When you need more, please let me know. Expense is not a consideration, not in any way. Do what you must to find out who killed my husband.”

She drew another deep breath and turned to Jim, placing a hand on his arm. “Delia will be back at work tomorrow. If you want to interview her, why not join us for lunch? Bring Mr. Browning if you’d like.”

Haunted dark eyes searched his, pleading. She nodded then and turned to Mort Jessup, who’d been standing in the wings, waiting to escort her home.

“Thank you, Mr. Sessions. Good night.”

Chapter 6

They sat on the patio, enjoying their remaining time together and reveling in the beauty of the desert morning.

“I can’t believe how blue the sky is here.” Terry pointed above her to a thin streak of white, the vapor wake of a distant jetliner. “And the fragrances, first citrus, then the Elysium ... just delightful.” She drew a deep breath. “It does not smell like that in Brentwood.”

Ella chuckled. “Nothing gets through the L.A. smog. Even if you can’t see it anymore, it’s still there.”

It was a little before ten when Terry glanced at Ella and nodded toward the driveway.

“I could sit here forever, but the time has come. On the road again.” She rose, cast one more glance at the mauve mountains and shrugged. Their vacation ended with a warm sweet breeze.

Only the final words of goodbye and the cold dregs of coffee lay between them and a hundred mile drive back to Los Angeles.

Resolute, Ella pushed her chair away from the table and glanced at Terry. “You’re right. I hate to go, but since we must, let’s do it.”

Terry grabbed her purse and linked arms with Lenny as they walked to the driveway. The Jaguar, trunk packed to the gills, waited in the sunny driveway, top down. Amy hopped into what passed for a back seat and stretched across it from one side of the car to the other.

“Please drive carefully, hon,” Lenny said as he opened the door for her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, fingers caressing the skin above his collar. “I’m gonna miss you like crazy.”

“Me too, Terry. I’ll call every night just to see what you’re up to. Are you going to stay with Ella?”

“I’m not sure yet, we’ll talk it over on the way home and I’ll tell you tonight.” She slid behind the wheel of the convertible and fastened her seatbelt. He leaned over and kissed her deeply. “Love you.”

“Me, too. Be safe, Lenny.”

Jim and Ella hugged one more time, and then she hopped into the car. They waved goodbye as they drove down the hill and out of sight.

Ella rested her head on the top of her seat. "What a beautiful place. I could do this ... might even learn how to play golf."

Terry chuckled. "I think this club is just a little out of your price range, don't you?"

"This one is, for sure, but I checked the papers and there are time-shares and things out here at reasonable prices. I couldn't *live* this far from the restaurant, but long weekends are sure possible. Jim and I are going to check out a couple of places."

"When are you guys getting married? Have you set a date?"

"Not yet, but I think maybe around Christmas. That would be fun, huh?"

Terry turned on the radio to the familiar opening of "Life in the Fast Lane." As the guitar riff pounded out the urgent beat, she turned it even louder and elbowed Ella. "Are they playing your song?"

A black BMW with darkened windows pulled away from the curb and followed the Jag to the security gate.

"Do you want to take Cook straight to the freeway or would you like to cruise Palm Canyon one more time?"

Ella chuckled, blue eyes hidden behind dark glasses. "What do you think?"

"Palm Springs, here we come."

The light traffic on Highway 111 flowed and Terry made most of the lights.

They left busy Palm Desert behind and entered Rancho Mirage, home of politicians, newspaper tycoons and movie stars. Emerald grass spread out before them as Thunderbird, one of the older clubs in the valley, sprawled to the right.

On the left, sheer, jagged hills, home to the big horn sheep and an occasional red fox, soared above the road. Nestled between huge rock formations, unseen estates sprawled there as well.

Everything changed when they entered Cathedral City, the industrial hub of the west valley. Although decidedly middle class when compared to its neighbors, new shopping complexes, movie theaters and some of the best old restaurants in the valley provided

entertainment for the working residents who lived there and the lucky tourists who found them.

In a blink they entered Palm Springs and again, the transformation was profound. Being the first city settled, Palm Springs boasted of the gilded age and glittering fame of Hollywood in the good old days. Restaurants and motels that welcomed Clark Gable and Cary Grant now hosted Governor Schwarzenegger and John Travolta.

On their walls hung autographed photos of the biggest stars of stage and screen history, many taken with the restaurant owner smiling with pride.

They took Indian up to the loop and then joined Palm Canyon where it once again ran both ways. They passed the tramway and in a blink, the land changed again. No more grass or flowers, no towering palms. Beach sand, quiet now in the still morning, could rage across the desert when the Santa Ana's blew.

The BMW stayed behind them, barely visible in the distance. As the Jaguar accelerated onto the approach ramp to the freeway, it too increased its speed.

* * *

Jim and Lenny watched the girls drive away then went back into the house. They had less than two hours to devise a way to break into Joe Chandler's flash drive watch.

An hour and forty-five minutes later they stared at each other, chagrinned.

"Until we talk with Mrs. Chandler about possible passwords, I don't know what else to do."

"The way she tells it, they worked closely together, at least they did in the early years. Being Chairperson of a huge charity like that must take lots of time."

Lenny nodded, checked the tape recorder once more and shoved it in his pocket. "We're looking for a password and it's likely to be a date or a name she'll know. Most people keep it simple like that, so we can hope. Or Delia may have it. We're about to find out, huh?"

The temperature hovered at eighty. Light lacy clouds drifted overhead. The sound of a golf ball being whacked ricocheted

off the surrounding rocks and mountains as a foursome teed off on the course below the Chandler veranda.

Lenny shifted in his chair, watching the dynamics of the conversation between Jim and Delia.

With hair so black the highlights seemed almost blue, and sharp, chiseled features, the one word description for Delia Rowan was exotic. The milky skin and short, straight nose said Irish; her light blue eyes would have said the same thing if they didn't have such a decidedly Oriental slant.

She had an arresting face that anyone with a drop of artistic talent would love to commit to canvas. Her body language both relaxed and at ease, told Lenny she was comfortable with the questioning.

"He used several passwords. Try these and see if they work: 6-12-77M; 1GAL78; VCIW98. If none of those work, I don't know what to say."

Joan said, "If those don't work, try 4-14-94D." She leaned back into her chair then and stared off into the distance.

Jim jotted them down on a small pad, saw Joan disengage and turned his attention back to Delia. "Was Mr. Chandler involved in a special project at the time of his death?"

Slender white hands with vermilion nails rested on the table. A wide gold ring bearing a large diamond graced the ring finger of her right hand. She stared at it a moment then raised her eyes to Jim.

"He always had several jobs going on at the same time. One client wanted another Faberge egg which proved more difficult than first expected. He was about to go to San Francisco to check into a likely prospect. The current owner had inflated the price and Mr. Chandler hoped to reason with him in person; the man is in dire financial straights and Mr. Chandler was optimistic about making a deal. Another client wanted a rare jade and coral chess set. He also worked with several museums here and abroad, buying and selling, arranging exchanges, exhibits, things of that nature."

"Did you work on those projects with him?"

"No, not really. For the most part, he handled all the outside exhibits. I concentrate my efforts toward keeping the galleries stocked and shipping and receiving between clients and the shops; we have six, so I stay busy. We've had an incredible year at the La Jolla shop and the manager just gave me a rather sizeable order to fill and deliver to him."

“Did Mr. Chandler have any enemies you know about?”

“Enemies? Certainly not. Many admired, perhaps envied him, but no enemies.”

“No unhappy clients?”

“None I ever heard of. His policy was a money back guarantee so at most some might be disappointed, but no one felt cheated.”

“Did you work here the day Mr. Chandler died? What time did you leave?”

Lenny studied Delia’s face, watching for pupils to dilate, a quick flick of a tongue over dry lips, balling of hands. Nothing.

“I left shortly before the APP truck got here. I passed it going down the hill.” Her cheeks flushed as she held her breath a moment. Then she clasped her hands. “It has not gone unnoticed on my part that had I stayed another five minutes, I, too...”

Joan Chandler, halfway through her second glass of wine and showing it, studied her fresh manicure. From time to time she stared at the nearby mountains, as removed from the conversation as she could be. As the questioning became intense she shuddered and finished her chardonnay in a series of quick swallows.

“Gentlemen, Delia, please continue your meeting as long as necessary. I have to go into town to deposit the charity check.” She rose and nodded to her butler who now became her chauffer. At the door, she turned. “I will see you in a while, Delia.”

“I’ll be here, Mrs. Chandler.”

They heard the car start and soon the gray Bentley crested the hill and disappeared.

“Mrs. Chandler is having a hard time of it, isn’t she?”

Before Delia could respond to Jim’s question, the phone rang. She left the room a moment, returning shortly, phone in hand. “It’s for you, Mr. Sessions; it’s the police.”

Jim cast a quick glance at Lenny as he took the phone and beetled his eyebrows. Lenny shrugged.

“Hello. This is Jim Sessions.”

“Detective Beldon here. I’m wondering if you have some time to chat? Is your meeting with Mrs. Chandler just about finished?”

Jim snaked another quick look at Lenny. “Yes, we’ve just about wrapped this up. Would you like us to come in?”

“No, actually. I’d prefer to meet you at your house ... at the club.”

“That’s fine, you know where we are. How long will you be?”

“Not long. I’m just entering the gate.”

“See you in a minute.”

Jim beckoned to Lenny then turned to Delia. “Detective Beldon is on his way up. If we have further questions, we’ll be in contact.”

He hurried to the door, Lenny right behind him. Before the door closed behind them, Jim said, “Beldon is driving ... shit, there he is. Do we offer the flash drive right off, feign ignorance if he brings it up, or try to work with him?”

“Always bad policy to withhold from the cops. Lying is even worse. Just not being eager is understandable if not what you’d call condoned. Your choice.”

“Son of a bitch, here he is. Okay, let’s let him do the talking. If you can figure out how, see if you can get away long enough to make a copy of the flash drive. Then we can give it to him without losing the....”

The Crown Vic pulled to a stop in the driveway. The door opened and Detective Beldon stepped out, an attaché case in one hand.

“Gentlemen.” He offered his other hand to Jim, then Lenny. “Thanks for making time for me.”

“Glad to help, Detective.” Jim unlocked the door and pushed it open, giving access to Beldon.

Tony sat right in the middle of the foyer, three feet from the door, ears up, eyes inquisitive. Instead of Jim or Lenny, he saw Beldon and went on immediate alert; a light ridge of fur rose along his spine. Ears now tight to his skull, the Doberman rose to his feet in a fluid, gliding motion.

Detective Beldon stopped in mid-stride and directed a glance at Jim. “Is he gonna eat me?”

Jim snapped his fingers and motioned to the dog. Tony left the room.

“If we could sit at a table, I’d appreciate it,” Beldon said, hefting the case.

“Inside, outside, what’s your pleasure?”

“Whatever.”

Lenny stared at Jim, a quizzical look on his face. *Why is he teasing Beldon? He's being a hard ass. Ah, do we play good cop – bad cop?*

The detective opened his case and extracted a tape recorder. He set it up on the table and proceeded to speak the date, time and his name. “This interview with Jim Sessions and Lenny Browning concerns the murder of Joseph Chandler and theft of artwork well in excess of one million dollars.”

He glanced from Jim to Lenny. “Mr. Browning, I understand that you worked as detective in the homicide division for the Los Angeles Police Department for fifteen years and that you now work in partnership with Mr. Sessions as a private investigator. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

Beldon turned to Jim. “I understand, sir, that you’ve been a private investigator working out of the Los Angeles area for ten years, specializing in missing persons, domestic abuse and runaways. Is that correct?”

“That is correct.”

With that out of the way, Beldon leaned backing his chair and sighed. “So what is your interest in the Chandler murder? Seems a little out of your area of expertise, Mr. Sessions.”

He shrugged. “I came to the club to participate in a charity event at the invitation of Mort Jessup. The night of the murder, my fiancé noticed the APP van ... but you know all that. Mr. Jessup is a close friend of Mrs. Chandler’s and when she felt dissatisfied with how the police had handled the case he recommended she talk with me and see if I would investigate on the side. We’re only involved because we’re right here and because we’re curious. Why lowball this case?”

“We aren’t doing that, it’s just happening that way. The media can’t get onto the club and Mrs. Chandler hasn’t left it, so the story is dying for lack of news. We have no problem with it staying that way. I’ve done a good bit of investigating into you two, what you do. I’ve learned enough to think I can trust you, that we can work together. Are you willing to do that?”

“Are you going to bring us up to speed or do you just plan to pick our brains and leave us in the cold?”

Lenny leaned forward before Beldon could respond. "Because we would be happy to assist in the case," he said, his voice tight as he glanced at his partner.

Sea green eyes, calm as a summer day, gazed at Lenny. They blinked. *Okay.*

"I appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Browning."

Jim leaned forward, intense. "So why the secrecy?"

"Can't tell what you don't know. There's been nothing to tell until early this morning. We haven't released it to the media yet, but we just discovered the body of the APP driver regularly scheduled for that run. Gunshot to the head, just like Chandler. When we found the delivery truck parked with Chandler's cars at the mall, we figured the driver was involved from the start. Obviously not. Looks like they called for an APP pickup out on Dillon Road in Desert Hot Springs. When the truck arrived, they shot the driver, left his body and took off for the Chandlers.

"The guy impersonating the delivery driver dropped the crew at Chandler's and then went to the mall and waited for them. After the robbery, they drove to the mall, parked next to the van and loaded the loot into a waiting vehicle, probably another van. They parked in the delivery zone behind the stores. That area of the mall is quiet, especially at that time and since there's no public access to the stores, it's rather unlikely to draw the attention of a passerby."

"Did you get any prints?" Lenny asked.

"Not one; not in the house, not in the cars. Zip."

"Security cameras give you anything?"

The detective shook his head. "No. They knew what they were doing and parked the APP truck so it shielded the getaway car from the camera. They only have one back there since it's not high activity. Whoever masterminded this knew how to cover his tracks."

Lenny watched as Beldon pursed his lips, brow furrowed, frustrated at the lack of evidence. "So what do you think now, Detective? Any ideas or theories to work on?"

"We suspect Mr. Chandler of being involved in illegal dealings, maybe selling stolen art or passing frauds for the real thing. We figure maybe one of his cohorts decided to cut him out of the loop. Maybe he pissed off the competition or stole a valued client, but we think the murderer was involved in the scam."

"How big a gang are we talking about, Detective?"

"Big enough to get the attention of Interpol, the FBI, and agents for the insurance companies. You know how that goes; we're

still speculating and trying to connect the dots. That's why we're keeping things under wraps for now. It could be huge, international even, but so far, they can't make a solid connection to Chandler, although they know his shops are involved." He glanced at his surroundings and shrugged, his lips twisted in a grim smile.

"We got the murder, but we aren't exactly in the loop on the art stuff. We don't see a lot of murders here; now we've had two in a week and they're related. As you can imagine, I'm getting all kinds of grief from my captain; the mayor has him squeezed and that stuff flows down hill. Since they can't get into the club, the media has a permanent seat next to my desk."

Lenny got to his feet, nodding at Jim and the detective. "Man, I remember how that feels and I don't miss it. God, it got hot all of a sudden. Some iced tea or lemonade sounds good to me. Detective?"

They both nodded and Lenny headed across the veranda. "Shouldn't take long."

He scurried to the bedroom, booted up his computer, inserted the flash drive and pulled a piece of paper from his pocket containing the code suggestions Delia gave him. He got the password on the second try then hit several more keys including copy and file transfer. Transfer complete, he hit the close button and shut down. He pulled the flash drive out and stuck it back in his pocket.

Lenny returned to the patio, tray in hand. He made direct eye contact with Jim, gave a swift wink and set the pitcher and glasses on the table.

"Do you think it's possible that Chandler discovered the fakes and threatened the perp with exposure? I take it you think he knew about the art fraud and willingly participated in a hoax like that?" Jim tented his fingers in front of his lips and gazed at Lenny for a moment before returning to Beldon.

"But what if he didn't? What if someone else brought the items to his galleries? Did Chandler inspect every piece he sold for authenticity? Maybe that came under Delia's job responsibility? Maybe another employee?"

The detective shook his head. "I don't know, but if he was involved in their purchase, he knew. A critic of his stature could never make mistakes like that. Of course, Mrs. Chandler pointed out they also accepted consignments on a limited basis and displayed

the work in the galleries nearest to the owner.” He took a long, grateful swallow from his glass and sighed. “We have his computer files and we’re going over everything, but it’s slow work. Lots of the stuff is in some sort of code; the state boys are going over a copy we gave them, but I’d still like to break this case.”

Jim made eye contact with Lenny then turned to Detective Beldon. “Do you think his wife is involved?”

“No. Contrary to popular belief about the spouse, I don’t think so this time. She started working with Muscular Dystrophy when they lost their daughter, maybe fifteen years ago, and devotes most of her time to charity work. At some point around then, they hired Ms. Rowan to fill in the gaps. She took much of the burden from Mrs. Chandler’s shoulders. Incidentally, they both have alibis; club security shows Ms. Rowan leaving the club approximately five minutes before Ms. Russell reported seeing the APP truck arrive. Mrs. Chandler discovered the body more than two hours later.”

“Did you get to talk with the son, Devon Chandler? Did he shed any light on what happened?”

“He flew in for the funeral. We spoke right after it. Evidently, he and Chandler did not get along. Devon was a little guy, less than two, when Joe married the boy’s mother. Seems like they had problems from the beginning. The kid had talent and wanted to work in the family business, but he and Chandler had constant conflict, lots of arguments. Disagreed on just about everything from what I hear.

“Out of desperation, they bought a store in Phoenix five years ago and sent Devon to live there and run it. Mrs. Chandler said once he moved away things between Joe and Devon improved a good deal. His store took off like a rocket, second only to the La Jolla store for income. Made the family a pretty penny according to Mrs. Chandler ... all kinds of money recently.”

“So things between Joe and Devon improved when the kid moved to Phoenix?”

“Well, they weren’t best buddies, nothing like that. After he became so successful, Joe developed a real respect for his stepson. I think they figured out a way to coexist without all the drama.”

“Drama? They fought?”

“According to Mrs. Chandler it never got physical, just loud.”

“Will you be questioning him again soon?”

“He had to go back to Phoenix, tie up some loose ends and get his manager ready to run the store in his absence, but he’s due in tomorrow. He said he’ll be staying with his mother for a while. Mrs. Chandler’s not ... doing very well.”

Detective Beldon turned off the tape recorder and stuffed it back in his briefcase. He rose then and extended his hand to Jim, then Lenny.

“If anything pops up, anything you think I should know,” he said, withdrawing a couple of business cards from his pocket, “give me a ring. I promise I’ll do the same.”

They walked the detective to the door and watched him get into the Crown Vic and drive away.

Chapter 7

“So what did you think of that, Lenny?”

“Phew, I think I need a drink.”

They walked into the kitchen, silent for the moment, digesting everything the detective had told them. Lenny made highballs while Jim stared out the window at the distant mountains.

“Let’s go back outside.” He nodded at the door. “It’s beautiful.”

“Sounds great. I’m gonna get my computer.”

They settled at the table, the late afternoon breeze aromatic with the fragrant scents of the desert.

“What’s your take so far?”

Lenny took a sip of his drink, fingers tapping on the table. “I have my doubts that Chandler was involved at all, frankly. If something like that was going on, and the FBI seems sure, then maybe it was, but he didn’t have a clue. At least not at first. It would have to be Delia. She’s the only one with access to the shops like that. It’s hard to believe he knew about the frauds or the thefts without telling his wife. It’s foreign to everything we’ve heard about the Chandler’s marriage.”

“I don’t see it either. All just too pat and easy to go there.”

“Well, I see a couple of suspects but no motives, at least nothing we know about yet.” Lenny drummed his fingers on the table. “Delia Rowan, Devon and possibly Joan Chandler. I don’t discount her just because Beldon does, although it is a stretch.”

“I don’t suspect her for a minute. Did ya see her this morning? She’s lost seven, eight pounds since we first met her, and those eyes. Nah, she’s innocent. So, who’s prime?”

“Tell ya the truth, Jim, I’m not sure. There’s so much we don’t know and I’m not convinced Beldon plans to deliver, so I think we’re on our own. Anyway, can you believe they killed the APP driver? That shows me right off the bat that murder was their plan, not robbery. And why the hell kill the driver when they only need to keep him quiet for a couple of hours? Could have tied him up, thrown him in the back of the truck, but no, they shoot him dead. Shit, man, they’re already facing murder one before they even *get* to Chandler. Whatever their motive is, it’s huge, at least to them.”

“Whoever *they* are. I know. Killing that dude blew me away, too. I thought either the APP driver belonged to the team or he’d been copped and held somewhere while a ringer drove.” Jim paused a moment, sipping his drink.

“Okay, suspects: Joan Chandler was not involved in the shops any more and has no motive that I can see. Mr. Chandler died in a planned and well coordinated attack, not a fit of passion during a domestic dispute. Mort Jessup said the Chandlers were tight, very much in love and devoted to each other. He discounted Joan’s involvement out of hand; he considered it an impossibility. Seems his wife and Joan are longtime best friends. Mrs. Jessup works with her on the fundraising board for Muscular Dystrophy and she would know if all was not well in that marriage. Like most gals, she shares everything with her husband.”

Lenny shook his head. “Not that I think it’s true in this case, but you’d be surprised at the number of marriages I’ve heard described as idyllic only to discover the spouse did the deed. Things are not always as they first appear.”

“That’s true, I’m sure, but of the three, I have her at the bottom of the list.”

“So do I, Jim. I’m just sayin’. Who’s first on your list?”

“Well, Devon is the obvious first choice, but Beldon said he has an alibi. He was in Phoenix when his mother called him. It’s a six hour drive from there to here, but I’m not sure about the flying time. We’ll have to check that out ... see whether the company has a plane. When you do as much traveling as they did, you never know. Maybe a regular charter? He flew in early the next morning. Where did he arrive?”

Lenny’s hands dashed over the keyboard. “Well, there’s the Palm Springs International and then some small airports out in Bermuda Dunes and Thermal ... somewhere near here. It’d be much closer if they used a smaller private plane, but I don’t think they do commercial flights. Let me check into that.” He turned and glanced at Jim.

“So far, I think I like Delia for this one. I know the security camera shows her leaving, but it’s just the car, right? Maybe someone else drove it out. We’ll have to talk with Mrs. Chandler, get some more info on Ms. Rowan. Like how secure was her job and how did she get along with Mr. Chandler?” Lenny cocked an eyebrow, shook his head and continued. “Loads of questions, like

how much does she make; is she on commission? Did you notice the rock on her finger? Very nice.”

Jim nodded. “I remember it well. I also remember Mrs. Chandler gave her several days off because Delia needed some down time to deal with her grief. I’m thinkin’ they got along well, but ya never know. It might also mean Mrs. Chandler just wanted some alone time for herself.”

“Thinking along criminal lines, Delia is in a position to make some hefty bucks if she were so inclined. She could inflate, or deflate for that matter, the price on any item in the store. Have a sale whenever it suited her, maybe in favor of some special client.”

Lenny rolled his eyes and made a face. “Or maybe she’s made friends with some of the artists and is hyping their work and splitting the difference when they get a sale; plus, the sale would generate more commissions for her again.” Lenny glanced at Jim. “It’s time to switch gears and start deciphering some codes.”

He tapped a couple of buttons and the copy of Chandler’s flash drive records appeared on the screen; he grinned and made a second copy.

“I’ll fix us another drink while you’re doing that. Then I have a plan to run by you.”

“So, what’s your plan?” Lenny nodded as he accepted the fresh cocktail.

“Let’s call Mrs. Chandler and see if we can talk with her.” Jim glanced at his watch and sighed. “It’s probably too late. I’d imagine she’s well lubed by now. Maybe we can catch her first thing in the morning before she’s too far along.” He dialed the phone, not surprised when Delia answered.

“Hello Ms. Rowan, it’s Jim Sessions. Is Mrs. Chandler available?”

“Not at this time. Can I help you?”

“Do you handle her calendar?”

“Yes.”

“What is the earliest appointment we can make with her? We have several questions to ask her and then we have to get back to town.”

“Would you care to join her for breakfast at eight-thirty?”

“That would be excellent. See you tomorrow.”

Eyebrows up, Lenny stared at Jim. “So, breakfast?”

“How’d ya guess?”

“Contrary to another popular belief, most heavy drinkers are early risers.”

“Is her drinking significant to you?” Jim asked.

“Not sure. Depends on how long it’s been going on, I guess. If it’s fairly new there must be a catalyst of some sort. If it’s been going on since the daughter died, for instance, then I suppose it’s just a tribute to her stamina and her liver.”

“Speaking about liver stamina, the club has a very active happy hour. How about we go up there for dinner, kinda keep our ears open.”

“Mix and mingle. Great idea; maybe we’ll run into some talkative types. You know how these clubs are.”

“I’m ready if you are.” Jim chuckled at his friend. “We really should have kept the Jag and sent the girls home in the Suburban. We’re gonna stand out in the parking lot like a sore thumb.”

They hopped in and headed for the clubhouse.

As though they hunted in packs, the cars gathered together in artful groupings, one more beautiful than the next. Several Rolls’ with names like Phantom and Silver Spirit stood heel to toe, pale in color, solid in size and reputation. A classic old Bentley Arnage snuggled as close as it could get to its half-brothers while feigning an air of indifference.

Elegant sports cars from foreign lands hung out together with their tops down, multi-colored, sociable, sleek and fast. Just like their owners.

A lone lemon-yellow Ferrari parked sideways in the back of the lot, isolated in haughty splendor. Rear spoiler hoisted like a tail feather, it looked down its nose at its obvious inferiors and refused to rub elbows.

Jim parked the Suburban in the back of the lot, even farther away than the Ferrari, earning a fleeting scowl from the valet.

They entered the busy lounge, happy to see an empty table. Light jazz played in the background as the bartenders poured and the guests drank as though racing each other to a foregone conclusion. Happy hour, even to the very rich, meant quick and conspicuous consumption. Conversations centered around golf for the most part, although they spoke of politics and the stock market as well.

“This must be the regular crowd,” Jim said. “I don’t recognize anyone from the tournament or the dinner. Guess they’ll just think we’re new members.”

They gave their order to the waitress and glanced around, picking up bits and pieces of banter near their table.

Two men sat in angry disagreement, voices low, venomous. “If you don’t stop....”

Soft melodious tones, vibrant with compassion and sorrow also reached them.

“I feel so sorry for her, so sad. I could just cry.” Beautiful, flawless skin, coiffed ash-blond hair and hot pink lacquered nails told of hours at the spa.

“She hasn’t drawn a sober breath since it happened,” said her companion, tone catty and hateful. “If you want to be accurate, she hasn’t drawn a sober breath in years. Now it’s just showing more than usual.”

“What a bitchy thing to say, Sarah. She a social drinker like the rest of us. Besides, how would you like it if you came home and found your husband on the floor with his head blown off? Cause for a drink, I’d say.”

“Sorry, Marj, and you’re right. It is a terrible shock, no doubt about it, but as for her drinking, it’s true and you know it; everyone does. If she didn’t have such far reaching contacts, they’d have booted her out of the charity ages ago. I’ll give you this, though. She’s a tireless worker, really dedicated. I wonder if she’ll ever get over losing Joe.”

Jim stared at Lenny, eyebrows up. “You any good at picking up the ladies?”

“I haven’t lost my touch. Besides they’re older than we are so it should be a piece of cake.” Lenny made eye contact with Sarah, lifted his glass and smiled.

“If Terry ever heard a comment like that you’d be in big trouble. On the other hand, you may be right. Oh, man, she’s givin’ ya the look.”

A pearly smile slid around her face for a moment, coming and going, unsure. She blinked in astonishment at the obvious flirtation and gave her hair a self-conscious pat. In a place where it was least expected, an attractive stranger made a pass at her. She glanced at her friend, whispered something in her ear and smiled

again. A coy expression parting her lips, she returned her attention to Lenny.

Following her friend's lead, Marjory gave Jim a demure half-smile, flipped the blonde tips of her hair back into place then stared into her drink.

"Time to make the introductions." Lenny rose, glass in hand and sauntered over to their table, a move not lost on another man in the bar.

"Ladies," he said, voice as smooth as silk. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Lenny Browning and this is my friend, Jim Sessions. We're new to the club."

The blonde nodded at Lenny and Jim, extending her hand. "So nice to meet you. I'm Marjory Bloomberg and this is my friend, Sarah Sheldon." She indicated the chairs next to them. "Would you care to join us?"

Conversation bounced around, general at first. Both ladies golfed, of course, which made for a natural starter.

"Did you attend the charity dinner the other night?" asked Marjory. "You seem vaguely familiar."

"Yes, we did. I played in the tournament as guest of Mort Jessup. Do you know him?"

Marjory nodded. "Of course, I remember now. You sat at the head table with Joan Chandler."

"Oh," Jim said, "you know Joan? Pity about her husband."

Both women nodded in unison, full of compassion but horrified as well.

Sarah stroked her throat with slender fingers, diamonds flashing in the light. "It was indeed. Shot and left on his pool deck for Joan to find. Mind boggling. We thought living here at a high security club made things like that impossible. Home invasion here? Ghastly."

"Well," Marjory said, "when you think of it, we can only be just so protected. We need our services, mail delivery, the gardeners, and our help. Who is ever really safe? Joan has a live-in staff, for heaven sakes. Didn't make a bit of difference."

"Do you know Mrs. Chandler well?" Lenny stared at Marjory, watching her expressions.

"Oh, yes, for years. We don't see each other on a daily basis. I live at the other end of the club, but Joan and I work at the same charity fundraisers and such, so we see each other frequently.

She doesn't golf or play tennis, though; spends most of her time at the foundation offices, working on money-raising events. Totally devoted."

"Poor Mr. Chandler. Doesn't sound like much of a marriage for him."

"Just like a man to say that." Sarah stared at Jim and pursed her lips, a hint of something like scorn in her voice. "It wasn't like that at all. In the beginning, Joan traveled around with Joe on most of his projects. She'd tell us about the times they went to Europe ... at least twice a season, shopping for art for his clients. After so many years I guess it lost its appeal. As she got older, and especially after Diana got so sick, Joan pretty much stopped traveling except for pleasure. The charity events and fundraisers filled in the gaps, and since they lost their daughter to Muscular Dystrophy, it was personal with him, too."

"Well, of course, that's true," said Lenny, jumping in. "I bet they had a great marriage."

"For sure," the women replied in unison.

Sarah glanced around the table, placated. "Joan didn't go into details. We're a bit past the kiss and tell stage, but from time to time she'd mention a romantic dinner or an unexpected present. Joe doted on her and the feeling was returned. They were a great couple. Guess that's why she's drinking so hard now. She's alone." Sarah shot a quick glance at Lenny and shrugged. "I lost my husband a year ago. It's rough."

Sunny blue eyes glanced from Sarah to Marjory. Lenny nodded. "If you ladies are dining alone this evening, we'd be honored if you'd join us."

"We'd be delighted," they said together and giggled again.

"That happens a lot." Marjory glanced at her friend and made a wry face. "We go way back."

"We know what that's like, don't we, Jim?"

Dinner yielded little new information and Lenny couldn't wait to get back to his laptop. He refused coffee and glanced pointedly at his watch. "I have a ton of things to do at the house, Jim. I need to get going."

"Me, too. Ladies, can we escort you to your car?"

"No, thanks. I'm not ready to leave." Marjory smiled and shook her head. "We're going into the lounge for a nightcap. This was great fun. Hope to see you again soon."

Jim and Lenny strode across the lot to the Suburban.

“I guess I was a bit rude there,” Lenny said, “but those gals had nothing more to give and I’ve got some ideas. Like, I want to know who sent the package the APP driver delivered and what it contained. May be nothing, but who knows. And this Devon character; let’s find out as much about him as possible before our meeting tomorrow.”

“I’m going to do the same with Delia. She piques my curiosity, let me tell you. It’s the *still waters run deep* thing.”

“Gotta watch them. Sometimes still water covers quicksand.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just sayin’ she might be bad news.”

Chapter 8

Delia greeted them wearing a white pullover shirt with a soft collar and powder blue linen walking shorts. The heels on her strappy tan sandals, although only of mid-height were pencil thin.

“Gentlemen,” She opened the door wider and stepped back into the cool foyer. “Mrs. Chandler is waiting for you on the patio.” Delia closed the door and led the way, heels click-clicking across the travertine marble floors.

Joan sat at a table under an umbrella, staring at the golf course. She nodded at the men, extending her hand toward the chairs.

“Good morning, Mr. Sessions, Mr. Browning. Please join me. I must admit I’m curious to hear your news.”

“We don’t have any news at this time,” Jim said, “but we have a lot of questions.” He waited while Stephens placed a platter of fresh fruit and hot, fragrant rolls on the table.

“How would you categorize the relationship between your husband and your son?” Surprised at the expression of displeasure flickering across her face, he continued.

“We’re not asking out of idle curiosity, Mrs. Chandler. I know it’s painful. Detective Beldon gave us a rough outline, but we need you to fill in the blanks. Please describe their relationship, especially the last ten years or so.”

“I married Joe when Devon was two. They didn’t hit it off very well, although we did everything we could think of to break through. It took years of family counseling and therapy, but finally they reached, I don’t know, a plateau or something when he went away to college. In the last ten years, especially after we got the Phoenix shop, things improved just because of the distance. He comes home for visits quite frequently and we speak almost daily on the phone.” Her eyes took on a faraway look and she sighed. “And of course, age mellows.”

Lenny shifted in his chair, an elbow planted on the table. “What kind of problems did Devon have as a kid? Do okay in school? Friends?”

Joan glanced from Lenny to Jim, eyebrows raised. “I don’t understand your interest in Devon as a child. What can that have to do with Joe’s death?”

“Mrs. Chandler, if you want us to get to the bottom of who shot your husband, we need to know these things. Please.” Jim nodded, sea green eyes calm and reassuring. “We’re on your side, here. Nothing you tell us will go out of this room.”

“When Devon was twelve, Diana died. He adored his sister, spent all his time with her, and when she went he became withdrawn, almost reclusive. For a while, he fancied himself a sculptor and spent endless hours working on one project after another. Anything to occupy his mind. Schoolwork came easy and nothing ever really stretched him, you know? If he wanted to bother, he could do anything. He just didn’t want to bother. He got into drugs and by age seventeen or so, he’d developed quite a habit.”

“Were you living here at the time?”

“Not full time. Devon went to school in Corona del Mar; he graduated high school there. We bought this house originally for golf getaways or when it rained too long at the coast.”

“What kind of drugs did Devon do?”

Joan Chandler clenched her teeth at the memory. “Mostly speed and coke. His personality being what it is, he managed to stay clear of the law and his studies never suffered, but his last overdose landed him in the Betty Ford Center. We moved in here full time during his hospitalization and recovery.” She stared off at the purple hills and shrugged.

“The desert grows on you, I think. We kept the house in Corona del Mar, but that’s mostly because it’s convenient when we need to stock the galleries. And, of course, we always spend July and August there. The desert is beastly in the summer.”

“Does he still use?” Lenny asked.

A faint blush colored her cheeks. “Not speed or coke, not in years. I think he still smokes pot, but it doesn’t seem to be a problem for him and I haven’t seen him act out in ages.”

“You said a while back that Devon is thirty-two and single. Is he gay?”

She shifted in her chair then shook her head. “No, he isn’t gay.”

Jim and Lenny shot glances at each other, noting the change in her tone.

“Could you elaborate a little?”

“I think he’s asexual. There’s never been anyone really significant in his life but me, male or female, except Diana. He’s smart, fit and very good looking. The girls flock to him; they always have. He has a very strong, very magnetic personality. If he wants you to, you’ll love him, he’s that charismatic and attractive. Problem is, for the most part, he won’t. Devon’s cold ... even as a child he was distant and aloof, which makes people even more attracted to him. Bizarre, isn’t it?”

“That’s odd for a man who works with the public. We heard his gallery was so successful the last couple of years only one other shop, the one in La Jolla, beat it for income. And he’s cold and aloof?”

“Devon is a born snob and that appeals to our clients who are also snobs. And as I said earlier, if he wants you to like him, if you are valuable to him in some way, you’ll think he’s the most charming person you’ve ever met.”

She chuckled, although the smile never reached her eyes. “He reads people very well and knows instinctively how people want to be treated. Then, like a chameleon, he shifts into any mode that person wants. Except jovial; Devon does not do fun-loving.”

Jim drummed his fingers on the table and took the plunge. “What was Devon’s dad like? Is he still alive?”

“What can he possibly...?” She glanced away from Jim and blinked. “He’s a stockbroker, Walter Moody. You might have heard of him.”

Jim and Lenny stared at each other. Of course they’d heard of Walter Moody. Describing him as a stockbroker reminded Lenny of referring to Jaws as a fish. He glanced at his partner.

Joan picked up her orange juice, drained the glass and indicated to Stephens that she wanted a refill, which arrived promptly.

“I know you’re going to ask, so I’ll tell you. Walter and I did not get along. Ours was a whirlwind courtship. We should never have had a second date, but we did. When I got pregnant, we married. By the time Devon arrived, we hardly spoke. I filed for divorce when Devon was six months old and haven’t seen Walter since. I got a huge settlement and a lump sum, plus Walter picked up all Devon’s college costs.”

“Did Walter and Devon meet? Any relationship there?”

“Not at all. Walter wanted nothing to do with his son until the boy hit around ten. By that time, Devon wanted nothing to do

with his dad, so it was a wash. Later, Walter extended a half-hearted invitation to play golf every now and again, but Devon always turned him down flat.” She shrugged and pursed her lips.

“I tried throughout the years to persuade Devon to meet his father, but he refused. He had no desire, no curiosity to even see him let alone get to know him. In many ways, he and Walter have similar personality traits. Devon doesn’t like anyone but me, not truly. You’ll see.”

“What does that mean, he doesn’t like anyone but you? Is he hostile to others?”

“No, not at all. He’s very sophisticated, has impeccable manners; it’s just that he refuses to engage with anyone but me. I still can’t figure it out and the therapists never got to the bottom of it, either. At first we thought he was autistic, but the doctors ruled that out. When something or someone does interest him, he is quite charming. It’s just that for the most part he isn’t interested, so he tunes you out. Like talking to a broom.

“When he first entered school he refused to participate in anything that didn’t appeal to him. He loved math, for instance, and topped his class from first grade to graduation. It got a bit harder in college, but he still headed the class. He loved to read, so that came easy. History? He couldn’t care less about anyone but himself, so reading about people in the past was a crashing bore. Still, he got top grades.”

“Did Devon have many friends? Kids he palled around with?”

“Never. It wasn’t them, though; it was him. Kids would come to the door when he was young, see if he wanted to play ball or whatever. He always said no. Blamed it on homework and stuff, but that was untrue. He just didn’t want to get to know them.”

“How about when he got older? Girls?”

She shook her head, a slight tinge of pink flushing her cheeks. “Like I said before, the girls chased him. School, the club, golfing; it didn’t matter. He was an exceptional looking boy and as he matured it ... mesmerized the girls and just about everyone who knew him, male or female. Only problem was it was all contrived. He didn’t care about anyone else but himself ... and me.” She shook her head, mortified.

“One day he and Joe got into it. Devon didn’t like it that Joe and I, er, shared a bed. He was about eight when I got pregnant.

It was a surprise to all of us, but I thought Devon would lose his mind. It was a very rough last couple of months, believe me. Then Diana was born and suddenly he had something, someone else to love. He doted on her, fed her, changed her, walked her in her buggy. It ... that, she was the only other person in the world he cared about except me ... and himself. When she died, he withdrew. It took going away to college to snap him out of it.”

“When will he arrive, Mrs. Chandler?”

She glanced at her watch and shrugged. “A couple of hours from now I would assume. He didn’t want to fly in and have to rent a car so he’s driving and if traffic is light, it won’t be long.”

“How do you think he’d feel about talking to us? Will he be receptive?”

“I really don’t know. This is the first time I’ve seen him since the funeral. He had to make a quick turn-around and get back to the shop, so we didn’t talk a lot. Neither of us was in much of a mood to chat, frankly. He plans to stay here for at least the month. I wouldn’t be surprised if he moved back to the valley permanently. Like I said earlier, we’re very close. But how he’ll act, I don’t know. To be frank, I’m as clueless as you are. Why don’t you join us for cocktails this evening? Around seven?”

* * *

Lenny and Jim sat on the side patio with their drinks and a platter of cheese and crackers. They chose chairs that would give them the best view of the Chandler driveway and hoped Devon would arrive in daylight. The rugged mountains, dappled with mauve shadows, announced the approaching dusk.

Lenny glanced at the jagged peaks of the Santa Rosa Mountains, stained gold and purple. “Man, I could get used to this real easy. It’s so dry, even when it’s hot, you don’t feel it.”

“You sound like a Palm Springs cliché. You could work for the Chamber of Commerce. Besides, out here, they do not consider ninety hot.” He chuckled then nudged Lenny and pointed at the car coming up the long road toward them. “I bet it’s Devon. I haven’t seen a car on that section of the road except the Chandlers and us since we got here.”

“Holy shit, take a gander at those wheels.”

The classic white Zimmer Golden Spirit convertible sped up the road, its distinctive shape and beauty stunning both men to respectful silence.

“Oh man, is that hot or what?” Jim stared as the car slowed for the turn then continued down the Chandler’s driveway. The garage door began to open; the car drove in and the door closed.

“See how fast it happens? You close your eyes for a second and you’d miss the whole thing.”

Jim checked his watch. “We have about twenty minutes to go. I’m gonna change. I’ll be right back.”

“Me, too, I guess. I’m not exactly crisp and fresh.”

Light piano music drifted around the Chandler patio. Stephens opened the door, nodding to Jim and Lenny. “Good evening, gentlemen. Please come with me.”

They followed him to the patio where Joan Chandler sat at the table with her son.

He rose as Jim and Lenny approached and held out his hand. The first thing they noticed beside his above-average height was perfect white teeth and a wide, handsome smile. With flawlessly coifed, medium-length dark hair, and dark soulful eyes, he looked like a movie star.

“Please allow me to introduce myself. I’m Devon Chandler.”

“Jim Sessions.”

“Lenny Browning.”

The younger man nodded, extending his hand toward the table. “Please join us.”

Devon resumed his chair at Joan’s right. Lenny sat next to him while Jim took the chair beside Joan.

Stephens refreshed Joan and Devon’s martinis.

“What would you like to drink?”

Lenny and Jim responded then shifted back in their chairs.

Joan said, “We’ve been talking about the likelihood of Devon moving back here. He’s found a remarkable manager with lots of experience to run the Phoenix gallery, so we’re going to give it a try.”

Devon turned from his mother to Jim, nodding. "There is so much for me to do here now. Mother can't manage everything on her own." He turned toward her again, large eyes soft and tender.

Joan's expression grew poignant as she returned Devon's gaze. "We had planned, at least Joe and I talked about opening a gallery here on El Paseo before the ... I haven't had time to discuss it with you as yet, but now I just don't have the heart for it."

He gazed at his mother, dark eyes searching hers, soft, caring. "It's certainly nothing to get into right now. You're still in shock. You need help, Mother; it isn't a good idea to be alone at a time like this. That's why I'm here."

Joan moved forward, placing her hand over his. "I really appreciate it, Devon. Thank you."

Stephens returned then, bearing a large tray with two highballs and a platter of assorted canapés. He placed the glasses and the platter and left.

Lenny picked up his drink and took an appreciative swallow. "When was the last time you were here, Devon, not counting the funeral? Do you come often, keep in close touch?"

He glanced at his mother then turned to Lenny, eyes focused on his nose. "We talk on the phone all the time, but it's been quite a while, I guess." He turned back to Joan. "Did I visit after Thanksgiving?" He returned his almost glance to Lenny and shrugged. "I figure it's been about five months."

"How do you like Phoenix?" Jim asked.

Devon shrugged. "It's very cosmopolitan, everyone on the move. It's quite exciting, but I'm not a desert person; I much prefer the ocean. We still have the house in Corona del Mar where I grew up. I'd prefer to spend most of my time there on the coast, especially in the summer. Hotter than hell in the desert then."

He finished his martini and raised his glass for a refill. Although the pitcher sat on the table next to the canapés, he made no move to pour for himself. Stephens arrived with a fresh glass filled with ice and poured for Devon.

Jim leaned back in his chair, face in shadows. He watched, fascinated, as Devon gazed at his mother. Each word she spoke might have been a pearl. To the exclusion of all else, his expression riveted on Joan, beguiled, dark eyes filled with love.

He's a good lookin' guy, no doubt about that. Well built without being muscle-bound, dark hair just long enough to be

tousled and thickly lashed brown eyes made him a pretty boy. *Sure loves his Mama.*

“Where were you the night your stepfather died?” Jim asked.

Devon turned toward Jim, eyes narrowed, expression insolent and clearly annoyed at being interrupted. “I was in Phoenix. Why?” His tone reinforced his irritation.

Before Jim could respond, Joan said, “Devon, I’ve hired Jim and Lenny to look into Joe’s death for me. I’m not at all satisfied with the job the police are doing. They’re asking these questions on my behalf.”

As he returned his gaze to Joan, his lips relaxed, expression softened. “I understand, Mother. Whatever you want.” He shifted away from her then and reached for a canapé.

“What else do you want to know, gentlemen?” He popped a crab puff into his mouth, eyes now wide and guileless.

“Can you think of anyone who might want to kill your stepfather? Angry clients, jealous competition?”

He blinked once and shook his head. “No, I can’t. My father had an enviable and very wide-spread reputation as an honest art dealer. I can’t imagine anyone having a grudge against him. Sorry.”

“Your father? I heard you two didn’t get along.”

For a split second, Devon’s lips tightened. With a wave of his hand, he dismissed that notion. “I was a difficult kid, a brat, and it didn’t get better in my teens, believe me. Once I entered college, moved away and became my own man, things started to ease up. Wouldn’t you say, Mother?” He glanced at her for the affirmation he sought, got the nod and continued.

“We had very different tastes in art and politics, but that’s about it. I made a huge hit out of the gallery in Phoenix the first year I opened and he was proud of that, which just goes to show you he was right all along. Always said if I just once cared about something, I’d be a success at whatever it was. He was right.”

“Do you work closely with Delia on stocking your shop? I understand she’s pretty much responsible for keeping inventory current and fresh,” Lenny said.

“Not with my shop. When I ran the Laguna shop we did. I’m just too far away for that to be practical. Besides, I don’t need her. I take care of it all by myself.”

“You developed your own client base? Do you travel much for them or do you use scouts?”

“I don’t do much of either. I have a fabulous staff, very talented. The internet makes me able to see every piece of art available for sale. Travel is only necessary when you feel the need to get away.”

“How about authenticity?” asked Lenny, his body now inclined toward Devon. “How do you know that you’re getting the real deal?”

Devon shot him a withering stare but quickly recovered. “The items are all authenticated and numbered before we ever see them. They’re appraised as well, so that part of the work is done for us. I buy something, then once I hold it, see it, the article is priced according to what I think I can get for it.”

Lenny shrugged. “How much is the markup, usually? I know it varies, but a ballpark figure is good.”

Devon pursed his lips, his eyes becoming hooded. “It depends on many things.”

“Like what?”

“Like how much someone else wants the work. I inflate to as much as three, maybe four hundred percent if I have a buyer anxious for a unique piece.”

“Doesn’t that tic off the buyer when he finds that out?”

“And they would find out about that *how*?” Amused, Devon tented his fingers in front of his lips and grinned. “Please, those decisions are internal, mine to make and besides, these are always voluntary purchases, Mr. Browning. No one is under pressure to buy. If the price is too rich, they have the option to walk away.”

“When they walk away, are they pissed?” Jim shot a quick look at Joan and shrugged in apology. “Sorry.”

“Please, Mr. Sessions. I’m a big girl. Speak freely.”

Devon nodded. “At times, I suppose. If they want the item enough they come back and buy. Sometimes I’ll lower the price to make a regular patron think they’re getting a good bargain. Then again, everyone has a price beyond their reach, sir. Most of us know what that is.”

“But what do they do if that does happen? If they feel cheated or something; what then?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea, sir. I’ve never experienced it. Like Joe, we offer the client the option to refuse the article on

inspection. We give them three days after purchase to change their mind and return for a full refund as long as the article is undamaged in any way. I've never had it happen, at least so far, but that's our policy."

"Anything like that ever happen with your stepfather?"

"Mother would be better able to answer that than I. Joe ever deal with that?"

During the discussion of inflating prices and angry customers, Joan became more removed, more detached. Jim figured she'd had at least three martinis and the one lowly piece of celery she nibbled on did nothing to help her stomach handle the vodka. When she realized they expected her to reply, she nodded.

"I don't think Joe's markups ever went over a hundred and fifty percent. His clients wanted high priced items to begin with, so there wasn't as much wiggle room."

Jim returned his attention to Devon. "What do you showcase in the Phoenix store?"

"We offer all the usual indigenous sculpture and paintings but we specialize in one of a kind jewelry, mostly unusual diamonds and precious gems. We also have some stunning turquoise and jade."

"Did you and Joe share clients or did you work up your own local clientele?"

"I developed the Phoenix client base on my own. The shops here in California share a good bit; they're familiar with each other's inventory. Our clients don't hesitate to drive around for a long weekend shopping spree. If they're in the La Jolla store looking for something specific and they hear we have that item in San Francisco, off they go."

Devon glanced at his watch and tapped the paper-thin face. "We have dinner reservations at the club in fifteen minutes, Mother." He turned to Jim and Lenny and rose, tone dismissive. "I hope you'll excuse us. We have a lot of catching up to do. If you have additional questions, feel free to give me a call." Devon handed Jim his card and walked with them to the door.

Back at the table on their patio, they mulled over their meeting with Devon. A blanket of black velvet spread above them, sky jam-packed with glittering with stars.

“I’m tellin’ ya, Lenny, that guy is a creep. Way past weird, don’t ya think?”

“That’s our Devon, all right ... good looking dude with asocial tendencies and delusions of grandeur. The problem is he deviates a good bit from the usual profile. Mental abnormalities have certain characteristics, although there are always exceptions. Psychopaths are mostly shiftless, unable to keep a job, always running afoul of the law, stuff like that. Sociopaths don’t relate, not to anyone. Certainly not men who graduated USC near the top of their class and ran an internationally acclaimed art gallery for over a decade.” Lenny clenched his teeth in aversion. “But no doubt about it, he’s an oddball ... made my skin crawl.”

Jim nodded at Lenny and made a face. “I take it you don’t like him for this one, huh?”

“No, not a bit. It’s too close to home for one thing. Shit, man, who the hell holds up his parent’s home like that? And what’s his motive? If he wanted stuff from the house, he didn’t need to murder his stepfather to get it; sounds like they were on peaceful terms toward the end anyway. To me, the biggest constraint against him murdering Joe is that he loves his mother so much, and believe me, he does. He wouldn’t shoot the old man and then leave his body where he knew she’d find it. That’s way past cruel, not to mention possibly giving her a heart attack. Besides, he wasn’t in town. You could tell from the expression on his face that he has an alibi.”

“So?”

“Something else is going on here that we don’t know about yet. Feels like it’s bad.”

* * *

The traffic gods smiled and the girls made excellent time back to Los Angeles. They hit the freeway at the best moment, missing the morning commuters and sliding through before all the office and factory workers broke for lunch. The closer they got to the city the grayer the sky became.

Ella drew a deep breath and laughed at her twin. “Ah, much better. Air I can see. Hey, as long as we’re alone, why not stay with me until the guys get back? I don’t like being at the loft by myself, even with Amy, y’know?”

Terry flipped her blinker on and prepared to trade the relatively quiet I10 for the frantic pace of the I101 toward

Hollywood. Now the excitement really began. The speedy little Jag slid into flowing traffic, achieving freeway pace from a dead stop in moments. The girls relaxed and Terry nodded, smiling.

“That would be great fun, El. I don’t know why, but I don’t like being alone either. It never used to bother me, but I don’t know, maybe as you get older you get in touch with your mortality? Or maybe I’ve just gotten used to having Lenny around. Anyhow, I would love to stay with you while the guys are away. Besides, I start my new job tomorrow night, right?”

“I have a feeling we’re going to be swamped. It’ll be a ball.”

Terry glanced in the rearview mirror, made a quick lane switch and prepared to exit onto Sunset Blvd. At the third light she turned left and headed to a quiet, residential neighborhood in Brentwood. The farther she drove the larger the lots became, finally giving way to small equestrian properties of about two acres, affectionately referred to by their owners as ranchettes.

Terry turned into the tree-shrouded driveway of her Victorian home and heaved a deep sigh. No matter how much fun she had on vacation, returning home always gave her a feeling of joy and satisfaction.

Amy ran around in the yard while they pulled suitcases and garment bags out of the trunk. Terry led the way up the wide steps, key in hand. They entered the foyer and went directly upstairs to the bedroom, dumping everything on the bed.

Terry pulled her little travel bag out of the closet, stuffing pj’s, a robe and slippers inside as well as two light blouses with matching shorts.

“What should I wear tomorrow night?”

“Well, with the restaurant opening after a week’s closure, I’m thinking something sophisticated, kinda glam. I hope we’ll be doing a lot of glad-handing and getting congratulations on the new look.” She chuckled in anticipation. “At least I hope so. Hey, wear that red dress Lenny is so crazy about. You should see how he looks at you when you wear it.”

A blush tinged Terry’s cheek as she glanced at her twin. “Embarrassing, isn’t it?”

While she packed, Ella said, “Hey, you remember that guy we ran into at the Santa Monica pier, Barry somebody, the one who did those great caricatures? Well, he asked me if he could come in

on Saturday nights and see if he could drum up some business, make some extra bucks.”

Terry nodded as she slipped the dress and matching shoes into the garment bag. “He’s very good.”

“I figure he can sit in the lounge at that table near the kitchen door ... no one wants it anyway ‘cause it’s so busy, but if you want to see and be seen, it’s the best seat in the house. Wish I could fix that door thing, but anyway, he’s coming in tomorrow night just to give it a dry run.”

“I think that’s cool. His work is so realistic, especially the pastel chalks. The charcoals are good, too; he’s very gifted. And what a nice thing to have available, great touch, especially if couples are there for a birthday or some special occasion. Much better than the typical photographer with the Polaroid camera. Great idea, Ella.”

Terry zipped up the garment bag and her suitcase and nodded. “Ready to go. Can you please grab my cosmetic bag? What the hell did I bring it up here for?” She headed for the stairs, muttering. “I wonder about myself sometimes.”

Amy stared down the driveway, ears perked, eyes intense. Her tail, what little there was of it, stuck straight up and stiff. She opened her mouth now and then as though tasting a far off smell. When the front door banged, she turned her attention to Ella and Terry. She barked once and bounced up the porch steps.

“We’re going home, Ames. Hop in back.” Ella opened the door, then the trunk, laying the garment bag across the top of the suitcases. They didn’t have far to go.

Instead of lying down in the back seat, Amy sat erect, her attention focused on the end of the driveway. The object of her search, the black BMW now parked half-way down the block. The girls never saw it but Amy did.

Terry drove back to Sunset and made a left, heading for Ella’s place and the restaurant in West Hollywood.

“Let’s go to the loft first, drop your stuff off and park the Jag. We can walk over to the restaurant. I can’t wait to see what the renovations look like.”

“Sounds good to me.”

A short time later the girls walked down the street to the restaurant. Not much had changed on the outside except the violet

colored bulbs that once lit up the neon marquee now blazed red in the afternoon sun; colorful flowers crammed into two huge cement urns flanked the entrance, making customers feel welcome. *ELLA'S* opened for dinner tomorrow after a long week at the beauty parlor.

Now fluffed and folded like an elegant lady with her new carpets and a fresh coat of paint, the trendy nightclub screamed welcome. *Come on in and see the new and improved ELLA'S.*

The black BMW slid into an empty space in the parking lot half-way up the block. Two men got out, pulled their ticket from the meter and sauntered down the street. Eyes on the girls, they watched as one pulled keys from her purse and opened a side door. It closed behind them.

“Between you and me, I just want to take a quick look around and then go back to the loft. I’m beat. I’ll grab a couple of steaks and we can grill them on the lanai.” She yawned and gazed at Terry.

* * *

Ella turned on the gas barbeque while Terry uncorked a nice bottle of merlot and carried it and two glasses to the table.

“I liberated a bag of frozen broccoli. I figure it’ll go good with steak and salad.”

“Sounds great.” Ella tossed the steaks on the hot grill, smiling when they began to sizzle. “One thing I miss when I go away is the grill. All that eating out, but never a simple grilled steak.”

Terry chuckled lightly. “I figure when I’m on vacation I want something I’m not likely to get at home, although, considering Chef, that doesn’t happen often.”

“Like I said, a simple grilled steak.”

They leaned against the railing, watching the distant ocean; seagulls rose and fell on the sea breeze as the sun slowly sank into the water. A flicker here and there of blue then flashes of diamond light turned to pink nothing.

“Done to a turn if I do say so myself.” Ella smirked in satisfaction as she placed two perfectly cooked steaks on their plates.

“Good job. You can be a cook anywhere.”

Ella cut into the steak and took a bite. “You know, this case the guys are working on is quite a leap from the usual domestic abuse or missing kid thing.”

“It’s downright scary, sis. Two people murdered so far and the cops don’t have a clue. I can’t wait until they get home.”

“It won’t be that long. Jim said they want to interview Devon Chandler. I think that’s the only reason they stayed. Besides, they only have that house for two more days. They can do what they need to here by net or phone.”

They carried empty plates and glasses to the kitchen, gave them a good rinse and put them in the dishwasher.

Ella yawned again and stretched. “We have an early morning tomorrow. I’m ready to crash.”

“Me too. Let’s do it.”

* * *

Ella hurried to the desk, reached for her reservation book and hit replay on her voice mail. For almost an hour she sat there taking dinner reservations off the machine.

While she did that, Terry headed to the bar to pour them a couple of cups of coffee. She heard sounds in the back as the door leading in from the parking lot banged again. She popped her head into the kitchen.

“Hey, Chef, good to see you.”

“Hey, boss, good, er, hi Terry. Where’s Ella?”

“She’s in the office, taking down reservations.”

Harrumphing, Chef pulled a piece of white paper from his pocket and waved it at her. “I already got a ton of them here. The machine jammed up and I had to reset. Tonight is going to be a nightmare, I just know it. The new sous chef simply does not compare with Jolene. I need to talk...”

Terry chuckled at his retreating back. Chef lived in a constant state of flux, always on the verge of one perceived disaster after another. That none of them ever struck didn’t seem to make his life any easier. He perched forever on the edge of the big one.

The beige-gold walls, painted the same color as the original, simply looked fresh and bright. The new carpet, on the other hand, made a spectacular difference. Warm sandy beige

replaced the original dark brown and made the huge room appear to double in size, while showcased on the wall in oak-framed posters, hung the guitar giants of classic rock, immortalized.

Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page and Jimi Hendrix, all in shades of purple or red relief, played for all they were worth; smoke curling from their cigarettes masked parts of their faces. Clapton, his cigarette stuck in the neck of his guitar, made love to the strings, face grimaced, lined with emotion.

The kids hung out there too, Eddie van Halen, John Petrucci, Jerry Cantrell, and of course, the girls: Joan Jett, Janis Joplin, and Tina Turner.

Hanging alone as befitting their stature in the world of classic rockers, two life-sized posters graced the wall, one on either side of the door leading to the dining room; two women held center stage.

One, an adolescent princess; Stevie Nicks twirled around on impossible platform shoes, veils floating, light blonde hair streaming out behind her, leaning into Lindsay Buckingham.

The other, the queen, whip-thin and dazzling with all that dark hair blowing around her face. Grace Slick smiled into the camera. *One pill makes you larger...one pill makes you small.*

Terry shook herself out of her reverie as she heard Ella call to her. "I'm over here, admiring the new look."

"Pretty cool, huh?" Ella said, glancing around. "The lighter carpet makes all the difference, don't you think? Oh, man, I hope you brought your skates. I have reservations for almost one hundred between seven and eight-thirty. Another hundred from eight-thirty to ten and we actually have two big parties coming in at eleven. Dear God, I have to bring in extra help. Man, what I wouldn't do to see Jolene walk in that door."

"Anything I can do besides charge up the cattle prods?" Terry chuckled in an attempt at light humor.

Ella shook her head, lips pursed. "You're just a riot. If you'll call the kids on this list, tell them they'll make a fortune tonight, beg, cry if you have to, but get them to come in. If they can't stay the whole night, early or late is better than nothing. I already called both backup bartenders and Al is bringing his nephew to help with the dishes and bussing."

Just before five, Ella unlocked the front door and flipped the switch to light up the neon sign out front, alerting customers that the restaurant had reopened. Within thirty minutes, two dozen couples sat at tables in the lounge.

Two men in their early thirties sat at the bar directly in front of the mixing station, sipping their cocktails and chatting with Al while he poured drinks. They stared into the mirror that lined the back wall, watching Ella standing behind the podium at the front of the restaurant while Terry seated guests.

Barry Waterman sat in the side table, his eyes searching the room for another likely subject. He'd already sold three sketches and resolved to do whatever it took to make *ELLA'S* a permanent gig. He spotted the men at the bar chatting with Al. The younger one turned toward the artist, dark eyes gleaming, chiseled features doubly attractive in the lounge's muted lighting.

Barry saw this one in charcoal, and within moments he sketched a likeness as unique and recognizable as a photograph. He filled in the background, including the buttoned down shirt. When he looked back up again, both men were gone.

Chapter 9

Devon Chandler brushed away the efforts of the host, holding his mother's chair for her while she sat. He took the seat next to hers and gave the waiter their drink order.

"Mother, I have to say, you truly look exhausted. How much weight have you lost in the last week?"

The waiter returned before she could respond, placing the cocktails before them. He asked if they wanted to order. Without even looking at Joan, Devon ordered for them both, including a bottle of their favorite wine with dinner.

Joan gave him a fishy stare and pursed her lips. She waited until the waiter left then turned to him. "Thanks for the compliment, about five pounds, and I wish you would not order for me."

"Are you telling me that you didn't want the salmon? Tonight you do not want Pinot Grigio?"

"That's not what I meant and you know it. Just because you know what I want doesn't mean you take over my right to choose. I don't want you to coddle me. Maybe tonight I didn't want Roquefort on my salad. Maybe I wanted French."

"Mother, we can change the dressing." He half-turned in his chair, looking for the waiter.

"No! I want the Roquefort, damnit, it's just...." She gave up. It had been going on too long for her to expect he'd stop now. Still, it annoyed her to no end. She picked up her glass and took a sip, staring at her son from beneath her eyelashes.

A man of extraordinary personal magnetism, Devon could easily have made it in Hollywood on good looks alone. Dark eyes burned with a hidden fire as he looked down his straight, patrician nose at most of the rest of the world. Haughty, contemptuous, beautifully shaped lips often twisted with scorn and disdain as he dismissed his fellow humans with a casual shrug and a wave of his manicured hand. Such was his normal expression except when he dealt with a valued client or when he looked at his mother.

Eyes soft, expression loving, he gazed at her. "I'm sorry, dear, really I am. Next time, please remind me. You know I don't want to annoy you. Now, to change the subject, you really do look tired. How about if we plan a getaway. Maybe a nice cruise, just to

relax? Or perhaps we could go to Italy. There are several pieces I'd like to see in Milan before I buy."

"What's your time-frame? A cruise does sound nice, even if only for a couple of days. I'd like to get away from the desert for a little while."

"I'll leave the length up to you. When we get home, I'll check the net and see what's being offered. Do you want to go to Acapulco maybe?"

Joan shook her head. "I don't want to be gone that long. Maybe Ensenada?"

"Not much adventure in that, but we'll have fun shopping. I'll get Delia to make the reservations. So, when?"

"As soon as you can get them, I guess. My calendar is clear."

"Well, that's settled, then. Now, how are you holding up? I don't mean to go on, but you look weary." He placed a gentle hand on hers and squeezed.

Joan made a face, her lips pursed. "Well, it's been every bit as horrible as you can imagine and then some. The police aren't getting anywhere, but I hope Jim and Lenny can come up with some connection.

"Why did you choose them, Mother? I've never heard of them. Maybe we should go through the attorney?"

"Jim worked for Mort Jessup on a private matter of some sensitivity. He got the job done for Mort, so he recommended him to me. Jim played in the tournament and Lenny's along for the ride."

"It's entirely up to you, Mother, but they don't seem particularly smart to me." He raised a hand and smiled at her expression. "I know, I know, totally your call. They're just not my idea of private investigators."

* * *

Terry and Ella sat in the darkened lounge, lights off except for the juke box and the bar lights. Two snifters of Grand Marnier relieved a bit of the stress; their feet, however, continued to ache.

"We're outta shape, old girl. We used to be able to do these back to back. Think Christmas; sheesh, think last New Years Eve."

Ella rotated her shoulders and slumped back into the booth, eyes closed.

“At least we made a ton of money. Oh, my feet hurt.” Terry sat off to one side of the bench, easing pressure on her right hip while massaging the balls of her feet. “Speaking of which, what’d ya clear tonight? Did the staff do well in tips?”

“Looks like the biggest yet, about twenty-five grand. We paid for half the carpet on opening night. Tips are always great here, but tonight we had a lot of cash, too. Mostly people use credit cards, which makes keeping the kids honest real easy. But there had to be almost five hundred in cash. That’s sweet.”

Terry chuckled. “I put most of that in there ... it’s this dress.”

Irritated, Ella said, “I don’t know why you do that. You work as hard as anyone else here. You should be included in the tip disbursement.”

“You gotta be kidding. Do *you* take tips?”

“Well, no.”

“Neither do I. My salary is more than adequate compensation. I shouldn’t even have mentioned it. Besides, that’s why we have such a super crew. They know this is the best house in Hollywood to work for.”

Chef popped his head in the door, face wreathed in a mock frown. “We plated the highest number of dinners in our history. I feel it, every single spoonful.” He waved the envelope Ella had given him earlier and smiled.

“Thanks. I’ll be in early tomorrow. The kitchen isn’t cleaned to my satisfaction and I think I’d better start the prime rib early; several of them, if tonight’s any indication. You realize we ran out by eight? Not even an end cut to serve until almost nine. If this is an omen of things to come, Ella, I really need another sous chef. Fredrick is fine, very creative; also very slow. We have to find Jolene. If I can find her will you hire her back?”

Ella stared at him, nodding on occasion like those dogs in the back windows of cars. “You find her, she’s got a job for life. Last I heard she’d moved back to Ohio or somewhere to be with her mother. Give it a try, but also put the word out to your comrades that we’re hiring. Thanks for the great job, Chef. Get a good night’s sleep.”

He nodded, turned on his heel and shut off the kitchen lights. Soon they heard the back door bang.

Amy padded along behind Ella as she went to reset the alarm. When the restaurant opened, the dog spent her time in the office, but once the last guest left, she rejoined the group in the lounge.

“Hey, Terry, I’m ready to go, how about you?”

“Let’s do it.”

They walked to the front door, unlocked the double bolt and closed it behind them. Ella locked it again and input six numbers into the keypad next to the door. A metal curtain unfurled from under the eaves, went all the way to the sidewalk and inserted itself into a steel slot. They heard the click as the rod slid through the rings, making the door impenetrable by anything less than a bomb. The back door followed suit; *ELLA’S* was safe for the night.

The girls crossed the street and walked the block or so to the entrance of Ella’s high rise. She input her code and the lock clicked open.

Amy stood by Ella’s leg while she slid the key in the lock. The dog stepped into the room first, hackles up. She picked up a trot as she began a systematic search of the loft. She returned to the girls before they could get their jackets hung up.

“That’s the funniest thing. Did Jim teach her that?”

“It’s all part of the program. She does it on her own now; I don’t even need to give her a signal. At least I know no one is gonna sneak up on me or pop out of a closet and rape me. If she finds someone hiding, they’re a goner.”

“Good God, shut up. I hate it when you talk like that. Reminds me of Bob.”

“Sorry.” Ella paused then stared at her twin. “Does Lenny talk much about Cricket? How’re they doing, do you know?”

“He says he should be able to bring her home in a week or two. She’s stolen his heart, that’s for sure. I won’t get to meet her until she comes home, but I’ve seen photos. She’s a red one, you know. Gold eyebrows, just gorgeous.”

By this time, they’d reached the bedroom. Ella shrugged at her, nodding. “Bed’s huge. Join us or do you want the other room?”

“Us?”

Amy hopped on the bed and settled herself in the middle with a deep sigh.

“Move over, girl,” Terry said. “Glad this is a Cal King.”

* * *

“Hello?”

“Good morning, Mr. Sessions, it’s Joan Chandler. I wanted to let you know that I’ll be gone for the next week or so. Devon and I will be on a short cruise; I need to get away, have a change of scene. Anyway, I just wanted you to know you can go back to Los Angeles if you need to. You have a copy of the flash so there’s nothing we can’t do over the phone.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask, does anyone know you have the watch back?”

“No. I took your advice and put it in my safe. The only person who knew anything about it is Delia and she thinks you still have it. It’s better for all of us if it stays that way.”

“I agree, that’s the best idea. Talk about coincidence, but I was about to call and tell you we planned to return to L.A. this afternoon. I will stay on your case, but Lenny has another client waiting.” Jim hesitated, unsure what to say next. “I’ll do whatever I can to find the killers, Mrs. Chandler. I promise you that. Try to relax on your cruise and give me a call when you get back. With any kind of luck, we’ll have good news for you.”

Jim put his cell away and glanced across the table at Lenny, lips pursed. “The thought of Joan and Devon going away on a cruise is really strange, don’t you think? He’s such an oddball.”

“Never trust a loner; they don’t think like other people. So, she’s okay with us returning to Los Angeles?”

“Yeah, and she’s kept the whereabouts of the watch secret, so anyone looking for it will think we still have it.”

He drained his coffee cup and poured another. “I have to ask ya, Lenny. What do you think ... is it possible that Joan and Devon are more, er, involved than normal?”

The former detective frowned, deep in thought and shook his head. “Nah, it’s creepy as hell, but it’s not that kind of love; at least I don’t think so. He’s crazy about her, all right, like a big kid; adolescent infatuation, hero worship. If it has sexual undercurrents, that’s beyond the norm even for a sociopath. Of course, every rule carries exceptions and that certainly is the case in analyzing mental or emotional illness.”

They glanced around their surroundings, enjoying the silence, putting off the inevitable.

“Besides, I can’t imagine Joan involved in something like that, can you?”

Lenny glanced at his watch. “What time do you want to leave? I’d just as soon not get stuck in evening rush. Do we have much else to do besides drop in on Detective Beldon?” He pulled a card out of his wallet along with his cell and began to dial.

“Good morning, Detective Beldon. Browning here. Jim and I just wanted to touch bases. We’re leaving for L.A. this afternoon.” He paused, listening, head nodding. “Same here, really. We have nothing new for you, so there’s no point in interrupting your day. We’ll keep in touch if we hear anything. You have my number.”

Lenny stared at Jim, eyes wide. “They’re completely stymied. No prints, no witnesses, no nothing. They’re monitoring the list of stolen art, maybe see if it turns up on eBay, I guess. Other than that, they’re at a dead end. To hear him tell it, *we done got us a perfect crime*. At least that’s where the cops are.”

“You gotta admit this one is as clean as they come. It’s so breezy here and the ground is mostly sand, so no prints there either. Did he mention Chandler’s computer accounts? Find anything interesting?”

“He said it contained business records, loads, positively tons of travel guides, and the names of his clients, stuff like that. Nothing else, which leads me to believe we just might have something different, something special. I have a close buddy in the LAPD, a decryption specialist; breaks into these kinda things for a living. I’m gonna give it to him the minute we get home.”

Jim glanced at the relatively empty freeway and raised an eyebrow at Lenny. “Did we luck in or what? Pretty free sailing. Ya never know from one minute to the next. Let some fool run out of gas or blow out a tire and the whole freeway grinds to a halt. Remember a couple of weeks ago when the Eagles came to town for a concert and the freeway turned into a parking lot for hours before the event?”

“I know, and with no warning. Other times, like today, ya gotta wonder if we’ve missed the main event, the traffic is so smooth and cooperative.”

They managed to make the trip in two hours and twenty minutes.

“Let Terry beat that,” Jim said in triumph.

They parked in the private lot next to the Jag.

“Tony and I’ll wait by the back door. Can’t take him in there with customers.”

“Be right back.”

Lenny entered the lounge, grinning. *I can’t wait to see the look on Terry’s face.* The girls didn’t expect them until tomorrow, so they’d be surprised.

Ella let out a delighted little squeak as he came in the door. “Is Jim with you?”

“Yeah, he’s at the back door.”

“I’ll go get him.” She pointed at the lounge. “In there.”

Lenny strolled into the lounge, grinning again. “Hey, beautiful,” he said in his best Cagney imitation.

Terry looked up from the pile of napkins she’d been folding. “Oh,” she said, drawing the syllable out, voice breathy. “Lenny.” She jumped to her feet and threw her arms around his neck. “Oh, I’m so glad to see you.”

“Right back at ya,” he said just before he kissed her.

Opening night packed a wallop, but the usual Saturday crowd delivered the knockout punch. At one-thirty, Ella finally had to turn off the sign, lock the front door and post Lenny to keep the after hours crowd out. No one seemed to want to go home.

Al gave last call at two and everybody ordered another drink. In despair he glanced at Ella and shaking his head, doggedly began to pour. With a numb hand, she reached for her glass and lurched into the kitchen, sure she would find murder and mayhem underway.

Indeed, she had every reason to believe that would be the case. The night had started to go south early on and by ten, both dishwashers had succumbed to fits of despair.

Their weeping caused Chef to start whining, yet again, about the absence of his true love and kitchen compatriot, Jolene which did nothing to encourage the new sous chef who was timid to begin with and now completely overwhelmed.

Unable to think of anything else to do, Jim had rolled up his sleeves and joined the kid at the sink. With two of them rinsing and packing the mechanical monster and the other kid scrubbing pots, they began to make real inroads. By midnight the teens had stopped whining, which encouraged the sous chef to get downright

inspired while plating. Chef decided it was long past time to open another bottle of wine, and celebrated peace in the kitchen by popping six filets on the fire for their personal consumption.

By two, peace, quiet and a certain lethargy reigned in the kitchen. Chef smiled with benevolence at his soused and well-fed crew, nodding on occasion and humming under his breath.

Ella poked her head in the kitchen door, took one look at her team and backed out, not wanting to break whatever spell they were under. She stumbled back to the lounge and noticed Terry and one of the buss girls behind the bar washing as the boys kept the dirty glasses coming. Al continued to pour.

At two-fifteen, Ella slowly turned up the lights. She circulated around the remaining patrons, thanking them for coming, inviting them back and gently encouraging them to leave. At two-thirty she locked the door, turned off the lights and virtually staggered into the lounge.

Jim, Terry and Lenny sprawled in the booth, glancing at each other from time to time, too tired to talk.

Chef, Al, Frederick, the sous chef, and Marty, the salad prep girl, sat at the table next to them, a bowl of sliced limes, a salt shaker and a bottle of Cuervo1800 before them. They consumed their shots in silence, biting into the limes and grimacing.

Ella handed envelopes to the team as they prepared to go home. Cash expressions of appreciation were always welcome, especially after a night like tonight.

Then they were four.

Bleary eyed, Ella gazed from Terry to Lenny. "You guys should not drive home tonight. Please come back to the loft and stay in the spare room. Really, please." Ella reached for Terry's arm, nodding. "Don't you think that's best?"

Terry shrugged and then stared at Lenny. "That's fine with me. You?"

"I've still got my suitcase in the car, so I'm good. Frankly, I don't think any of us should be driving."

* * *

They lounged around the living room, too tired to sleep, needing time to wind down.

"So how's it going with the Chandler murder? Anything new there?" Ella asked.

“Lenny made a copy of the flash drive and we kept the memory chip, so we returned the watch to Mrs. Chandler. It’s something special to her, some sort of keepsake. She agreed to keep the whole investigation quiet while we try to break Joe’s code. After talking with Detective Beldon today, we think the computer hard drives don’t contain the same files we have from the watch. Looks like the cops got different files and information. We’ll see once things settle, hopefully tomorrow.”

Jim gazed at his hands and grinned. “They’re still a little pruney from the dishes. God, what a night.” He swung his gaze at Ella and the grin widened. “You better hire some more kitchen help, wench.”

She chuckled, settling into his arms. “I have three new waiters coming in tomorrow around noon, plus Chef said he has another sous chef and several experienced kitchen workers that he’ll bring in on Tuesday. It’s a damned good thing we aren’t open on Mondays. Man.” She yawned.

“Where’s the chip?” Terry asked.

Jim chuckled. “If I wanted to hide something where no one else would ever find it and yet get my hands on it in a moments notice, where would I hide it?”

Terry shrugged, glancing from Jim to Lenny. “I don’t know; where?”

“It’s in Tony’s collar. Can you think of anywhere safer?”

“Tony has a secret hiding place in his collar?” Terry looked at Ella, amazed. “Whoa.”

Jim chuckled as the dog crawled from under the table after hearing his name. “Rudy’s a real techie. Except for the dogs, that’s all he likes to do. Spends hours on the net researching gadgets for the vans or unusual stuff for training the dogs, like those collars. They’ve been around for years. They use them on canine units during certain kinds of wars. The dogs are kinda like short-range carrier pigeons.”

“Wow,” Terry said, chuckling. “The stuff you can find on the internet.” She shook her head and gave everyone a lopsided grin. “I’m blitzed. I gotta go to bed.”

Lenny rose and extended his hand, giving her a lift out of her chair. “Me too. Damn, I forgot to get my suitcase.”

“Who cares? You can sleep in your undies.”

Jim guffawed. “Undies? You mean skivvies.” He laughed again.

* * *

Tom Malloy nodded several times, snapping the cuff of his thin rubber gloves as he listened. Finally he spoke.

“We just got both their computers. We didn’t run into any problems; very quiet. He parked in the darkest part of the lot. You should see all the high-tech gadgets they got in that SUV. Shit, man, they got a fuzz buster and some kind of satellite gadget, maybe a cloaking device. I didn’t have time to get a good look, but you can bet it’s totally illegal. We found the laptops in some cubicle in the back ... had to use a frickin’ pry-bar to get in it. The glove compartment was impossible to open ... nothing I could force. It was flush with the dashboard. Figure they got guns in there. Anyway, we’re booting up the computers as we speak. We’ll get back as soon as we find something.”

Tom Malloy slipped the cell back into his pocket and sat in front of the computer. He glanced across the room at his young partner. “Hey, Spencer, you get in yet?”

“Not yet. I just attached the password generator a moment ago. It’s roaming cyberspace as we speak. Considering all the information we have on these guys, we should hit the password in moments.”

Tom attached his generator to the laptop and sat back, waiting. He hunched forward again, glaring at the screen, wanting immediate access. He discounted the time a manual search of this magnitude took in the old days with a mental flick of the wrist.

Who cared about the old days; this was now and he wanted in. *Now*. His fingers drummed a steady beat.

“Come on, come on, spit it out, for God’s sake.” He continued to scowl at the computer as though he could bully it into submission.

“Decryption takes patience,” Spencer said, slowly drawing out the syllables. “Did you hear anything new? Did they make any arrests yet?” He arched his eyebrows and made a comic face.

Tom chuckled. “No, and they never will. That buncha morons couldn’t find their peckers with a map. Besides, the gang didn’t leave anything to find. As long as they keep their cool, they’ll never get caught; at least not by the cops. You can bet they already

have the stuff socked away.” He shifted in his chair and shook his head.

“Don’t ya just think that puts a new meaning to the words private collectors? Imagine paying a mil for some *objet d’art* you have to hide from the world. Sick thing is they don’t care; their desire for the piece, whatever it is, supersedes everything, even if the item is hot. Like drugs, man. They steal a piece from the public domain and deny the folks rightful enjoyment. They hide ‘em away in secret rooms for their clandestine pleasure like really ugly porn. Total avarice, the creeps.”

He drummed his fingers on the desk, glaring with impatience at the computer. “These frickin’ things take forever. We have so much to do and sittin’ around isn’t my strong suit. Come on!” He smacked the desk with the flat of his hand.

“Talk about intense, man. You put the Darth in Vader, dude; cool your jets a bit. It won’t be long now.”

As though to prove Spencer right, the computer screen bounced to life. He hit a button and began to open files.

Tom’s computer followed suit moments later. He started with the desktop screen, paging, opening, scanning, reading a bit, and then going on to the next file. Five hours later, Tom pushed away from the computer in disgust.

“It’s not in the desktop files. I’m gonna call it a night.”

He flopped down on the twin bed nearest the bathroom, not even bothering to take his shoes off.

Spencer continued to read through the files. He knew exactly what he wanted. Fatigue slowed him down just enough to help. In a file filled with anecdotes about his training progress with some dog named Cricket, his enjoyment in being a PI and some steamy stuff about a gal named Terry, he hit the jackpot.

“Tom,” he said, voice low but harsh enough to bring Tom up from the ethers.

“Wha...?”

“I found it. Take a look.”

Tom crossed the room in three strides and leaned over his shoulder. “Way to go, dude. Bingo.”

Spencer popped a flash drive into the port, hit copy then paste and transfer. Satisfied he had a copy, he hit delete file.

“That takes them outta the game. Good job.”

The men in black rose and headed for the parking lot and their car.

Chapter 10

Joan Chandler sat on her patio with Delia, waiting for lunch to be served and dictating some notes before her cruise. Delia watched the older woman from under lowered eyes, judging her emotional state with the eerie accuracy of familiarity.

“Please relax and enjoy you’re cruise, Mrs. Chandler. Don’t worry about business or anything going on here. I’ll stay at the house and if anything comes up that I know you want to hear, I’ll email you on the ship.”

Delia glanced across the patio at Stephens and nodded. “If you want to give the staff time off, that’s fine with me. I can clean up after myself.”

“Are you sure, dear?”

“Absolutely. I have so many things still to do....” Delia turned to Stephens and beckoned him tableside. “Would you like a week off?”

He nodded, smiling. “The wife wants to go to Seattle and see the grandkids. I figure a week is all she can stand.” Stephens looked straight at Mrs. Chandler. “However, Madam, if you don’t feel comfortable being out of the country with the house empty, that’s no problem.”

“Absolutely not. You take Anna to visit your grandchildren. They grow up so fast.”

Devon entered the terrace just then, interrupting the conversation. He gave a dismissive nod to Stephens and Delia.

“So Mother, what do you want to do when we hit shore in Ensenada? There’s a fabulous shop there, I don’t know what their source is, but they have incredible merchandise. I’m particularly interested in a piece of sculpture.” He looked pointedly at Delia who held her ground, refusing to be sent away with the household staff.

“Mrs. Chandler, I’m wondering if....”

“Please, Delia, can’t you leave a memo or something? Mother and I have a wonderful trip planned and I just got great news to share with her. Come, Mother.”

Hardly able to contain his excitement, he took Joan’s arm and led her to the end of the terrace, eyes dancing. “I have a

fantastic surprise. You won't believe it. The ship just got a last minute cancellation on their Presidential Suite and I booked it for us. Imagine, we'll have a seaside balcony that runs the length of the living area; it's large enough for sunning or dining. We each have a private suite with a miniature balcony and a small wait-staff to care for our personal needs. Just heaven."

Joan smiled at her son. "It sounds wonderful. I'm all packed; are you ready to leave? I want Stephens to drive us to the pier so we don't have to leave a car there. It's not the best area."

"My luggage is standing by the front door, waiting. As for Stephens driving, I agree. I'm not about to leave *my* car there for a week."

"How long do you figure the drive will take? The San Diego traffic can be a bear."

"We have about four hours to make it. They said we should be there an hour ahead of boarding, so let's eat lunch and get on our way."

They walked back to the table and she said to Delia, "Devon has a copy of our travel itinerary, including our docking time."

She shifted in her chair as Stephens served them and touched Devon's hand. "I can't thank you enough for taking your old mother on such a lovely vacation. I'm sure you have better things to do, so I'm doubly grateful."

Devon stared at her, astonished. "Mother, no one in the world is more important to me than you are, nothing is." He patted her arm in reassurance. "We're going to have a wonderful time, dear. We have the usual formal dinner with the Captain. What will you wear?"

"I'll have to buy something at one of the boutiques. Nothing fits any more."

"We're going to change that, too. Now come along and eat up; the chicken salad is divine. Stephens put cashews in it this time, your favorite, and look, those golden raisins you love. Come on, Mother, please try something."

Joan stared at her son a moment, tears misting her eyes. *What a truly charming man and so devoted.* The tone of his voice, so gentle and encouraging, reminded her of how he used to talk to his sister. She swallowed convulsively as the memory of her losses came back to haunt her.

Nodding, she picked up her fork.

* * *

“Ms. Rowen, I’m wonderin’ if there might be anything else I can get for ye.”

Delia turned away from the golf course vista and nodded at Anna. “No, I’m just fine. Don’t even think about me. Go ahead and pack. I understand you’re going to visit your grandchildren in Seattle.”

Anna smiled, shrugging. “Aye, much better than that, truth be told. They’re in the middle of a series of storms and me daughter, Molly, has a bad case of cabin fever, so they’d already planned to bring the kids to Disneyland for a week of fun in the sun. Talk about coincidence; they wanted to surprise us. Anyway, we’re goin’ to Anaheim instead of Seattle. We’ll have a lot more fun; drier, to be sure.”

“It’s been a while since you’ve seen them. I know you’ll have a great time. Now go ahead and get packed for your trip.”

Anna smiled again. “We’ll not be leavin’ until tomorrow. They’re takin’ the red-eye to save money, so they’re arrivin’ at LAX around three in the mornin’. We’re meetin’ them for a late lunch.”

Delia raised her eyebrows. “You’re staying here for the night? Why don’t you have some romantic getaway time down there while you have the chance?”

“Ah, Stephens and I are a wee bit long in the tooth for such as that, way past the romantic stage, so we’ll be here tonight to serve ye. I’d planned a poached salmon with asparagus and new spring potatoes with pearl onions. Does that suit your taste, ma’am?”

Delia blinked once and then nodded. “That sounds wonderful to me, Anna. About seven? And if you can talk that man of yours into it, go ahead and leave early. I can care for myself.”

Anna inclined her body toward Delia in a conspiratorial manner, even though they were alone. “In thirty-eight years, ma’am, it hasn’t happened yet. I’ll not be holdin’ me breath.”

Delia watched Anna disappear around the corner of the patio and into the kitchen. She shrugged off her momentary irritation like dust. She’d have to wait to search the house until late in the evening, but who cared; it didn’t matter. With so much

uninterrupted time in front of her, she would find what she wanted ... Joe's flash drive watch. She knew Joan had to have it; she as much as said so.

The key to Delia's ruination lay in the information contained on that flash. She knew Joe well, knew his habits like her own. No doubt he'd made notes about his suspicions and his plans to expose her to the FBI. It was only natural that he'd store them on his flash.

She'd checked his computer with the proverbial fine tooth comb, but to no avail; the watch provided the only place he could safely store such inflammatory information.

The top secret little bombshell told it all. If the cops ever discovered it, not only would they know Delia belonged to a gang of art thieves, they'd know Joe planned to fire her, which gave her a motive for his murder.

If they found out about the friend who'd accompanied her to the Chandler house earlier in the afternoon, it would blow her alibi, because it was Clarice who drove the well-known car off the club grounds. They could never learn that Delia left in the back of the Hummer with a fortune in stolen art. The Picasso itself would earn a million.

* * *

The moon slid in and out of the fleecy clouds, playing hide and seek with the stars that spread across the heavens. The huge ship skimmed across the top of the water, steady in its course, only the low, subtle hum of the engines audible.

Joan and Devon sat on the balcony off their living room, enjoying the end of their first evening at sea. Each held a snifter of cognac.

"I'm so glad you suggested this cruise, Devon. I feel better already."

"I knew you would, Mother. It's so nice being alone together isn't it?" He glanced over his shoulder into the spacious suite, noting the tasteful décor.

"Very nice accommodations don't you think, and great food. Dinner was exceptional and I thought you looked stunning in that dress."

"Thank you for the compliment. I'm hoping to pick up a few pounds." Joan chuckled. "Won't be a problem if tonight's

selections are any indication; we're eating fine for the rest of the vacation. Did you try the key lime pie? To die for." She gazed at him and shrugged.

"No, I was in for flan and it proved a good choice. Delicious."

"Not to spoil the mood or anything, but I want to discuss something with you. I'm seriously considering selling a couple of the shops ... maybe leasing them, if you prefer not to sell. It's just too much for me to deal with comfortably and I don't want to burden you right now. The charity takes an enormous amount of my time, for one thing, and I don't have much to go around. Besides, I'm getting ... tired."

"I have some thoughts on that subject, too, actually, and I think it's an excellent idea."

Joan sighed. "Good, I'm glad. I was afraid you'd get really upset."

"My first question is which ones?"

"Well, the San Francisco gallery for sure; it's too far up the coast and while it makes a tidy profit, we don't need the hassle. How about the Phoenix store? Can you stand to part with your baby?"

His voice tensed a moment, strained. "I agree about San Francisco, but Phoenix? I don't know if that's a good business decision. I found an excellent manager and I have full confidence in him. Let's sell the Santa Monica gallery instead. That area has so much competition it doesn't earn the kind of profit the other shops do. Then we can concentrate on the southern galleries. Now what about me? Do you have plans?"

"I'd like to leave that up to you. What is the most fun for you, the buying and stocking?"

"Yes, I like that best, I guess, although I'm not as keen on traveling to Europe as I used to be. Don't need to, really. The net takes me wherever I want to go."

"It's all your decision. If you plan to live at the beach house and don't want to travel that much, you might want to manage the Newport gallery."

"I love that store the most, I have to admit it. I feel like I grew up there."

"You just about did, and it's a good choice for you personally. You'll live in the beach house, right?"

“Oh, yes. I’ve had enough of the desert and it won’t be long before it’s like hell on earth. Phoenix is even hotter than Palm Springs. Nope, I want a house with an ocean view.” He chuckled, nodding at the rolling waves. “This one is fabulous.”

Joan stared at Devon, pleased with his amiable attitude of cooperation. She sipped her cognac and continued. “Well, I know Delia wants to stay on, so she’ll continue doing her job. What you do is really your choice. I’m just trying to lighten the load more than anything else. Remember to live your life fully, son. That’s what really counts. You don’t need the money. Decide what you want to do, get as involved as you would like, but life is so short; live it up. Have fun.”

“Well, I admit I’m still stunned, losing Joe and all, and it does make one think of one’s future. We’re both still in shock, to tell the truth. It probably isn’t the time to make huge decisions if we aren’t sure, and certainly not about cutting our business in half. I’d like to keep Newport, La Jolla and Laguna for sure. They’re close enough to each other to visit several times a week. Which leads me to ask, where are you going to live?”

“I’ll probably stay in the desert, but not in that house. I have to get out of there. I can’t move past the memories if I have to face them on a daily basis.”

“I can certainly understand that. Gives me the creeps and I didn’t see anything.” Realizing what he said, he murmured an apology, reached over and patted her hand.

“Why don’t you come back to the beach house with me? Can’t you do your charity work from there? Surely there’s another chapter somewhere down there?”

“I’ll stay with you for the summer, but I’m going back to the desert for the fall and winter months. I hate gray, rainy days. I’m going to put the house on the market the minute I get home. In fact, I may just have Delia start the proceedings while we’re gone. No point in waiting. I’ve made a decision; I’m not going back there. This cruise will be the beginning of a new life.”

“Mother, really, I understand and concur, actually, but aren’t you making huge decisions too fast? Cutting the business and selling your house?”

“I don’t want to go back there, Devon.”

“Okay, I understand that. How about if you get Delia busy lining up houses for us to see when we get home? We’ll find something wonderful, and then you can come back to Corona del

Mar with me for the summer ... the *beastlies* are almost upon us, you know; it's mid-May. Then in the fall, you can come back to a brand new home. How does that sound?"

"I'd like to stay at the club, but get a smaller place, maybe one of the condos? I have a friend who lives in one, perfect size." For the first time in ages, Joan spoke with enthusiasm. "Delia can handle the proceedings for both houses and I can drive up when it's time to close."

She glanced at him across the shadows, not wanting to start something this late into the evening; neither of them were up for it. She shrugged.

"I appreciate all the time and effort this takes on your part, Dev. I feel guilty using up so much of your attention. It's time for you to find someone to spend the rest of your life with."

"I agree with that, believe me. Are you planning on remarriage? Will you...."

"Not a chance. I can't even imagine it. My life is full enough without bringing in another person." She gazed at him with heavy eyes. "You're young. You need to make your own family."

"I've already done that and you know it."

They sat in companionable silence, enjoying the warm breeze and the flitting clouds overhead. Yawning, Joan crossed to the rail and stared down into the gentle rolling sea. The reflection of the moon glittered on the face of the ocean and beams of light bounced through the translucent waves.

She yawned again and stretched her arms high above her head. "Oh, me, I think the food and the brandy just kicked in. I'm ready for bed."

She walked back to the table, bent over and kissed Devon's cheek. "Sweet dreams, honey. See you in the morning."

"Good night, Mother. Sleep well."

Joan entered her suite yawning, picked up her purse and sat on the bed. After hesitating a moment, she reached inside and pulled Joe's watch from one of the compartments.

For whatever reason, seeing it, holding it, kindled vivid memories that flooded her soul. She closed her eyes and pressed the watch to her heart, rocking softly back and forth as though comforting a baby. Tears gathered on her lashes, hung there a moment and then slid down her cheeks, splashing on her clenched

hands. She turned off the light and slipped between the sheets, the watch still clutched to her breast.

* * *

Delia waited for the lights in the casita to go out. It wasn't really necessary, since she could get into the safe blindfolded. It was a simple precaution to ensure Stephens didn't see something and make a connection later. The watch would be there, she just had to get it and remove the chip. She didn't think Joan had a clue what the watch held and she'd never see any difference with the chip removed. Just a matter of moments and the problem would be solved.

Penlight in hand, she entered the dark bedroom and approached the safe. She flicked on the light and then input the code, pulling the heavy door open. A quick look at the almost empty interior made her heart sink. No watch. Careful not to rearrange or disturb the few remaining items, she felt along the bottom, hoping it might be stuck between jewelry boxes.

Her heart pounded as she leaned into the wall. *Son of a bitch. Where the hell did you put it, Joan?* And then, in a sickening moment, she knew. "You took it with you. Oh, my God."

She went through both night stands and Joan's bureau, but never expected anything to come of it; nothing did. "You leave me no choice, Joan."

Delia pulled her cell out of her pocket and began to dial.

Chapter 11

“Oh, shit, my head is killing me.” Ella poured a cup of coffee, measured in her cream and took a sip. “I got six hours, for Pete’s sake. That should be enough sleep.”

Terry chuckled, hefting her cup. “It’s the Grand Marnier. I am gonna swear off that stuff. Mixing is not a good idea.”

“Did you see Chef doing shots? I swear, he’s been with me for years now and that’s the first time I ever saw him do that. Usually he sticks to wine.”

“Ha. I bet *he* has a head today.” She paused, listening to the commotion in the hall.

“Good Lord, what’s all that yelling about?”

Terry clapped her hands over her ears as the voices got louder. The front door burst open and Lenny and Jim barged into the loft, still cussing.

“Son of a bitch, I can’t believe it,” Jim said to Ella, eyes wide with emerald flames. “You won’t believe it, either. Some asshole broke into the damned van last night and stole both our laptops. All our records.”

His voice rose in outrage as he pulled open the desk drawer and shook a tracking device in her direction. “We’re on the way back out. We know where they are and when I find the guys, I’m gonna introduce them to Tony.”

The tall Doberman, already on alert because of Jim’s loud tone, focused on his master, ears up, head cocked. Amy crawled out from under the table, also alert. Her gaze shifted from Jim and Tony to Ella. She quivered as a light ridge of fur rose along her spine.

“Are you taking Amy, too?”

“Nah, one is enough. We should be back in an hour or two. I’ll call if anything comes up.”

The door slammed behind them.

* * *

Tom Malloy glanced at his partner and grinned. He finished his third cup of coffee and signaled for the waitress.

“Check, please,” he said when she got within hearing distance.

“You didn’t get a chance to catch any shuteye last night, Spencer. I’ll drive in to the office. Take the hour or so and get some z’s.”

“Sounds like a plan.” The agent nodded, handing over the keys with a yawn. “Thanks.”

They sauntered across the lot to their car, full stomachs and lack of sleep slowing their pace.

“Did you talk to the JTTF Unit Chief? Are we going to have to turn everything in to the Riverside office? I hope we continue with the case when we get back to Palm Springs. There are so many files; you’d think they’d want the help.” Spencer leaned up against the car, eyes drowsy.

Malloy unlocked the doors and slid under the wheel. “I’m sure they will. We’re meeting with Special Agent Davis, Cyber-crimes Division. They’ll verify everything, probably make copies of the files and then send us back to Palm Springs. We’ll do independent research, compile the info and compare notes. That’s how it usually happens, can’t see why they’d change now.”

An hour later they walked up the steps to the offices of the Riverside County Division of the FBI. Spencer noticed a plaque on the lobby wall with the words Joint Terrorism Task Force across the top and the picture of a Special Agent lost in the line of duty. Photographs of present and past Presidents, Directors and Attorney’s General covered the other walls.

They displayed their badges to the officer on duty and followed him down a hall. He led them to a conference room where a middle-aged man sat at a table, surrounded by photos.

He nodded at Malloy and Spencer, indicating chairs across from him. Spencer handed a copy of the flash drive to Agent Davis and sank into a chair.

“It’s encrypted so I didn’t bother to work on it. Whatever it is, it’ll wait until I get back to Palm Springs. Sorry I can’t help you with a head start.”

Agent Davis shrugged. “Ah, no problem, fellas. We’ll get to work on it real soon. Good job, by the way, getting the files so fast.”

“Piece of cake.” Malloy pulled himself to his feet. “Well, if that’s it, we have another couple of hours drive ahead of us and the later it gets the worse the traffic will be.”

Davis waved the flash drive at them and grinned. “Got what I need. Have a safe one.”

* * *

Jim faced the petite manager of the Holiday Inn across a faux marble counter, explaining his predicament. He put his identification back in his wallet and leaned forward, making direct, intimidating eye contact.

“Sometime last night, someone stole two computers out of my SUV. The tracker says they’re here in your hotel, room 158, to be exact. We followed it to the door. I left my partner there, guarding, while I came to find you. Can you check to see if it’s occupied?”

The manager accessed her files and shook her head. “They checked out early this morning, sir.”

Jim glanced at her, perplexed. “I don’t understand that. Are you sure they checked out? The tracker shows the computers are in that room.”

“Well, the computers may be, but the men left several hours ago. How about if we confirm that the room is vacant and see what’s going on?” She nodded, grabbed a ring of keys and beckoned. “Come with me.”

Baffled, Jim swore under his breath and shrugged. He followed the manager down the hall past vending machines and a busy laundry room. Lenny nodded at Jim as he approached. The manager stopped at 158 and knocked on the door several times. Receiving no answer, she slipped her passkey into the slot. The empty room contained nothing personal, only the normal furniture and two laptop computers, one on the desk and the other at the table.

“I take it these are yours?” She nodded at the computers and in an attempt to be funny, added, “I wonder if I should charge a little extra for the late checkout?”

Unamused, Jim and Lenny stared at the young woman, who immediately blushed and began to mumble. “I’m just kidding, of course. Well, here comes the maid. You may take your property.”

Lenny settled in the passenger side of the SUV and grunted as he fastened his seatbelt. “Well, if this doesn’t take the frickin’ cake I don’t know what the hell does. They left the computers

behind ... thousands of bucks here, and just walked away; it's absolutely nuts."

"I guess they got what they wanted. They didn't break into the van to steal them on a lark." Jim turned into the restaurant parking lot, still shaking his head. "I can't wait to see what the hell they did in there. It's not over yet."

* * *

The girls sat in the lounge interviewing applicants for a variety of jobs. They'd already added two waitresses and three busboys and with Chef's promise to bring trained kitchen staff, all they needed now was another bartender.

The young man handed Ella his resume, an attractive smile on his face. After being honest and knowing how to mix and serve every drink known to man, the only other requirement for a bartender was an affable nature and good looks. He filled the bill with his ready smile and blond hair.

"How long have you been in town, Ric?"

"I just arrived last weekend. Moved here from Texas, hoping to get an acting job, but first I gotta eat."

"How'd you find out we were hiring?"

He chuckled, the sounds light, musical. "I didn't. I've put in applications at every place within a three block radius. I came by earlier, but the doors were still locked. I figured I'd try one more time before I gave up for the day."

"I'm glad you did, Ric. I think you'll be a good fit. You've got the job as long as you agree to a couple of house rules. First, all tips are pooled. You okay with that?"

"Yes, Ms. Russell."

"Second, biggest rule. I'm Ella." She extended her hand and smiled. "Welcome aboard. I'd like you to start tomorrow on the lunch shift. It'll give you a chance to get into the swing of things before the night crowd starts. After lunch, you can help Al clean up the bar and replenish the back stock. By four, we're hopping in the lounge with happy hour, so if you stay until seven to back him up, you'll be off to a good start. Come in at ten-thirty, okay? Black slacks, white shirt and comfortable shoes."

"You bet. I appreciate it, Ms. er, Ella. Thank you."

Ric Hartman walked up the block then hopped into the driver's seat of a late model blue Lexus and pulled out his cell. "It's me. I got the job, start tomorrow." He paused, nodding several times.

"Yes, the guys left this morning. They'll be there in plenty of time." He continued to listen while his eyes idly glanced around. "This shouldn't take more than a day or two." He blinked once and chuckled.

"They just arrived."

* * *

Jim and Lenny walked in the back door and headed for the lounge, Tony padding along behind them. They sauntered to the bar where Ella sat, chatting with Al about his new coworker.

"Hey, you sweet little thing," Jim said, nuzzling her ear, his hand gently squeezing her shoulder.

"Hey to you, babe." She pressed her cheek into his hand and sighed with relief. "Looks like you got the computers back. I'm glad you're in a better mood, too." She kissed him, blue eyes sparkling. "Hell of a way to start the day, huh? Where were they?"

Terry sat at a booth with a dark haired young woman, smiling as they talked. She caught sight of the guys out of the corner of her eye and waved, then turned her attention back to the woman and nodded.

"We open for dinner at five, so always give yourself at least an hour, just to be sure your station is properly set up and you get a chance to eat. The lunch shift is supposed to be here by ten and for all the same reasons. Uniform is black slacks, a white tailored short sleeved blouse with a collar and comfy shoes." She extended her hand to the girl and smiled. "See you tomorrow, Clarice.

Terry gathered her papers together, closed her file folder and walked toward the bar.

"I can't believe the luck. We've got some great new teammates." She gave Lenny a kiss on the lips. "Got the 'puter back, I see."

"Yes," he said, shaking his head. "Now I have to get inside and see what those bastards did. They sure in hell didn't steal them for fun and games. Buggers."

With the restaurant officially closed, the rest of the afternoon passed in relative peace and quiet. They gathered in the lounge, snacking on burgers and double orders of onion rings and crispy fries.

Lenny opened his laptop, booted it up and waited. He hit several keys then cursed. “The son of a bitch ... those shits deleted my file about the Chandler murder.”

“Oh, Lenny, no. They stole the only files?”

With a wry expression on his face, Lenny shook his head. “They might think so. Thankfully, I’m such a suspicious fella, I made a backup.” He shot a glance at Jim who shrugged.

“They got mine, too. I remember thinking that was a good idea when you did it, even though it seemed redundant. From what I can see, they didn’t do anything else to my files either. If we want to zero in, I’d say the Chandler connection is the match.”

Lenny opened his briefcase and pulled the extra flash drive from a compartment deep inside. Twiddling it in his fingers, he made a face at Jim. “I think this is the key and I think we better find out which door it opens and fast.”

Lenny dialed another number on his cell, smiling. “Hey, Freddie, it’s me. Listen, I got a favor to ask. I need a fast translation of an encrypted file. If I bring it over, how quick do you think you could do it?” Lenny waited a moment, nodding, a variety of expressions flicking across his face.

“Well, considering it’s still encrypted, I have no idea *how* big the file is ... so of course, you have no idea how long....” A ghost of a smile lit his face. “Yeah, it’s real important.” Another pause. “Yeah, for me. Hey, Freddie, I owe ya big time, dude. Be right over ... and don’t forget to collect.”

Lenny closed his cell with a snap, rose to his feet and walked to his computer. “I’ll make two copies of this real quick.” He popped the flash into the slot and hit the copy button. The first file cleared and he hit copy again.

“Now you have one, too, Jim. See what you can find while I’m gone. I have to take the flash over to the LAPD so a friend of mine can decipher the files. I have no idea how long this is gonna take.”

He kissed Terry goodbye and turned for the door. “I’ll give someone a buzz if anything comes up.” With a wave, Lenny left the restaurant.

* * *

The huge ship sounded her horns, announcing her imminent arrival to her passengers and crew as well as the little tugboats waiting to escort her into port.

Devon slipped an arm around his mother's waist and whispered in her ear. "We're going to have so much fun. I can't wait to see this little shop that specializes in Indian masks. Very good stuff according to the ads I've seen."

Joan drew a deep breath and nodded. They leaned against the starboard rail, watching the activity on the pier. Dockworkers gathered together, gesturing, making plans as they prepared to tether the huge ship.

Vendors set up their tables and booths, displaying silver jewelry, piñatas, ceramic animals and clothes, some of them hand-made.

Seagulls circled overhead, calling to each other in raucous tones, swooping, soaring and playing in the sea breeze.

Devon took Joan's arm and escorted her down the gangplank.

"I'm not that old, Devon. I can make it under my own steam." She withdrew her arm which he immediately retrieved, patting her hand.

"Humor me, Mother; you don't want to fall at this point."

"I know, and I won't. I can do it myself." Resolute, she gently removed her arm. "Besides, you're right here next to me. If I need your arm, I'll grab for it."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. So, where do you want to go first?"

"Well, the Galleria la Grande has a fabulous display of unique things. Have you ever been there?"

"Not so far. Actually, I've never been here before. I always go to Mazatlan or Acapulco when I'm looking for Mexican or indigenous art. I read an article about the mask shop while I searched on line for our cruise tickets; I've never been there."

She grinned at him. "Well, prepare yourself for a good case of déjà vu. Joe fell in love with the place the first time he saw it. He modeled the La Jolla store after it ... you'll feel like you've stepped through a portal or something."

"You're kidding. Really? How interesting."

“Joe always found paintings and unusual art objects there and the proprietor will ship back to the U.S. which makes life much easier.”

“I didn’t know Joe took you here.”

“Only a couple of times, years ago, but he often flew in alone to rejuvenate the stock, particularly the La Jolla store. He’d come back and tell me of the wonderful finds and the new artists.”

“Is that why you wanted to come here, to remember good times with Joe?”

“In a way, I suppose. Being here in a place where we had so much fun brings back lovely memories.”

“It’s not making you too said, is it?”

“No, dear, not at all.” She slipped her hand through his arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Not at all.”

They turned a corner and there was Galleria la Grande. Outside the front door perched on easels, rested two exquisite paintings, one of a secluded seaport, the other a still life.

“Ah,” Joan said. “Be prepared.”

Nothing had changed but the stock. The neutral beige walls blended with a most eclectic collection of art. A curving tile staircase rose to the next floor, the filigreed black wrought iron railing edging the graceful steps, provided a perfect complement to the red paver tiles.

The atmosphere of the studiously casual and yet elegant shop stopped Devon in his tracks.

“Oh, my. You weren’t kidding, Mother. I mean, it’s a fraction of the size, but still, this is incredible.” Voice reverent and just above a whisper, he nodded.

“Told you, didn’t I?”

They wandered around the shop for almost three hours and before they left, Devon had arranged to have five paintings, a pair of matching urns and a bronze statue sent to the shop in La Jolla.

Joan took his arm and leaned into him with a grin. “Well, after all that, I’m famished. Do you want to eat something here or wait until we get back to the ship?”

“Let’s find a lobster shack ... don’t you love what passes for lobster here? Anyway, I’m in the mood for a huge lobster cocktail.”

“Sounds like a plan. I never expected that little bowl of fruit to get me this far.”

Devon chuckled and hugged her to him. “We’re going to pig out.”

Twenty minutes later they were up to their armpits in spiny lobsters. The sweet delicious meat offered a unique challenge. Thankfully the kitchen staff cut the shells in half before serving.

“The only way to eat Mexican lobster is steamed.” Joan grinned as she dipped a chunk into a butter bath. “The first time I ate one was in Puerto Nuevo. I got it fried or broiled or something. Didn’t taste any more like a lobster than it did a chicken. Turned me off them for quite a while. Then, one day, Joe got his steamed. I took a bite and it made all the difference.”

“I never eat them any other way than this,” Devon said, wrinkling his nose. “Too dry no matter how they cook them and there isn’t enough butter in the world to fix dry lobster. But in their version of a shrimp cocktail,” he nodded at his plate and grinned, “it’s delicious. The sauce makes all the difference; love that cilantro.”

Joan snickered at a memory and glanced at Devon. “I remember the time Joe,” she choked back a laugh and held up a slender forefinger while she swallowed. “He ordered a seafood cocktail rather than a lobster cocktail. I don’t know what got into him.” Her voice broke again as she started to giggle. “Anyway, it had octopus in there and several items we never did recognize, but he convinced himself that something was staring at him. Joe sent it back and the waitress never batted an eye. She knew from the get-go that he’d do that.”

His upper lip curled in undisguised distaste. “What some people call food is beyond me. Can you imagine living down here? Total despair.” He speared another chunk, swirled it in the sauce and popped it into his mouth. “It really is horrible. I can’t even make it up.”

Devon glanced at his watch and pushed his empty bowl aside. “So, tonight is the Captain’s gala and you have a spa date in two hours. I love the gown you picked out, by the way and the shoes are a knockout. Of course, now that your appetite is back, it’ll be too small in a month.” Devon patted her hand, solicitous.

“At least I hope so. I am not a man who admires thin. You had me worried there for a while. All better now.”

Joan started to reply and thought better of it. Memories of Joe flooded her mind as she gazed around the little restaurant, people-watching, just like they used to do together. Two men, obviously Americans, sat at a table near the door, a pitcher of beer and a plate heaping with unpeeled shrimp between them.

A Mexican family of four sat by the window, smiling, chatting, the children eating hamburgers.

Joe would have found the burgers amusing, would have made a funny remark about McDonalds eventually taking over the world, and she would have laughed.

Joan blinked several times and cleared her throat. She finished her Margarita, thought about ordering another and decided not. She had a long day ahead.

Devon signaled for the check, handed two twenties to the waitress and told her to keep the change. He rose, once again taking Joan's arm.

Moments later the two Americans downed their beers, threw several bills on the table and followed Joan and Devon as they walked along the cobbled stones. She pointed at some leather jackets hanging from pegs and they turned up a narrow, alley-like street with vendors lining both sides. Clothes, sun glasses, leather goods and silver jewelry nestled in low boxes. Tables stacked with handmade blankets and colorful sombreros lined both walls.

The men from the restaurant closed the distance to within inches and one shoved what felt like a gun in Devon's back. "One sound outa you, dude, and the old lady's dead. Turn into the alley up ahead."

Devon cast frantic glances from side to side, trying to make eye contact with someone, anyone who would call the police. No one even noticed them as they walked swiftly down the alley.

"When we get to the side passageway, go down to the end."

Devon and Joan got to within thirty feet of the end of the passage.

"There's another alley on the left. Take it to the street. There'll be a taxi waiting at the curb. Get into it."

The taxi drove for more than an hour, stopping at a location far across town. It dropped them off in an area of dubious repute and left. The kidnappers pushed them down a dirt path littered with beer cans and the odd stray dog.

Dilapidated shacks surrounded them, littered with ancient cars supported on blocks. A flock of seedy-looking chickens pushed the empty beer cans around as they scratched in the sparse grass for a stray bug. Filthy, barefoot children, most in dire need of a tissue, roamed at will, unsupervised.

Groups of young men, black-eyed and scowling, gathered together, smoking, talking and gesturing at the gringos.

“Dear God, you can’t...” murmured Devon, aghast.

“Shut up,” Joan said, voice a low hiss.

“Ya better listen to the old gal, dude. If you don’t, she’s the first one to die. You’ll follow right after.”

Joan glanced at Devon and her stomach flipped. Had the men been able to see his expression, they probably would have shot him right there and then; however, they did not.

Chapter 12

Lenny entered the lounge, a look on his face Terry had never seen before.

Smiling, she waved him over. "Just in time for pizza."

He slid into the booth and gave her a kiss. Nodding at Ella, he turned to Jim. "You are not frickin' gonna believe this. Freddie cracked the code in about two minutes, made me a copy of the whole file, and guess what? First one I open concerns our friend, Delia Rowan. She belongs to a gang of art thieves, in operation for the past ten years. It may be a coincidence, but that is about the length of time she worked for the Chandler's."

He nodded at Jim's stunned expression and chuckled. "Joe was about to fire her and turn her in to the authorities when he was murdered. He had an active recruitment search going and narrowed down her replacement choice to two applicants. He was ready to pounce and I bet Delia found that out and alerted her gang of thugs. They conspired to murder Joe before he turned them in."

Lenny downed half his beer and nodded. "That's why they had no compunction about killing the APP guy. They knew Chandler was next, a dead man walking. Rather than taking a chance of being recognized, they killed the only witness."

"Dear God." Ella stared at Lenny. "She murdered him in cold blood like that? Unbelievable."

"It's the first thing I thought when I read that file. And what a break I got, deciding to read it in reverse order. There are twenty some files and it was the last one on the disc; I went backwards."

"Did you guys ever suspect her?"

Jim shook his head and shrugged. "I didn't, not really. Mostly because security showed her, or at least her car, leaving the club before the death occurred. Not only that, Joan Chandler seemed comfortable, genuinely fond of her, so we had no reason to suspect her then. All bets are off now."

Lenny pursed his lips, jaw clamped tight. "Bet your ass, and now, duh, I see how and why everything went so smoothly. That whole thing just screamed inside job, right from the get-go. I mean, how could they know he'd be there alone ... that Joan went to Los Angeles and that Stephens and his wife had the day off? I can't imagine the gang would resort to murdering everyone who

happened to be in the house. The odds showed an inside connection from the start, but I didn't pick it up. Guess I'm losing my touch."

"You aren't a mind-reader," Terry said. She glanced from her twin to the guys and shrugged. "What do you think?"

"Sounds like Delia called APP for both pickups, and once the gang killed the driver and got the truck, it was easy sailing from there on out."

"Have you notified the Sheriff's department, Lenny? Beldon should know about this, don't you think?" Terry glanced at them, eyes wide.

He nodded. "We can't wait too long. We have to go over the files and find out what we need to know, 'cause once they see this, they'll confiscate everything we have that pertains to this case."

"Unless, of course, we make another copy." Jim grinned at his partner, eyebrows raised.

"Well, there's that." Lenny chuckled. "I think I'll handle that right now."

* * *

Special Agent Spencer threw the report on his desk, sat back in his chair and made a face at Tom Malloy. "Bite my ass, man. Delia Rowan killed Joe Chandler. Can you frickin' believe that?"

"Ya gotta be kidding me. His assistant? How the hell can that be? I thought she left the club before he died? What the hell's going on?"

"It's because everyone believed she drove her car out, but there's no proof of that. Getting out's no problem; there is no real scrutiny when they leave the club. The transponder recognizes the license number as the car goes through the gate, transfers it to the computer and it's logged in as an exit, but no one identifies the driver or whoever else is in the car, for that matter. There didn't seem to be any connection between Ms. Rowan and the murder at the time, and with an alibi like that, she slid under the radar. Until now. She's got the whole deal ... means, motive and opportunity."

"We need a warrant," Malloy said, picking up the phone.

"Yep," Spencer said, continuing to cruise the files. "We sure do."

* * *

Devon stared at the room in disbelief. It stank of age and mold and urine and something he wouldn't acknowledge even if he could identify it. His gorge rose as he glanced at his mother.

She nodded several times in encouragement, tried to smile and failed.

"They're going to be back in a minute, Mother. Are you all right? Did they hurt you?"

"I'm fine, honey, don't worry about me. If you can figure any way to escape from here, do not come back for me, Devon. Call the police or better, call Jim and Lenny, but do not come back."

"You can't be serious." He discounted that statement with a wave of his hand. "What do you think this is all about? What do you think they want from us?"

"I don't know. If they're just out to rob us they could have done that in the cab. If they have rape in mind, you'd think they...."

"Sweet Jesus, don't even say that! Oh, God, I really can't stand much more of this." He glanced wildly around the tiny room and quivered. "It has to be something pretty big to kidnap us, even in Mexico. In the first place, they aren't Mexicans, they're Americans. They never mentioned money, didn't take your ring or my watch. I think it's something important, but what?"

"If they know who we are, they know we're worth a substantial ransom. Maybe that's it."

Devon studied the dismal room and the stained bedspread he sat on and shuddered as ripples of fear and revulsion shot up and down his spine. He had no idea what to do or how to protect her, but he could not allow them to hurt his mother.

"I have a very bad feeling about this and I want you to take care of yourself. Please do this for me, Devon. I couldn't bear it if I lost you, too. If you can get away, call the San Diego police, call Jim and Lenny, but do not even think...."

The door burst open, startling them to silence.

The taller man, dark and well-built in his mid-thirties, approached Joan. "Where is the watch?"

Eyebrows raised, Joan said, "What watch?"

"Here, have my Rolex." Devon started to unsnap the timepiece, fumbling a bit in his haste.

The youngest of the gang sneered. "We don't want that watch, asshole. We want Joe Chandler's special watch." He turned to Joan and nodded. "Where is it?"

Eyes the size of marbles, she said, "*That* watch? It's in my stateroom on the ship. In the drawer next to my bed. It's in a blue velvet bag."

"Son of a bitch," said the young man, turning to his accomplice. "Now what the hell are we supposed to do? We've already hung around here too long waiting for orders and now this shit."

The taller guy pursed his lips. "Well, we can't get on the ship, so one of them is gonna have to go back and get it. I vote for keeping the old lady. Let him go get the watch and bring it back here." He raised his voice slightly. "When we get it they can both go. They're nothing to us."

While that conversation went on, Joan made full, direct eye contact with Devon. She made that *you remember what I just said* face and shook her head at him. She mouthed the words *I love you* and blinked.

His gaze remained steady as he nodded. *I love you too.*

The men nudged Devon. "You need to get that watch and bring it back to us on the double. No side trips. The taxi will wait at the pier for you. How long will it take you to board ship, pick up the watch and get back to the taxi?"

Devon threw his arms up in despair and stared at the men. "I don't have a clue, I never timed it. Depends on how long the line is to board the ship and then just luck with the elevator ... I don't know, maybe fifteen, twenty minutes? I'll go as fast as I can, I promise. Please, just don't hurt my mother. I'll give you more money than you ever thought of if you'll please..." His voice quivered. "Please, I'll do anything you want."

"We're counting on that and so is she, 'cause if you screw up, you'll never see her again. Just keep that in mind whenever you get the urge to do something dumb. Okay, let's go."

Devon cast an agonized glance at his mother and whimpered under his breath. "I'll be back as quickly as possible."

The taxi made good time, but it took over an hour before they stopped near the boarding gate pier. By that time, Devon was frantic. He hopped out and sprinted to the back of the long line of

passengers waiting to board the ship. A group of girls, laughing and bumping each other got into line behind him.

The moment he knew the taxi driver could no longer see him he pulled his cell and his wallet from his pocket, hands trembling, and fished out Lenny's business card.

Cursing under his breath, Devon had to dial his cell twice before his shaking hands input the correct numbers. He cleared his throat.

"Browning here."

"Oh, thank God. Mr. Browning, it's Devon Chandler. We're in Ensenada, Mother and I, kidnapped by a couple of thugs and they want Joe's watch and Mother said it's in her stateroom on the ship, so they sent me back to get it and I'm just, oh my God, I'm losing my mind and I need your help!"

"Hold on a minute, Devon. Who has your mother?"

"I don't know. Some guys nabbed us in one of those street bazaars, forced us into a taxi and took us to this God-forsaken neighborhood on the other side of town. Unbelievable. She's still there with them, alone. Oh God, what should I do?"

Devon continued to talk as the Boarding Steward checked his papers and welcomed him aboard.

"Mr. Browning, I don't know if my service will hold inside the ship, but I have to get that watch. What should I do if I lose you?"

"First of all, don't turn your cell off. Even if we get disconnected, leave it on. When you get back outside, call me again. Do you have any idea who these men are; are they masked? Have they mentioned Delia?"

"Well, of course not. I ... *Delia*? Oh, dear Lord, this has to do with Joe's death, doesn't it? These men, the men presently holding *my mother*, are the ones that killed my dad?" His voice continued to climb. "You're telling me you think the ... oh no, *no*. What should I do?"

Devon entered the elevator and promptly lost contact with Lenny. By the time he strode through the suite to his mother's stateroom, he was in a frenzy. He jerked open the drawer of her bedside table, plucked the purple jeweler's bag from the bottom and opened it.

He almost cried as he saw the familiar watch. Memories brought a deep sigh and a pang of sorrow. *Help me, Joe. I don't know what to do here. Please.*

He redialed Lenny and connected immediately. "Okay, I have the watch. I'm still in our suite. What should I do now?"

"These guys; they aren't masked, are they?"

"No, we can identify them."

"Exactly; that means you both are in grave danger."

Devon paused a moment as the impact of the words struck him. Voice ragged, he said, "They're not going to let us go, are they? My mother ... my precious... she's all that matters to me, you realize. I have to get her out of there, and if they hurt her, I will kill them; rest assured."

"We've got a plan, okay, but it's gonna be rough; here's what you have to do."

* * *

Devon stormed down the gangplank, face suitably horrified. He charged across the parking lot to the waiting cab, jumped inside and proceeded to fidget and cough and tap his foot to the point where the taxi driver finally said, "Knock that shit off."

Properly astonished, Devon stared at the driver. "How dare you?"

"Shut the fuck up."

"What did you say?" he said, tone accusatory. Devon collapsed back into the seat of the taxi, a huge sigh escaping his lips. "Well, I never."

With the stage set, he stared at his hands and prepared for the next scene. Ice-cold eyes, burning with anger and dread, squinted to slits; he studied his fingernails.

They stopped at the same house and Devon leaped out of the car. Without even knocking he burst through the door, trembling, babbling, out of control. Eyes about to pop out of their sockets, he cried, "Mother?"

The men charged out of the room, expectant.

"Hand it over," said the younger kidnapper.

Hyperventilating now, Devon wheezed. "I couldn't find it ... I checked the dresser and the desk, but I" Clutching his chest, he pushed past them and ran to Joan.

“Mother!” He threw his arms around her, hugging her close. “Go with this,” he whispered in her ear. He moved away from her and wailed aloud in despair.

“It’s not there. I looked in your dresser, I even checked your suitcase on the off chance it might be there, but it’s not anywhere.” He stared directly at her and blinked. “It’s gone.”

Her expression became contemptuous. “The dresser? You looked in the dresser and the suitcases? I told you it was in the bedside table. Why...?” Her voice broke in what sounded like sob of angry despair. “Why don’t you *ever* listen?”

“The nightstand? You never *mentioned* the nightstand, Mother.” He turned to the men, panting, hands thrown wide. “She said the dresser, I swear she did. I’m sorry. I’ll go back there right now and get it; if it’s there, I’ll get it. Please, I just didn’t...”

Joan saw the alien look in his eyes and drew a sharp breath. *Oh, my God, I was right. If he gets the chance, he’s going to kill these men. I can see it in his face. What am I going to do?*

Indeed, for the first time in this life, Devon felt ragged, murderous emotions. He glanced at his mother from under his lashes and drew a deep breath; she was always worth the risk, any risk. Back still turned to both men and with false sobs pouring from his mouth, he looked her directly in the eye and winked.

* * *

Lenny slid the cell back in his pocket, turned to Jim and shook his head. “You’re not going to believe this in a million years. That was Devon Chandler. He and his mother were kidnapped tonight in Ensenada and we have to get to them fast. The gang is holding her captive somewhere while he retrieves Joe’s watch; she left it in her cabin.”

“What the hell, the flash watch? Who wants it, does he have a clue why?”

“He doesn’t know anything except they aren’t wearing masks, so I figure they’re part of the gang that murdered Chandler. They want the flash so they can destroy any files regarding them, Delia, or the art fraud. As soon as they get it, Joan and Devon are dead. So far, that’s the only file we’ve had time to get into. Who knows what else is lurking in there.”

Jim flipped on the fuzz buster and the cloak and glanced in the mirror. The empty freeway encouraged him and he moved into the fast lane, increasing their speed.

“Anyway, he’s enroute back to the house, which he said is a minimum of an hour’s ride. I told him to stall them, tell them he couldn’t find the watch ... make up something. With any luck, and if Joan catches on fast enough, they can work it so the thugs believe the story and send him back again. We need time to get down there ... meet him by the dock.”

Jim nodded. “The thugs must know they don’t have a hope of getting on the ship without proper ID and even if they managed it, they wouldn’t have access to the suite, especially in first class like that. Besides, they don’t want to deal with an overzealous crew member and raise the alarm. They want to work fast ... in and out. I’m betting they’ll send Devon back. We’ll be there by then.”

Lenny chuckled, devoid of amusement. “That is one lucky couple. If we were in L.A. instead of San Ysidro when he called, they’d be shit out of luck, both of them. Being only an hour out gives us the advantage.”

They passed the last exit for San Ysidro and accelerated as they headed into Baja California. They zipped over the border from the United States into the slums and abject poverty of Tijuana. Graffiti-covered walls filled with hateful gang warnings edged both sides of the freeway.

Crossing the border at freeway speed made the change so quick and profound that many first-time tourists gaped in speechless disbelief. In the blink of an eye, you entered what could only be described as a third world country.

“Man,” Jim said, glancing around at the squalor, “dealing with the Mexican Federales is a bitch and a half. Glad we’re gonna do it on our own.”

“Me too. I told Devon to keep his cell open. I locked onto it while we talked so I can follow him right to the ship or wherever else he goes.” Lenny popped a satellite map up on his laptop, grinning. “Here we go.”

Jim tore through the night, satisfied that no Mexican cops would ever catch him, even if they managed to see him. When he’d challenged Terry to look under his hood, he wasn’t kidding.

The cloaking device hid the license number from police radar, but it didn't matter; they never saw a cop all the way in to Ensenada.

They drove down to the waterfront district and turned toward the pier. Several cruise liners docked in a row, lights blazing in the quiet spring night. The Suburban turned into the area dedicated to parking spots for the cruise ships and stopped in the back row. Although the ships would dock overnight, very few cars utilized the free spaces.

Sounds of music and revelry echoed from the various decks; lights, songs and shouts of laughter and merriment filled the air. After a morning packed with sight-seeing and endless walking, the travelers spent the afternoon napping on deck. They awoke refreshed, ready for cocktails, a scrumptious meal and a night of party time.

Tomorrow, local vendors would cruise the lot as they gathered to bid a cheery farewell to those who so lavishly enriched the local economy. The rich *touristas* deserved one last chance to buy a souvenir.

“Okay, lookee here, Devon’s on the move.” Jim watched the screen as a green blip inched its way across the map.

Lenny nodded in satisfaction. “With any kind of luck ... oh, yes, here he comes, on the way back to the ship. Clever boy; it looks like he convinced them, and Joan.”

Jim and Lenny got out of the SUV. Tony climbed into the driver’s seat, grinning. Jim rolled the window down, closed the door and glanced at the dog. “Guard.”

Tony grinned bigger.

The men strolled across the lot, acting like tourists and pointing in the windows of darkened shops.

Lenny glanced from side to side, alert. “We have to follow Devon without the taxi noticing us, but that shouldn’t be much of a problem. I’m just not sure what the ‘hood is like. We don’t need to get the locals in an uproar and I sure in hell don’t want to start some kind of riot. This is the weirdest place, man. Even as an L.A. cop, it was just wild.”

“You probably realize we didn’t take time to get Mexican insurance and the van is worth a fortune, so if we can get our job done fast and get out without damage to it or us, I’d sure appreciate it.”

“That’s a plan. Best thing to do is follow at a discreet distance. If the traffic is light, we fall behind a bit, wait it out. It’s no problem either way, we won’t lose him. I just don’t want to be too far behind. Once they get the watch, they might kill them on the spot.” Lenny peered into a storefront window.

They were silent a moment, then Jim said, “Anyway, when Devon goes back into the house, I’d like to see what we can hear, what we can figure out from their conversation. Personally, I do not want another Alamo. Let’s get in and get out with as little commotion as possible.”

“Hell, yeah, sounds like a plan to me.”

Jim shrugged at the group waiting to board the ship. “Oh, hey, look at that. Devon just got in line.”

Lenny nodded, dialed his cell and watched Devon reach into his pocket.

“Hello?”

“It’s Browning. We’re standing a bit to the left of you, by the column.”

Devon moved up the line which was much lighter at this time of night and spotted Jim and Lenny. “I see you.”

“Is your mother all right?”

“Yes, so far.”

“Good job. I guess your story was persuasive.”

“They bought it, Mr. Browning, and my mother, she’s always ... she caught on right away. We fooled them.”

“Okay, Devon, it’s very important that we do this right. The success of this plan is riding on you, frankly, but we’ll be there too. Are you up for it?”

“I’m ready. Tell me your plan.”

“Get the watch. Don’t dawdle but don’t rush. We’ll wait for you to come out. Go back to the taxi; we’ll be right behind you. When you get to the house, go directly to the room your mother’s in. Get the gang to focus on you. We’ll take over from there....”

Jim followed the taxi, staying back far enough the driver never knew he had a tail. When the taxi stopped, Devon once again ran to the house.

They drove past the house and parked in back among a graveyard of other cars, some so old the paint had completely rusted off.

“What a dumpy neighborhood. Shit, I hate to leave the van unattended, but we need his backup.”

Both men glanced at the huge dog, now on full alert, a stiff ridge of fur rising along his spine and shoulders.

“Just roll up the windows and lock it. We won’t be that long.”

Jim closed the door silently, tapped his thigh and made a circular motion with his hand. Tony melted into the darkness surrounding the house.

Lenny pointed at the front door, tapped his chest, and then motioned for Jim to circle around back to where a dim light shone through a window.

The flimsy door could not conceal sounds from inside and Lenny put his ear against it, listening. One hand reached for the knob; it was locked. His other hand, stuck in his jacket pocket, held his gun.

First he heard the sharp sounds of breaking glass, followed by a scream and loud growls. A ruckus started in the back of the house followed by scuffling.

Lenny drew his gun and put a stiff leg to a door so rotten it literally flew off its hinges at the blow. It staggered a moment then fell lengthwise into the room with a resounding thud.

Lenny heard the distinct sounds of scuffling as he charged across the floor to the closed door, slamming it against the wall, making it shudder.

Jim crouched in the window like some action hero, gun in hand, grinning, while Tony, horrible sounds coming from his open mouth, pinned one man down to the floor. Every tooth in his head showed and saliva dripped down his fangs as he snarled.

In the other corner, the unbelievable took place.

Devon Chandler, face purple and a sure candidate for immediate cardiac arrest, had the youngest of the gang members down on the floor, beating the man senseless. Periodically casting amazed glances at his mother as she cheered him on, and thus encouraged, he redoubled his efforts. Blood spurted from the downed man’s lip, hitting Devon directly in the face.

“Eeuw!” Sitting back on his heels, he withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eye. “Gross!”

Astounded, Lenny glanced from one to another, a baffled look on his face. “Okay,” he shouted at Devon. “Enough. We have

to get out of here and we need to decide what to do with these guys.” He glanced at Jim. “We can’t take ‘em with us. Let’s bail before we get company.”

Devon ran to Joan, grabbed her purse from the floor, and pulling her from the bed, hustled her out the door. “Follow Lenny, Mother. And hurry, please.”

They rushed after Jim and jumped into the back of the van. He slammed the rear door for them, hopped behind the wheel and started the engine. Tony and Lenny shared the passenger seat, the dog’s tongue hanging out in exertion as the van tore down the bumpy dirt road.

“I wish we could have brought that gang with us,” Devon said, nodding swiftly several times. “Bastards. Excuse me, Mother.”

Jim nodded in agreement. “I wish we could have too, ‘cause this isn’t over, but we’d never have gotten them through customs. There’s no point in calling the Mexican police and starting something up. Besides, they’re long gone by now. Probably right on our tail.”

“Are we going back to the ship?” Joan glanced from Lenny to Jim, correctly reading their expressions. “Well.” She turned to Devon. “So much for the Captain’s Gala.”

She looked at her son with new, respectful eyes and began to snicker. Her eyes tilted at the corners, laugh lines deepening. As the snicker grew, her lips parted showing beautiful white teeth.

“I never knew you had it in you, son.” The laughter bubbled up. She blinked twice, guffawed and made a tiny blue-veined fist. “Pow, right in the kisser.”

Devon slid an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. “I could tell you some tales that would curl your toes; it’s just that this time around I’m different. All kidding aside, Mother, I don’t ever remember being so frightened. You’re alright, aren’t you? Truly?”

“I’m fine, dear, double promise.”

Forced to half-turn in his seat or continue his tender moments with Tony, Lenny watched the emotions flit across the faces of mother and son. He gave them an envious smile.

“I really admire your relationship,” he said. “You both, well, it’s really neat. I never experienced anything like it with my mother, that’s for sure.”

“We go back a long way,” Devon said.

It was Jim’s turn to snicker. “You have quite a sense of humor, too. You’re totally different from my first impression.”

“He’s not being funny, actually,” Joan said. “He has very unusual religious beliefs. He believes we are kindred spirits. Around about now, I’m inclined to agree with him. Tonight had an eerie familiarity that I just can’t shake.”

“Kindred spirits?” Jim looked at her through the mirror.

“He believes in reincarnation ... that we knew each other, were married in a previous life. It’s all very ... transcendental or something.”

“When did he start ...?”

“Hello? *He* is in the car and able to speak for himself.” Devon shook his head at Joan. “You always talk for me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.” He gazed into her eyes and patted her hand, then turned toward Lenny. “I’ve always known it. I can’t remember a time, an age, when I didn’t. I was about five when I recognized relationships like marriage. What seemed like memories would come to me that I couldn’t figure out, couldn’t understand, like her picking flowers in a meadow or riding horseback over the plains.

“I’d have frequent bouts of déjà vu, all centered around and involving Joan ... my mother, but never in that relationship, as her son. I was always her husband. None of the therapists we worked with ever made a connection.”

Jim’s eyebrows resumed their normal position. “You are kidding me. I never heard of anything like that before in my whole life. Fascinating.”

“Neither has anyone else. The older I got the stronger the memories became. And before you ask, while they are very physical, they’re in no way sexual. Just in case you wondered, they’re mostly adventures we have ... had together.”

“Do you take any meds, Devon, anything that might contribute to this condition?” Lenny asked, expecting a sharp, condescending reply.

Instead he got a chuckle. “No, not really, not what you think. When I was a kid, I did some coke, but I stayed away from the hallucinogens. I already had enough going on in my mind that I couldn’t control. I had no desire to add to the confusion” He shrugged and cocked his head. “All I do now is pot. It keeps me mellow.”

Joan puffed out her lip in disapproval, bringing a retort from her son.

“Oh, please, Mother. You haven’t a clue. Besides, you must admit I’ve learned how to handle it better.” He looked pointedly at her. “Frankly, I don’t think you’re in a position to preach.” He resumed his dialogue with Jim.

“When I was a kid, I hated Joe for being an interloper. Nothing I could do would shake him off. It’s a wonder we never came to blows. I was the most insufferable teen ever born, so it’s a testimony to his restraint. When I went away to college, it got better. I studied about reincarnation, everything I could get my hands on, whether it was religious, mystical or old masters. Once I finally understood what I felt and why, I got control. For the last ten years, my dad and I were friends; he never gave up on me.”

They pulled into line for the border crossing, their passports at the ready.

Jim looked around and shrugged. “For a line that stretches for miles on a sunny summer day, this is a piece of cake. If we ever have to come through again, we’ll do it late like this.”

The border agent glanced into the car as he looked at their identification. “Anything to declare?” he asked in a monotone. “Welcome to the United States.”

Jim glanced in the mirror as they cruised through San Ysidro. Several exits for National City passed by; ahead they saw the lights of downtown San Diego.

“Can I take you to a particular hotel, Mrs. Chandler? Is there a preference? Lenny and I have to go back to San Ysidro on behalf of another client.”

“Sure, Mr. Sessions. We’re coming into the Gaslamp District and the Hilton is just down the street. That will do fine.”

“I never did ask, Devon,” Lenny said. “What did they say about the watch?”

A look of surprise crossed his face and Devon grinned, reached into his pocket and handed the watch to his mother. “Never got the chance to give it to anyone. When that dog came crashing in the window, everything went crazy. I jumped one guy while the dog got the other. Anyway, I saved Joe’s watch for you.”

“Oh, shit.” Jim and Lenny stared at each other.

“What do you mean by that?” Devon asked. “It means a lot to her.” He nodded at Joan. “To both of us.”

She glanced from Devon to Jim and shrugged. “It’s an *oh shit* moment because the gang needs the flash so they can get incriminating files off Joe’s computer. That’s why they kidnapped us.”

Devon crossed his arms over his chest and glared at his mother. “I am definitely out of the loop here. What are you talking about? That made no sense at all. What flash? What *is* a flash?”

“You know that right after Joe died I hired Jim and Lenny to look into who murdered him and why. I knew that watch held his personal computer info, so I gave it to Jim. When they finished with the file extraction, they gave the watch back to me. That’s why the gang wants it. They need the information, whatever it is, and they think it’s in the flash files.”

Jim slid a quick look at Lenny and shrugged. “About that flash, Mrs. Chandler. We took the memory chip out before we returned it, so even if they had the watch, it wouldn’t do them any good.”

“Where is the chip now?”

“I left it at the office in Hollywood. We made a couple of copies for safekeeping.” He turned to Lenny, eyes wide. “Can you handle the Hollingsworth case alone?”

“Absolutely, Jim. You gonna stay with them?”

“I have to. The gang will try again and if they’re not on our tail now, they soon will be.” Jim turned to Joan and Devon. “I’ll stay with you for the rest of the night, just in case. We can figure out what to do tomorrow.”

He pulled up to the hotel lobby and handed Joan his card. “Go in there and register, get your suite. When you get the number, call me and I’ll meet you up there. I don’t want anyone to know I’m here with you.”

Joan took the card, smiling in gratitude. “I don’t know how to thank you, Mr. Sessions.”

“How about if we all get on a first name basis? That would be thanks enough.”

“Okay, Jim.” She opened the door and nodded. “We’ll be back with you directly.”

Jim pulled into the back parking lot and got out of the van. Tony stood next to him, staring at them expectantly as Lenny climbed behind the wheel.

“I can put this off for a while....”

“Nah, we’ll be fine. Go ahead and close this one up.”

“I’ll get in touch with you in the morning, Jim. My meeting is scheduled for eight, so I should be free by ten. If you need me earlier than that, give me a call.”

“See ya.”

The van disappeared around the corner and into the night.

Jim walked to the side door of the hotel, hoping against hope it might be unlocked. He reached for the handle and his cell rang.

“Hello.”

“We are in room 882, Jim.”

“Devon, can you come down and let me in? The door’s locked and I don’t want to be seen in the lobby.”

“Which door is it? Do you see anything I can recognize?”

“We’re around back, on the ocean side, I think. Just watch for the harbor lights. I don’t see anything specific to tell you about.”

“Okay, I’m on my way.”

Twenty minutes passed before an exasperated Devon finally opened the door. “I’m sure you don’t realize it, but there are *five* exterior doors on this side of the building alone, and the harbor lights are all over the place.”

“Sorry about that. I’ve never been here before.”

Devon waved a hand. “Excuse me, Jim. I don’t mean to be rude. This is the wildest night of my life and I’m a bit on edge. Equally worrisome is my mother. This is not how she usually spends her evenings; it’s a wonder she hasn’t keeled over from fear. Positively harrowing.” He ran a hand through his hair, lips pursed.

“And what could Joe *possibly* have on his computer worth dying for ... several people dying for? I knew the man well and he did not indulge in anything illegal, trust me. He didn’t even speculate. His honor, his code of fair play, his behavior; nothing warrants this. And by the way, earlier you asked me if they’d mentioned Delia. Are they all together on this thing? Did Delia kill Joe?”

They entered the elevator and Devon punched the button for the eighth floor.

“We’ve only had the chance to read one file, but it looks like it. Joe uncovered her connection with the art thieves, did some research on what pieces she stocked your galleries with and uncovered several big problems. When Lenny finishes the case he’s doing now, from tomorrow on we’ll be free to concentrate on Joe’s murder. By the way, how’s your mother doing?”

“It hasn’t hit her yet, but when it does, she’ll need me. That’s why all this aimless wandering up and down the corridors trying to find you made me grumpy.” He looked down at the lacerations on his swollen hands and shook his head wide-eyed. “Plus, I’m in pain; they’re killing me. It’s a first.”

“Imagine what his face looks like.” Jim glanced at Devon, amused.

Devon straightened his shoulders and nodded. “I acquitted myself quite well for my first fight.” He looked at his bruised knuckles, then at Jim and nodded again. “Really.”

“I can believe that.”

“Well. I’ll get even better.”

“I have no doubt.”

The elevator opened with a swish. They stepped out, turned left and stopped midway down the hall. Devon slid the card in the slot, removed it and opened the door.

Jim studied the entry as they walked into a small foyer. The hall to the left presumably led to the bedrooms. A desk with a green accountant’s lamp and a computer hookup shared space with a phone.

Across the room, Joan sat on the sofa and stared out the huge window at the stars, a glass of wine in her hand. She turned toward them, smiled and waved in welcome. Her voice, slightly slurred, matched her facial expression.

“It was terribly rude of me, I know, and I apologize, but I’ve made great inroads in the bottle of merlot. So much so, I called down to room service to get another, as well as a substantial number of hors d’oeuvres. I haven’t had a thing to eat all day but lobster. I’m starved.” She patted the sofa next to her. “Please, join me.”

Devon sat beside her, staring earnestly at his mother’s wine glass. “Perhaps you might want to wait for the food to arrive.”

She leaned into him and grinned, eyebrows raised in a coquettish glance. “You’re not the boss a me.”

“But really, Mother, don’t you think you’d better wait?”

“Wait for what? Tonight I was kidnapped in a foreign country, shanghaied to some ... I don’t even know how to describe that building they kept me in, and threatened to within an inch of my life. As if that’s not enough stress, I have to watch you beat the tar out of some guy with a gun, yet, and you think I should wait before I finish my wine? What for, the end of the world? A tsunami? You know an earthquake is coming?”

She gazed at him, lips quirked in a smile. “I’m a big girl now, Dev. I don’t need you to monitor what I drink and besides, it’s been a rough night.”

Joan grinned at Jim then, turning her attention on Tony. “What a magnificent creature. I’ve always loved the Doberman, best watchdog out there, I think. I had one as a child. What’s his name again?”

“This is Tony,” Jim said with a chuckle.

“So, Tony, you’re quite a hero dog, aren’t you?”

Tony cocked his head this way and that, listening to her. His expression showed the interaction as his ears raised and lowered in rapid succession. Round amber eyes gazed at her.

“He’s not supposed to pay any attention to you. At least that’s how he was trained. After living with Ella and Amy for a year, he’s lost a bit of his touch.”

Joan gave a snicker. Heavy-lidded dark eyes sought Jim’s. “Off his touch? Lost ... he took care of business tonight.” She turned her eyes to the dog and extended a hand. “Hi, Tony. You’re my hero.”

The stumpy tail wagged as the dog shared his attention between Jim and Joan. He whined under his breath and wagged harder.

Jim shook his head. “Spoiled as rotten as Amy, aren’t you? Okay, go say hello. Be nice.”

As Tony approached, Devon rose putting his body between Tony and Joan. “No, Mother, he bites. I really don’t....”

“Hush, Devon, you’re my hero, too.”

Tony sat by her side, eyes half closed, basking in the gentle touches, the scratching under his collar. His tail wagged his hips as he grinned, every tooth in his head showing in a delighted doggie smile.

There came a knock on the door, followed by a muffled cry of “Room Service.”

Jim rose, snapped his fingers at Tony and whispered, “I don’t want anyone knowing we’re here.” He and Tony walked quickly to the hall and hid in the dark.

Devon opened the door wide enough for the waiter to push the cart through. As he began to close it, two men charged into the suite, pushed Devon aside and slammed the door.

“You!” he said, staring his former adversary in the eye.

The man waved his gun at Devon, a menacing expression on his battered face. “Shut up and get over by the sofa with the old lady.”

The counterfeit server stripped off the black jacket and shirt and threw the hotel uniform on the floor. He nodded at the other men and drew his gun. “We got no time to play here. The waiter will wake up soon and when he does, I want us long gone.” He turned to Devon, extended his palm and wiggled his fingers. “Give me the watch.”

“I have it right here,” Joan said, voice cracking like glass. Shaking fingers reached into her purse, withdrew the watch and handed it to the man. She drained her glass and looked hopefully at the bottle on the table.

“Is this the right one, Frank?” He handed it to the youngest of the trio, who had his eyes locked on Devon.

He examined the watch a moment then let out a curse. “It’s the right kind of watch, but the flash chip is gone.” He stormed over to the sofa and stared at Joan, shaking the watch in her face. “Where’s the frickin’ chip?”

Joan spread her arms wide. “I haven’t the vaguest notion what you mean. What is a chip?”

“That’s a load of bullshit, lady, and you know it.”

“Son of a bitch,” said the man posing as the waiter. He dug into his pocket, pulled out his cell and dialed.

The man referred to as Frank turned to his former opponent, who had closed the distance between them. “Where is it, asshole?”

Devon returned the stare. “I have no idea. I’m not a techie. What does it look like?”

“You stinkin’ bastard,” the man screamed, throwing the watch at Devon. “This whole plan is fallin’ to shit.”

Voice full of menace, gun chest high, he turned and approached Joan. “Where is the fuckin’ flash chip, you old bat?”

Flabbergasted, Devon charged, shaking his finger at the hoodlum. "Don't you dare talk to my mother like that."

Before anyone could react, he buried a sharp elbow in the man's kidney with devastating force, eliciting a loud shriek. The gun flew up in the air, almost landing at Devon's feet. He snatched it from the floor and pointed it straight at the thug's chest.

Just as Devon's elbow collided with the goon's back, Tony sprang from his shadowy hiding place in the entry hall and with an eerie howl, jumped the other gangster, knocking the gun out of his hands. The man hit the floor with a hard thud and lay, there stunned.

Tony stood over him snarling, one paw planted on the man's chest, his jaws an inch from the unprotected nose. His teeth clicked together like scissors.

Jim appeared at the other end of the hall, gun level, aimed at the remaining upright thug. "Put your gun on the table and your hands behind your head where I can see them."

With the futility of fighting obvious, the man closed his cell with a snap and put it on the table along with his gun. He raised his hands above his head and slowly turned around to face Jim.

"Tony, back off."

Jim turned his attention to Devon and shook his head. "It's so not worth it, man, don't even think about it. Lower the gun."

Devon never even gave him a glance. Black eyes narrowed on the little punk who'd dared to speak so to his mother.

Jim glanced at Joan and shook his head. "I think the genie's out of the bottle."

"Devon, I beg of you, please put the gun down." Joan's face had a gray tinge to it as the color drained from her cheeks. Unsteady, she leaned forward and refilled her wine glass as he lowered his gun.

"Well, thank you," she said, and drank deeply. "I'm not really sure how much more excitement I can take in one night. Especially on an empty stomach." Joan made her way to the service cart, taking small, careful steps. "I'm still hungry, though."

She lifted the lids from the serving bowls and proceeded to fill her plate. "I'm not sure it's good to eat this kind of thing before going to bed, but then, who cares. I mean, all things considered, could it really matter? Just once?"

Oblivious to Tony, the men on the floor or the guns, she smiled at Devon, popped a shrimp-stuffed mushroom in her mouth and nodded. "Oh yes, this will do nicely. Quiche looks divine."

Jim disarmed all three gang members, making them sit with their backs to the wall.

It was time for Tony to have some fun. He glanced from one to the other, snarling, lips lifted, drooling. He made direct eye contact, lowered his head and snarled even louder. The ridge of fur rose as he brought his muzzle to within an inch of a vulnerable nose.

He moved to the next guy, stared him down and repeated the performance. Up and down the line he went, snarling and snapping.

Jim dialed his cell.

A slightly groggy voice said, "Beldon. It better be good."

"It's Jim Sessions. I got three of the guys that committed the Chandler murder sitting here in front of me. You want them?"

The voice became wide awake and strident. "Holy shit, you're kidding. Where are you?"

"San Diego. We're in suite 882 of the Hilton in the Gaslamp District."

"Shit, man, I can't touch them there. Go ahead and call the Sheriff. That's their jurisdiction anyway. Good of you to think of me, though. I appreciate it. Speaking of which, I have some news for you. It's come to our attention via the FBI and Interpol that Delia Rowan, et al, might be responsible for the theft of a painting from the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It's worth millions. We have an APB out on her now."

"Just out of curiosity, did the FBI know about me and Lenny? Know we're working this for Mrs. Chandler?"

Beldon hesitated then drew a sigh. "I'm not supposed to tell ya, but I'll be straight. This one got real hot real fast and yes, we told them about you. Why?"

"Oh, nothing really. Just answers a question that's been bugging me for a while. So, they have the computer files as well?"

"Evidently."

"Okay, I just wanted to give you the shot, Detective. Sorry to wake you."

The next call summoned the San Diego County police.

Chapter 13

Ella disabled the security system, inserted her key in the back door of the restaurant and entered the dim hallway. She walked down the corridor to her office, flipping on light switches and talking to Amy. Her cell rang; she recognized the caller id.

“Hey, Terry, what’s up? You hear from the guys?”

“I just talked with Lenny. They had to make an unexpected detour to Ensenada last night, something about the Chandler case. Jim’s still on that one and Lenny’s finishing up the San Ysidro client. Lenny isn’t sure, but they might have to stay over again tonight. We can talk about this when I get in. I called to say I’m at that market near the pier and they have the most incredible papayas and avocados I’ve ever seen. I heard Chef whining the other day about not being happy with the fruit and veggie guy lately; anyway, should I get some?”

“Aren’t you sweet? Yeah, do that. He’ll use them in the lunch special.”

“Okay, see you in an hour or so. Traffic is fierce downtown.”

Ella sat at her desk, stacks of cash before her, counting out the drawers. “I wish we didn’t need to keep this much cash in the office, don’t you, Amy?”

She glanced at the dog and smiled as she made up four cash drawers for the opening. “We’re so busy now that we serve lunch, there’s no choice. Well, are you ready?”

The Doberman never took her gaze off Ella, round gold-flecked brown eyes soft with love. She did the two-step in anticipation, sang a woo woo sonata, and jamming a cold nose in Ella’s hand, gave it a nudge.

Ella checked her watch and nodded. “Right on time. Okay, I’ll turn on the jukebox, but not too loud. We don’t want to bug the neighbors.”

Amy bounded into the lounge. She knew what jukebox meant as well as Ella did. Amy had her favorites to which she’d sing with such gusto it brought attention from the neighbors. She gave two sharp barks and sat in front of the jukebox, stubby tail wagging her whole backside.

With a chuckle, Ella hit her special code and the musical behemoth sprang to life, eliciting sounds, lights and a faint whir.

Ears up, Amy barked again.

Ella picked three selections and grinned at the huge dog. “Nope, no Zep. Too early. How about it? Do you feel like a Sultan?”

As the song started, Amy lost all dignity and began to dance on her hind legs, hopping like a kangaroo. She sang along with the boys, her lilting woowo’s joyful as she played with Ella ... *“we are the sultans of swing.”*

They twirled around the dance floor of the empty lounge, romping. By the time their three song workout ended, both dancers puffed with exertion.

“Wow,” Ric said, “that was amazing.”

Ella called hello, embarrassed at being caught. She picked up a clean bar towel and wiped her forehead. “Gee, I didn’t know it was so late.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s not, you’re just early.”

“Guilty. I woke up at dawn and couldn’t get back to sleep. I went down to the donut shop and scored big.” He smiled again, raising a white, grease-stained bag. “French crullers.”

“I got the coffee.”

Ric followed her through the lounge, taking note of the décor. “I meant to tell you yesterday, these posters are outstanding. It’s amazing what a good frame can do, huh?”

She laughed. “Dude, the frames cost five times what the posters did, but it really works, doesn’t it?”

He nodded. “Especially with the oak bar. Who decorated for you?”

Ella indicated a chair near her desk and walked over to the coffee pot. She poured two cups, handing one to Ric.

“I did. Well, Terry and I worked on it together. We have different kinds of visions. She’s really good at seeing things in detail. I’m more of the big picture, *when it’s done it’s gonna look like this*, kinda gal. She suggested doing the bar that way and we’re both into classic rock, so once I mentioned rock star photos, she talked about the oak frames to match the bar.”

Ella sunk her teeth into the crispy cruller and rolled her eyes. “Man, too many of these and I’ll have to increase my morning workout.”

“Is that what you were doing with the dog? I got a kick out of watching.”

“She and I do it every morning. Dobies need exercise and I just don’t have the time for much but the short walk over here. We do a little aerobic dancing in the morning, gets the blood going.” She giggled, looking for the dog. “Ames?”

A cool black muzzle thrust itself against her knee.

“There you are,” Ella said. “Come out and I’ll introduce you.”

Amy came around the outside of the desk and sat at command.

“This is Ric. He works here.”

“Can I touch her?” he asked, beginning to reach for her.

“No,” Ella said. “She’s not a pet.”

Ric jerked his hand back and swallowed. “I can see that.”

Although silent, Amy showed every tooth in her head; it seemed more menacing than if she’d growled.

Amazed, Ella stared at the dog. “Where are your manners?” She shrugged and took another sip of coffee.

“She probably just needs to get to know me.” He rose as he noticed Al walk into the kitchen. “I guess I’d better get to work. Talk later.”

Ella waved her hand in goodbye as she continued to stare at Amy. “You don’t like him, do you, girl? I’ve never seen you act like that around anybody.”

Amy watched Ric walk out the door and sighed, no longer baring her fangs. She followed Ella to the dining room and for the first time she didn’t stop off to visit Al.

* * *

Terry pulled into the lot, top down, back seat of the Jag full of distinctive brown paper bags. She tooted the horn at Chef, who was about to enter the restaurant and held up a bag.

“Can you give me a hand? I’ve got treats for you.”

“Where have you been,” he asked, spying the name on the bags. “Ciro’s? Oh, yum.” He held the door for her then led the way to the kitchen, waving at Ella as they passed the office.

Terry put the sacks on the counter and grinned at Chef. “Just take a gander at what’s in there. You’re gonna smile.”

Ric called hello to Al, a box of assorted fruits in his arms. “You want me to start cutting these up?”

“Hey, Ric. You’re an early bird. Yeah, go ahead. The knife is in the dishwasher under the sink there. With the lemons and limes, do wedges and full slices, okay? Oranges in half rounds.”

Ric got to work while Al brought cases of beer from the kitchen and started to fill the coolers. They heard the back door slam again and shortly Clarice and Dona sauntered into the lounge, calling hello. The door banged again as the remaining lunch staff filed in for work.

They checked the chart where Ella assigned stations.

“Oh,” Dona said to Clarice, “you’ll be working with me today, just until you get your sea legs. Once you catch on, you’ll get your own station, but it really doesn’t matter. We pool our tips and always help each other out. It’s something that makes this place special.”

“What kind of money do you make here?” Clarice asked as she refilled the silverware bin.

“In a word, great. Lunches on a good day, I take home a hundred; nights usually double, although opening night, between the tips I made and the additional money I got from Ella, three hundred. But that’s not the norm except for holidays. More like two hundred; we earn every penny of it, girl. You’ll see, but it’s a good living. This place jumps.”

“Wow, that’s some nice cash. This is a job to keep, huh?”

“Well, the earnings are par for the area and if you get into some of the really big clubs, ya make double. I’d rather work here with Ella, though. She’s fair, she’s decent and she doesn’t tolerate any fooling around, so the team comes to work straight and sober. Y’know?”

“Got’cha.”

“Sure makes life easier.”

A small line had already formed outside the club when Ella opened the front doors at eleven. By noon there wasn’t an empty table in the house.

Al watched customers continue to pile up and shook his head. “I’m not complaining, mind you, but what’s going on? Once the novelty wore off, I figured the traffic would settle down, but no. I guess it’s the new menu Ella made. Sure as hell can’t be the new

carpet and paint that caused this.” He nodded, eyes sweeping the room.

“So this is unusual,” Ric said, glancing at the clock. “We’re just about at capacity now.”

“I know; get your skates.”

Hopeful guests bellied up to the bar, glancing from Al to the podium where Ella stood.

“Do you serve lunch at the bar?” He took the last seat in the house.

“Can do, my friend. Just wanna eat and get out, huh?” Al laid a placemat on the bar along with silverware wrapped in a napkin and a menu.

The man glanced around the lounge, eyes searching the guests. “Yes, thanks. I’ll have a gin and tonic, tall, please and a burger with the works. Medium with extra crispy fries.”

Al took the order, nodded at Ric and held up the ticket. “Give this to Chef, would ya? And bring out some more menus. I have a feeling we’re gonna need them.”

Ric headed for the kitchen and snapped the ticket onto the overhead lazy Suzan. He spun the wheel so the ticket now faced the kitchen and called, “Order in.”

As he passed the open office door he hesitated, popped his head inside and glanced around. With the restaurant packed, he figured he might have time for a quick once-over. He checked again over his shoulder and walked to the desk.

As he approached it, the sound of a growl stopped him in his tracks. He glanced at the sofa where Amy sat. In one fluid, silent move, never taking her eyes from his, she slid off the couch. Ears flat to her lowered head, she stared at Ric, soft vibrating growls making her muzzle quiver. The ridge of short, black fur along her back rose as she walked toward him, stiff legged, tail straight up.

“You stupid mutt,” he said. “Stay the hell away from me.” Ric backed out of the room as fast as he could until he banged into Terry.

“What are you doing in the office?”

“God, Ella, I ... Al wanted more menus. I came in to get them and I guess I scared the dog or something. She’s like, really pissed or something. Look at her.”

Amy stopped in the middle of the office, alternately lifting her ears and wagging her tail at Terry and glaring at Ric.

"I'm Ella's twin, Terry," she said and walked across the floor to the desk.

"Al sent me to get more menus for the bar." He pointed at the pile stacked on a shelf. "I saw them this morning while Ella and I had coffee. I forgot about the dog. Can I get them and get back to work? It's crazy out there."

"Those are the old menus. Ella keeps all of the new ones at the podium with her. She'll give you what you need." She smiled at him then, nodding. "Next time you need something, find me, I'll help you."

"Will do."

Ric hurried to the momentarily untended podium, grabbed several menus and rushed back to the bar.

"Shoot, dude, you get lost?" Al took the menus with a scowl and handed them out to needy customers.

"I got turned around back there; don't quite have the lay of the land yet. I'm workin' on it."

"Okay, carry that tub full of plates to the kitchen and bring back an empty tub and some clean silverware. Quickly, huh?"

Ric picked up the tub with a grimace and stared at the greasy plates, scraps of food clinging to the surfaces. *What a hell of a way to make a living.* He dropped the tub on the table next to the dishwasher, grabbed a clean one and carried it to the bar.

Clarice took an order from her latest couple and got in line at the bar. "Two lemon martinis, Ric, and a glass of ice." She slid a quick glance around and whispered. "I'm gonna give the boss a call. It's time."

"Rightyo," he said. Three waitresses moved into line. "Behind you." He placed the frosty glasses on her tray, scooped ice into a rocks glass and put it on the tray as well.

Clarice dropped off the drinks and hurried to the rest room. She snatched her cell from her pocket and dialed.

"The coast is clear. They've got the dog here, not to mention a full house and a waiting list, so they're both busy. Give it another go. If either one of them leaves, I'll call ya."

Clarice entered the kitchen just as Chef was about to hit the bell.

"Order up," he said.

* * *

Only two couples remained in the once-full dining room. Ella beckoned Clarice and Dona to the podium.

“Are those guys done? Got their checks closed out?”

They nodded, too tired to talk.

“I’ll keep an eye on them. Go clock out and pick up your tips. You have the late shift, Dona. Rest up and we’ll see you at eight.” She checked the chart again. “Clarice, you’re working the late shift too, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then, take a break, sneak in a nap if you need to. You did a great job today.”

“I appreciate that, Ella.” Clarice grinned. “Is napping something you do, too?”

Ella cocked her head and laughed. “Not lately. See ya later.”

* * *

“No, I didn’t. She’s got this big freakin’ dog in there is why. I tried to check the desk earlier ... no, didn’t know the damned thing was even in there, and then she started to frickin’ stalk me! Scared the shit outta me, man. If one of the gals hadn’t come in just then, that bitch’d a chewed me a new one.”

Ric paused, listening, his expression becoming more indignant by the moment. “That’s fine for you to say, it didn’t *happen* to you. Anyway, did you get into the apartment?”

He listened, lips pursed. Several times he shook his head. “Shit. That’s what I was afraid of. What do we do now?”

* * *

The phone rang. “Hello, Agent Spencer here.” A wide smile and a grunt brought his partner, Special Agent Tom Malloy, to attention. The stiff thumb Spencer gave him encouraged Malloy to form the words *who* with silent lips.

“So they’re on the way back to Riverside, Mr. Sessions? The San Diego Sheriff, yes, I see.” He glanced at his partner and

grinned. "We can meet you anywhere you want. Your choice." Spencer paused again, jotted an address on his note pad and nodded again. "We should be there in a couple of hours."

The agent hung up a moment later and turned to Malloy. "Remember Jim Sessions and Lenny Browning, the PI's working for Mrs. Chandler? They just busted three of the gang members involved in the heist."

Tom, already on his feet and reaching for his jacket, smiled back. "Where we heading?"

"Some restaurant in Hollywood. Bring that museum file, will ya? I'd like to share some photos, see if anyone is familiar. After that I guess we can go ID the perps, see which ones we have and which are still out there besides the Rowan woman. Unfortunately, she was not one of those captured."

The men in black strode down the hall together, deep in conversation.

Chapter 14

They met at a back table in a fashionable Beverly Hills eatery. Light jazz filled in the background, deftly covering the sounds of tinkling silverware and conversation.

Delia stared at him, eyes filled with fear. "Maurice, my darling, I don't know what else to do."

She sat with her back to the room, black hair concealed under a honey brown, shoulder length wig. Her cocktail suit of muted rose, close fitting, almost revealing, complimented the atmosphere perfectly.

The man, dark features unclear in the low sultry lighting, leaned forward. "It is imperative that we recover the flash before someone else discovers it and figures out what it contains. You realize that, don't you? We searched the loft again and turned up nothing, just like the last time."

Delia glanced at Maurice and shook her head. "Those women don't have a thing to do with this, darling, they never did. In the first place, Jim Sessions isn't about to plant something on his girlfriend that could get her killed. It could never, ever happen, okay? All I can think of is he must still have it. Joan never had a clue what the chip held. She never knew there even *was* a chip, so it's no sense talking to her; Devon either."

The waitress placed their salads before them along with a basket of rolls. "Is there anything else I can bring you?"

They shook their heads and when she left, Delia continued.

"You know the police arrested Carl, Pete and Frank last night? Our time is limited, Maurice. I have to get out of here before they crack my cover. If those guys talk, if there is a connection to us ... it's all over. God, what should I do?"

"Remain calm for starters, *mon chéri*. They don't know about me, do they?"

"No, no one else does, but they know about *me*. I have to get out of the country, Maurice. Tonight. Please help me."

"Of course, *ma petite amour*. Where do you want to go? I will arrange to fly you anywhere you choose. Do you want to go back to France? You can stay at the Paris apartment until I can join you, or I can open the villa at Marseille. Which would you prefer?"

She took his hand in hers and kissed the knuckle of his forefinger. “I don’t care where I am if you are not with me, my love. Won’t you come too? I don’t want to be alone. I’m not only afraid *without* you, I’m afraid *for* you. What if you stay here and someone somehow makes the connection? You’re a well-known art connoisseur and, well ... it could happen.”

“Do not worry about me, mon chéri doux, I will be fine. As soon as my work is completed here, we’ll be together for the rest of our lives.”

Delia finished her martini and ordered another, eyes haunted. “Maurice, I’m so afraid. I don’t think that’s going to happen. I have a terrible feeling about all this.”

Tears filmed her eyes; she reached for his hand, kissing the tips of his fingers. “*Please*, my love, come with me tonight, please. We’ll leave the U.S. and never come back.”

“I cannot go as yet, but it won’t be long. Do you need to pack? How quickly do you want to go?”

She nodded twice and drained her glass. “Will you send a car around to the condo? Give me an hour or so.” Delia placed a gentle hand on his arm and squeezed. “I love you so much, you are my world. I wouldn’t want to live without you. Please be careful.”

“Mon ami.” He kissed her hand and then her lips. “You are the love of my life. God speed.”

He watched her walk away, mouth flooding with regret, lips pursed. A shaft of light pierced his glazed eyes as she opened the door and waved goodbye. He returned the wave, squinted and blinked once again. She disappeared as the door closed.

Maurice drained his glass and motioned to the waitress to bring another. Memories wrenched his soul, happy times, earlier times. There was no choice, but that didn’t make the choice any easier. He raised the frosty glass in silent salute. “May your God have mercy on you, Delia.”

Swallowing the contents of his glass, he sighed, wiped the tears from his eyes and pulled his cell from his pocket.

Voice atremble, he said, “She’ll be at the condo in ten minutes. Make it clean and above all, do not frighten her.”

Maurice closed his cell with a snap, thrusting the device from him. It slid across the table and fell on the floor. He shook his head in disgust and bent over to retrieve it.

One moment life seemed worth living ... at least it seemed preferable to death. In another moment it was no longer so.

* * *

“We’re making good time all things considered, don’t you think?” Agent Spencer nodded at his partner, Tom Malloy. “The last time it took three hours.”

“I feel like knocking on something when ya talk like that.” Malloy stared out the window as the sky grew white, no longer the deep blue he lived with in the desert.

“Okay,” he said, “we’re on the last lap in a tad over two hours. Our exit’s coming up. Freeway was a total piece of cake, but...”

He looked down the long exit ramp in dismay. “Oh, shit, we’re gonna pay for it. Look at the boulevard, would ya? It’s a frickin’ parking lot.”

“How far away is the restaurant?”

“A bit over a mile.”

“We’re back to a three hour drive.” Morose, Spencer glanced at the gas tank. “On top of everything else, we have to fill up.”

They inched along at a snail’s pace.

With a look of outrage on his face, Malloy shook his fist at the driver of a green Hummer. “The left-turn nuts ... look at this, would ya?” He leaned out the window and yelled, “That’s a \$350 fine.”

The driver in the Hummer flipped him the bird.

“Right back at ya, asshole,” Malloy said, returning the vigorous American salute with one of his own. “I swear...”

“Don’t say you could walk there faster.”

“Why not, it’s the truth.”

“Just don’t.”

Twenty minutes later they pulled into the almost empty parking lot of a restaurant called *ELLA’S*. They walked into the lounge where Jim Sessions and Lenny Browning waited for them at a large booth.

Introductions made all around, Spencer said, “Good job nabbing those guys. I checked and they’re in the middle of some

pretty intense interrogation. With that many people involved, someone is bound to take a sweet deal. It's being offered."

Tom Malloy smiled with encouragement. "Any of them happen to bring up Ms. Rowan? She works with a gang of thieves responsible for boosting stuff valued in the millions. As yet, most of the art is still missing. We figure the men you had arrested are part of that gang."

Jim glanced at Lenny and made a face. "No, we never heard her name mentioned, either time. Did she murder Mr. Chandler?"

"We don't know whether she held the gun, but yes, she wanted some special watch he owned. It was his custom to wear it at all times, so Ms. Rowan had good reason to believe she could get it off his body. She couldn't know Mrs. Chandler had it. After they shot him, they had very little time to get the artwork they wanted and get away. We figure Ms. Rowan searched the house while the remaining gang packed up the artwork. Looks like she never found the watch."

Spencer paused a moment, then lifted his eyebrows. "We know that when she hired you to dig into her husband's murder, Mrs. Chandler gave you the watch. She didn't know the contents, only that whatever it was meant the world to her husband."

Malloy nodded. "She counted on you to extract the files and find something, anything that pointed to the killers. That's why we took your computers and downloaded Chandler's files. We needed them for our investigation."

Lenny said, "And weren't you clever deleting the file off my computer. Why did ya do that?"

"It's nothing personal, Mr. Browning," Agent Malloy said, "we just can't have civilians mucking around in ongoing, open cases and messing with evidence and stuff."

"Mucking around is it then? *Our* mucking around landed three of those gang members in jail. What's *your* mucking accomplished?" Jim simmered, green eyes snapping fire.

Lenny nodded several times. "I think we've proven that we're not gonna screw things up. Why don't we pool our resources and see what we can come up with?"

"We can't do that and you know it, Detective Browning." Agent Spencer emphasized the word as he gazed at Lenny, eyes devoid of emotion.

“Yes ... detective. We checked you and Mr. Sessions out the night Mrs. Chandler hired you. The rules are clear and you both know them. If you find something out, you get it to us. Right? We do not return the favor.”

With the futility of arguing with the FBI Agents apparent, Jim and Lenny capitulated.

“We didn’t get much chance to see the files. We’d just had them decrypted when you stole them. What did you find?” Jim asked.

Spencer glanced at Malloy and shrugged. “We can tell you that Mr. Chandler knew some very unsavory people. At least he found art for them. One in particular, an arms dealer with a taste for Monet. He goes back several decades with Chandler. There were others.”

Jim shook his head. “Do you think Chandler was involved in arms sales?”

“We don’t know anything for sure. We’re pulling the threads together. Chandler might not have known how the guy made his living, but he and some other people used his galleries as a conduit to transport things into the United States that were not what they seemed.”

“What makes you so sure Mr. Chandler knew about these people? It’s doubtful that he approved every piece that came into his shops let alone who bought them. Delia was responsible for stocking all but the Phoenix store. I think it’s far more likely it’s her than Chandler.” Lenny shook his head. “If you overlook her I think you’re making a mistake.”

“Don’t kid yourself; she’s not out of the mix, not by a long shot. A variety of agencies are hunting for her. It won’t be long.”

“Is this some kind of terrorist plot? I can’t imagine what else brings the FBI into a murder investigation.” Jim ran a hand through his hair, dissatisfied. “What is it?”

“When we get to the bottom of this case, the murder will be solved as well, but that’s not our immediate concern. The Riverside Sheriff is working the murder aspect. We’re part of a Joint Terrorism Task Force assigned to the Cyber Crimes Unit.” Spencer shot a glance at his partner and shrugged.

“The gang uses the internet to move things around, get the right merchandise to the right buyer. Chandler’s galleries provided a perfect foil and when he found out what Delia was up to, he decided

to turn her over to the authorities. She killed him before he could do it. He inadvertently discovered something, but it was much more than Delia Rowan's antics. This concerns a much bigger fish. It's him we're after."

* * *

"So that's what a MIB looks like." Ella chuckled and took a sip of her martini. She fished out the olive and bit it in half, making a face. "Talk about nondescript."

Indignant, Terry nodded at Lenny. "They're the ones that stole your computers, aren't they? I wish you'd have let us sit in. I'd have given them a piece of my mind."

"Exactly," Lenny said, a smug look on his face. "Which is why you didn't. They don't know we made extra copies and I don't want them to. They think we're out of the loop and we need it to stay that way. I want to get home right now and start my research."

He rose, pulling Terry to her feet, and nodded at Jim and Ella. "We're going to get started on the Chandler files. There's like thirty of them. Why don't you work on the first fifteen and we'll do the rest. I've already downloaded the last file."

"Sounds like a plan to me, guys. See you in the morning." Jim grinned. "If anything comes up, give me a call."

Terry entered what used to be her former husband's office and gazed around the large room. Not all that long ago it gave her shudders; now it made her smile with delight. All vestiges of Bob disappeared in the warm glow of rose-colored paint, thick cranberry carpet and pale birch furniture.

A tall ficus tree stood beside French doors that led out to a cobblestone patio, the rose garden and back yard. In the nearby corner opposite the white marble fireplace, three round club chairs and a sofa made a comfortable conversation area.

Remembering how she met Lenny always made Terry giddy. They fell in love almost on sight and it soon became apparent they couldn't bear being apart one moment longer than necessary. Lenny sold his condo and moved into the house.

She knew he'd need a quiet place to work and get together with clients, so Terry turned the room into a shared office. She indulged herself in a shopping spree, buying them matching desks, filing cabinets and lamps. They shared the armoire, the printer and a large bookcase.

A confirmed believer in the laptop, Lenny placed it on his desk and plugged in the battery.

He walked toward her, an unmistakable grin on his face. He wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled her neck.

“Hey, you delectable little morsel.” He nibbled on her ear. “What would it take to get a little assistance from you?”

“Probably not very much. Just what kind of assistance is it you want?” The coy gurgle rippled up her throat and parted her lips, showing white, pearly teeth. She kissed his bottom lip. “I have a couple of ideas.”

He picked her up and held her to him, returning her laugh. “Me too. But work first, okay?”

“Okay.”

He set her back on her feet and grinned. The grin turned serious as he glanced at the computer.

“I already went over the last file he worked on; at least it was last in order. I not only didn’t read every word, I just scanned the pages, hoping something would jump out at me, but nothing did.”

“Well, that’s understandable. You guys were in a hurry. I’ll take my time.” She pulled a pair of reading glasses from her desk. “You want me to really study them, right? Can you tell me what to look for?”

“It’s anybody’s guess, Terry. Names that keep popping up, maybe, something out of place within the context of what you’re reading. Like, if he has a list of paintings and who bought them and all of a sudden he talks about a meeting with someone to check out a tank ... y’know, anything that looks odd or out of place.”

She chuckled. “Tank, huh? Okay, send me the attachment.” Terry booted up her computer and grinned. “I love being a private eye.”

Terry cruised slowly through the file, impressed with the methodical and systematic way Joe Chandler worked. He kept extensive records of the purchases of every client who patronized the galleries. Filed in alphabetical order, last name first, he detailed contact information and the date they made their first purchase through a Chandler gallery. Next, a list of what they bought, the date, what they paid and what they desired in future acquisitions.

These purchases included a warrantee of authenticity describing the identifying marks of the authenticator and the bill of sale from the last, duly noted owner of record. Finally, a detailed commentary on the buyer's financial position, including their preferences in wine, cigars and restaurants when applicable.

For more than three hours they went through the files. Although nothing popped up for Lenny, Terry did find one thing that seemed curious. In the middle of a list of buyers that began in 1978 and ended on the day of his death three weeks ago, she found an entry that didn't match.

Each entry contained the same information, input in the same way; the personal information varied, but never the format. Nonetheless, inserted in the list lurked an entry that did not go with the others. It was, thus far, the only deviation in what otherwise could be called monotonous repetition: Maurice DuBois, a series of numbers, some separated by dashes, other's by slashes, some forward, some backward.

She highlighted the page and copied it. "Hey, Lenny, take a look at this. Why do you figure it isn't the same?"

He studied the page a moment and then shook his head.

"This is interesting, isn't it?" He scanned the other entries on the page, looking for variations or deviations, but nothing compared. Out of hundreds of entries, only this one differed.

"Any idea what we've got here?" Terry asked. "What could those numbers stand for? Birthdays? Account numbers?"

"This is a job for my friend down town. He's a wiz at this kinda stuff. I'll take it to him tomorrow and see what he can turn up."

He hit a couple of keys and when a new prompt appeared on the screen, he requested the computer to locate every mention of Maurice DuBois. He initiated the search and a file Lenny had not as yet seen opened.

Moments later the printer spit out a copy of the page; by the time it completed the search, five more references to Maurice DuBois sat in the copier tray.

Lenny handed her a page and took one for himself, as well as several blank sheets of accounting paper.

"Do something for me, will ya? On this accounting paper here, one letter or number per box, no spaces, write down the exact entry like you would a crossword puzzle. Keep each letter or number in order, like this:

MauriceDuBois.08/05--LB/....

MauriceDuBois.08/05—SMO/.... Off to the side somewhere, note the number of the original page.”

Terry grinned at him. “Oh, I get it, like Sherlock Holmes.”

* * *

Ella put a match to the small heap of logs piled on the hearth and smiled as the starters burst into flame. She waited a moment, but the dry wood caught immediately. She added a larger log and joined Jim at the card table.

“Okay, what do we do first?”

Jim nodded at his computer. “I’m going to print out all the files we’re checking. The first one is done and ready to read. I didn’t count them, but it looks to be about five pages. Go ahead and start on it and I’ll read the second. It’s almost finished as well. After we have a couple of files under our belt we may be able to see a pattern form, something that stands out, a continuity in how he makes entries, stuff like that. Then we can trade files and see if we’ve missed anything the first time around. One file may trigger something in another, too. We won’t know until we’re in it.”

Ella picked up the small stack of papers. “Is there anything we’re looking for in particular?”

“I don’t really know. Stuff out of place, repetitive words, anything that sounds odd. The guy’s an art dealer, so if you read something about bank accounts in Switzerland....” He chuckled, gathered another file, this one thicker than the others, and continued.

“That’s a definite red flag. Speaking of flags, highlight any area you’re concerned or suspicious about in red, then make a note of it, dates if possible. Then we can compare, see if anything about them is familiar.”

“Ah,” Ella said, tone excited. “I have a travel log here dating back from 1975. He talks about going to Europe with Joan to buy art for the first gallery in Newport. He listed all the items they bought, who they got them from and notes about little shops they saw with special, unique kind of stuff.”

Jim nodded. “Cool. Highlight names of people and their shops for our list. See if they pop up again and when.”

Ella read the second page of her file, nodding from time to time and jotting down notes. She flipped ahead to the last page, surprised at the final sales transaction date of October, 1984. "This file covers almost a decade."

Jim stacked the third file and secured it with a paperclip. He hit print and the fourth file started.

"I figured as much. The second one starts in late 1984. At this rate, unless he gets much chattier, the fourth file should conclude business up to or close to the present."

"Except for making my file into a list of who bought what and when, there's nothing special in it." Ella tapped the list. "These are all foreign dealers and buyers here. I wonder if he kept his American clients in another file. Would that make sense?"

Jim shrugged. "I suppose, but we won't know until we hit on it. There could be so many ways they're connected. Are you talking about buyers and sellers on the same list?"

"Looks like it to me, although he's developing a number of repeat buyers ... clients, if you will. I noted them as well as the dates."

"Are any of the dates meaningful? Any pattern developing? If you see anything to question, anything we need to look into, tell me. Even if it's just a feeling. I'm keeping a list here of questions we have to ask Joan."

"No. His client base quadrupled, according to his estimates, and here's something; he hired Delia in February of 1995. Am I remembering correctly? The daughter, Diana wasn't it? Isn't that around when she died?"

"I remember overhearing someone talking about it at the banquet, that it'd been more than ten years since her death, so that fits the timeline."

Ella put her file on the table with a red check in the upper right corner and started on the next file, not surprised to see it started in 2003. A glance at the final page showed an entry just two days before Joe Chandler's murder.

She shook the file lightly, rustling the papers. "Looks like this is the end of the diary or whatever you want to call it. I made a list of things that jumped out at me. I'm just not sure it'll be any help."

Jim shrugged, continuing to scan the file. "You know how it is. Fresh eyes, another view point. Ya never can tell. When we get together with Lenny, I bet we're going to find a lot of repetition."

Obviously, the earlier files were pre-computer and transferred from a word processor or whatever. God, can you imagine?"

"Not even, not for a moment."

Chapter 15

The men gathered around a large wooden table, discussing their plans, gesturing at aerial charts of Los Angeles, their words short and clipped as they devised a plan.

An olive-complexioned man in his mid-forties, head swathed in a checkered turban, pointed at a map on the computer monitor.

“Allah has blessed us. I knew it would be so. The wind pattern suggested in the forecast indicates optimum spread on Thursday evening. The radar shows sustained winds of twenty miles per hour are expected, starting around five and continuing through the evening.”

“That is excellent news, Ahmad. The container arrives in Long Beach on Monday evening and will be offloaded during the night. We’ll get access Tuesday night, giving us plenty of time to get it loaded onto the truck and away from the port authority. The drive to the airport is less than an hour. From there, we simply have to load the canisters of anthrax into the spray equipment and deliver it to its worthy recipients.” The melodic tones of his French-accented voice made the words that much more chilling.

Kaleil Sonjoni, a younger man, bearded and with fire in his black eyes, said, “Being able to deal this blow to the infidels on a warm summer night such as this will increase the number of people infected by the disease ten fold. Balmy weather always brings them outside. The mayhem that will occur once the people start to die will cause a panic. This is truly a sign from Allah. Success is ours. Allah akbar.”

A man in a white tunic cast dark, manic glances at his cohorts. “Could it be better? Five o’clock on a Thursday night as people come out of work and tourists wander the streets, pouring money into the American war machine....” He rubbed his hands together in glee. “All perfect candidates to be doused. It would be interesting to see the hospitals on Saturday night. By noon the next day, they’ll be in a state of emergency, not realizing the battle is already over, at least for them. All they’ll have left to do is bury their dead.”

He paused a moment for effect, wanting the weight of his words to penetrate the minds of his men. “This is just the beginning for the United States. After this, we have plans for the New York

tunnels as well as Washington, DC itself. Look to the future but remember, one at a time. Do not be distracted. Focus, prepare and be ready to strike. Secrecy is our friend, our covering. Allah Akbar.

* * *

Joan Chandler glanced out the darkened window of the Bentley and shook her head at the stalled freeway. "We're going to sit here forever. Care to join me?"

She reached into the small refrigerator, removed a bottle, the container of orange juice and a small bag of ice. She poured vodka into a glass, topped it off with some juice and glanced at his disapproving face. "Stuff it, Devon."

She put the bottle of Stolli's back in the fridge with the ice, swirled the cocktail with her index finger and took a sip.

"I've had to put up with a lot of strange nonsense from you over the years. Please indulge me. As you can attest, I have had a very hard week." She took another sip. "Very hard."

"Even so, Mother, it is a bit early, don't you think? It's not even ten. Aren't you concerned about *that*?"

"Nope. I have too many real things on my mind to worry about *that*. You worry for me, okay?"

Devon crossed his arms over his chest and tried to sulk. As always, he couldn't, and snuck a glance at her from under thick eyelashes.

"I don't mean to rag about it and it is your choice, of course. I guess you're a big girl now." A strange expression came over his face as he pulled a pouch from the inside pocket of his jacket and withdrew a joint.

"And, of course, I'm grown up as well."

His voice, laced with a good amount of smug irony, made her want to shake him as he twiddled the cigarette at her, eyes twinkling. Insolent, she stared back at him, lifted her glass and took another sip.

He lit the joint and drew several deep breaths of smoke into his lungs, holding his breath a moment, slowly exhaling.

"Oh, I *so* appreciate that, son."

"Don't worry about it, Joanie, drink up."

Devon snickered, took several more hits from the joint then allowed it to go out. He put it back in the pouch and leaned toward her, dark eyes alight, drilling into hers.

“Now that we have *that* handled, what real worries are you talking about? Jim has the flash, those thugs are in jail and there’s a warrant out for Delia’s arrest. Is there something else ... aren’t you satisfied that the people who killed Joe are in jail? You’re holding something back from me and you usually don’t do that. Please tell me.”

“I don’t know, Devon. I just find it hard to believe Delia could juggle so many balls in the air at once. The work with the shops alone was full time. I know because I did it. Add to that the client searches, staying connected with the art scouts, traveling, and now we find she’s head of some team of art thieves? There has to be someone else working with her. She had inside help.”

“Any ideas who?”

She shrugged. “I don’t have a clue, but when we get home I want to find out where all the shop managers spent last week. Can you help me with that?”

“Of course. Do you include the Phoenix gallery? We’re pretty much on the fringes as far as Delia is concerned.”

“No. You managed that shop until Joe died so no one in your employ would have had the chance to know Delia. No, it’s got to be one of the other galleries.”

“How about that guy in San Francisco? Ah, Scott something? He’s always been just a little too slick for my taste. I’ll check him out and the Santa Monica store as well. As far as that goes, I can do them all for you. Then we can network and see what pops up. Really, leave them to me. I’m worried about you. That trip turned out to be anything but a pleasure cruise.”

Joan’s cell rang just then. “Hello.”

“Joan, this is Jim Sessions. I’m wondering if we could get together. Where are you?”

“We’re parked on the freeway right now, but we’re heading for the condo in Santa Monica. Where are you?”

“I’m in Hollywood with Lenny.”

“Why don’t you two come over, meet us for cocktails? I have no idea how long it’ll take us to get there, but I can give you a call when we pull in. We’re in the Ellis Building, ninth floor on the ocean side, 90211W. Good, we’ll talk as soon as we get in.”

Joan closed the phone, eye eyebrows elevated. "I have a feeling we'd better contact the shops now and have that information available for Jim." She looked up as the limo accelerated, passing the stalled car responsible for bringing the freeway to a standstill.

Stephens picked up the speed and slid into the carpool lane.

Devon glanced at his mother then pulled his cell from his pocket. "I've got the San Francisco, La Jolla, and Laguna shops. Why don't you call the others?"

Less than twenty minutes later they had their answers.

"All the managers on my end are accounted for. No one left, even for half a day. What did you find out, Mother?"

"Everybody's in place except for Ric Hartman, our Santa Monica manager. He and his wife left for vacation a week ago. Denise Adams, his assistant, says they went on a cruise with friends. They're due back next week. She said the trip came up suddenly."

Joan paused a moment. "I can't remember, how long has he run that shop?"

"I'm not sure, Mother. Perhaps five or six years? Delia hired him, I remember that. I've only met him once or twice. He struck me as knowledgeable and more than competent to run the gallery. How are the sales on that shop?"

"Very good. I haven't had any personal dealings with him, but Joe had confidence in his abilities."

"Well, that's something we have to remember to tell Jim." Devon glanced at his watch and pursed his lips. "Also, when we get to the condo, remind me to download the Santa Monica shop files. I want to see if there's anything odd going on over there."

"You think there's more to it than just Delia, don't you?"

"Yes, I think you're right. Someone else worked with her, maybe the ringleader of this bunch of thieves. Joe never talked with you about any concerns with the shops or the personnel?"

She shook her head slowly back and forth. "For a week or so before he died, Joe seemed nervous and preoccupied. I was so busy with the charity that we didn't get to spend a lot of time together. He didn't get a chance to tell me much, but do you remember Garry Walsh? The curator of the Philadelphia Museum of Art? He called Joe a week or so before the murder, and you won't believe this.

“Seems he’d been asked by the heirs of some collector in Manhattan to appraise some estate pieces. He recognized a Picasso right off that he knew was stolen from a museum in San Diego. The paperwork showed the collector purchased it from our gallery in Santa Monica. Agent of record, Delia Rowan.”

“Good Lord, Mother, I ... are you telling me Delia used our shops to fence stolen artwork? I can’t believe it.”

“Oh, yes, so it would seem. Joe didn’t tell me much because he didn’t get a chance. He suspected Delia and a client of ours, Maurice DuBois, might be the ringleaders. Do you know him? Ever deal with him?”

“No, I haven’t, but he is very well known, if not well thought of in the art world. Many of the top European museums won’t deal with him and the words *buyer beware* are the first you hear when discussing him.”

“You’re kidding. We worked with him for years. My God. How’d you find that out?”

“I had to fly to France last September and saw him at a number of events. I have a client in Phoenix who can’t get enough of the Impressionists ... honest, it’s enough to make you gag. Anyway, I found several pieces he wanted, and in the process, at one auction, I saw DuBois bidding on a Gauguin. As I said, in the course of my time there I saw him on several occasions. He makes quite a stir in society, you know, always appears at social functions with a beautiful woman on his arm. I thought it was professional jealousy and prejudice because he’s Muslim and because he’s successful. Looks like there were other reasons.”

Eyes wide, Joan turned to Devon. “I’m dumbfounded, amazed really. When we first started in the business, Joe and I used to hang out with him when we went to Europe. He was so young, barely out of his teens. We frequented many of the same shops and auctions, but I haven’t seen him in ten years, at least. Joe saw him on occasion, but the relationship had changed, you know how that goes. Maurice stopped coming to California and confined his American shopping efforts to New York; at least that was what Joe thought.”

Devon glanced at her from under his eyelashes. “Did Joe ever tell you why he suspected DuBois? Did he make a particular charge?”

Joan shook her head, sorrow twisting her mouth. “He never got the chance to tell me why he suspected Maurice. He probably didn’t want to worry me until the evidence was clear.”

The phone rang in the conference room, startling both men.

“Spencer here.” He listened for a moment. “Son of a frickin’ bitch.” He slapped the top of his desk with enough force to splash coffee out of his cup. Red-faced, he glanced at Malloy and shook his head in obvious disgust.

“Don’t let them toss the place yet. Yeah, we’re almost there. Thanks.”

“What now?”

“That was Detective Johnson, LA homicide, just calling to say they found the body of Delia Rowan, headshot.”

“Oh, shit, we really wanted her. Where’d they find her?”

“In a high-rise condo off Wilshire. I got the address right here. Let’s go check it out.”

Malloy glanced at the table. “What about the rest of the files. We only have three more to go?”

“Well, you can stay here or not, but I’m going to her condo before the Sheriff’s gang tears the place apart.”

Malloy shrugged into his jacket, slipping his gun into his shoulder holster. “I’m right behind you.”

They hurried through the busy outer office, nodding from time to time as fellow workers greeted them.

“What’s the address on Wilshire? Can we walk?”

“No, it’s too far. And what is with this walking shit all of a sudden?” Spencer glanced at his partner as they headed for the parking lot.

“I hate sitting in the car twiddling my thumbs is all. Just a waste of time. I shoulda brought my laptop.”

“Did it ever occur to you to just take that time to relax? I’ll drive, you nap.”

“Give me a frickin’ break.”

The sunlight, such as it was, fought its way through the low-lying smog. There was a smell of change in the air, neither more nor less appealing, just different.

As though to tweak Malloy yet again, traffic inched up the boulevard. As they pulled abreast of a Dunkin' Donut shop, he opened his door. "I'm gonna get a cup. Ya want one?"

A flabbergasted Spencer could only nod. "I'm not waitin' for ya."

Malloy grinned. "Wait for me? Yeah, right."

By the time he got back to the car, Spencer had actually gone almost a block. Malloy jerked the door open and leered. "Like I said, I could walk faster."

"So frickin' walk, then! Who's stoppin' ya?" He took the offered cup and shook his head.

They entered the lobby of the upscale high-rise, badges in hand. The cop guarding the elevator nodded. "Twelfth floor, gentlemen."

More badge flashing gave them access to the condo. Delia Rowan lay on the floor in a heap, the spreading pool of blood staining the pale carpet in a wide radius around her head. The forensic guys working on the body didn't even notice them, but the detective in charge did.

He extended his hand. "I'm Johnson."

"I'm Special Agent Spencer." He shrugged at Tom. "This is my partner, Special Agent Malloy. Come up with anything we need to know?"

Detective Johnson shook his head. "Gunshot to the back of the head and no forcible entry. Never knew what hit her. Good bit of blood spatter shows the gunman stood close behind her. Small caliber handgun didn't make much noise. Probably a .22 with a silencer, but we won't know for sure until they do the autopsy." He glanced at the luggage piled against one wall. "Looks like she meant to leave town."

Spencer and Malloy pulled on rubber gloves and nodded toward the back of the condo. "We're going to check the bedroom first, see what we can find. Then we want that computer." He nodded at the table. "Don't let anyone touch it, okay?"

They walked down the hall, looking on the floor, at the walls, getting a feel for the place. The spacious bedroom had a private bath and a dressing room with a large walk-in closet.

"I'll take the dressing room," Malloy said.

"I'll work through the furniture in here first."

Spencer went to her jewelry box, removing drawers containing a few bracelets and necklaces. He poured the items onto the dresser, checking the large box for a false bottom or loose lining where she might hide a note or a key, anything. He pulled an envelope from his pocket and scooped the jewelry into it. Although no expert, his immediate impression was that this was costume jewelry.

Her dresser contained a few items of apparel, but it seemed she'd packed almost all her clothes. From the looks of things, she did not plan to return. He pulled each of the dresser drawers out, checking the bottoms, looking for anything strange.

By the time he got to her nightstands he had little hope of uncovering anything useful. He opened one drawer to find it completely empty; the bottom, like all the others yielded nothing. He opened the other nightstand drawer and found only a worn Bible. Spencer picked it up, about to throw it on the bed for later perusal. Instead he turned it over, spine side up and leafed through it once. Two pictures fell out of the book.

One showed a younger Delia and a swarthy, handsome man, arms wrapped around each other in a close embrace, the Eiffel Tower clear in the background. He flipped it over and read. *Paris 1997*. The other showed her and the same man in swimming attire, sitting in the stern of a yacht, smiling as they raised their glasses to the photographer. The back of that picture said *Delia and Maurice in Cannes, 2002*.

He withdrew another envelope and slipped the photos inside. Bible tucked under his arm, he continued his search, but turned up nothing more. Spencer walked into the dressing room, glancing at Malloy on the floor, bent over a pile of binders stacked in one corner.

“What are those?” Spencer asked with a shrug.

“I don't know yet, haven't had a chance to check. There was a secret compartment here behind the shoe rack. Take a gander; I almost missed it hidden like that. I found the files inside. Check 'em out.” He straightened up and began to search the upper shelves.

“They're records of sales, just like the ones Chandler kept. Looks like they contain information on all the shops, who they catered to, more of the same shit if you ask me. Oh well, we'll take them along. I can't imagine they meant much if she was prepared to leave them behind.”

Malloy shrugged. “Ya never know. We’re just assuming she was ready to go when she got murdered, but maybe she had more packing to do. Looks like she was headed for the bedroom when someone shot her in the back of the head.”

Spencer leafed through the files for a moment. “I found this Bible in a drawer and wait until you see what was inside.” He bent over, staring at the hole Malloy poked around in. “That’s really weird. Do you think she made that herself? Strange.”

“She didn’t do it personally, I’m sure; this is a professional job. Shit, it’s probably something that comes with the condo. The resident can hide stuff away but still have easy access to jewelry or whatever they didn’t want to be found. So, what’s in the Bible?”

With a scowl, Spencer pulled the photos out of the envelope and handed them to Malloy.

“Wow,” he said, reading the backs of each. “Maurice DuBois, huh? Undeniable proof they knew each other ... quite well I would think.”

“Another link in the chain, my friend.”

Chapter 16

Joan perched on the edge of a delicate rose-colored chair. Her darkly circled eyes flitted from Jim to Lenny and back again. She leaned toward her son and smiled. "Please do the honors, dear."

Devon nodded, rose to his feet and walked toward the bar. "Gentlemen?"

They declined as he knew they would. Not so with his mother. He returned to her side, a tumbler full of ice and a personal carafe of vodka.

"Mother." He placed the glass before her, shook the carafe and stared at her. A glance passed between them and his shoulders relaxed; he poured for her.

She nodded at Jim. "You said you had something to ask me. What is it?"

"We have a bunch of questions, actually," Jim said. "The majority of your husband's files, at least the five we've checked so far, are all done in the exact same format. Would you know why there are several entries regarding Maurice DuBois that do not fit the pattern?"

She elevated her eyebrows and shrugged. "No, I can't imagine why. How do they differ from the norm? Maurice is a long-time client, one of our first, actually. We are well acquainted ... started out together as young, green art dealers. In the beginning we palled around whenever we went to Paris or he came to California. Over the years ... different things became more important to me, although Joe and Maurice continued to work with each other on occasion."

"So DuBois is a dealer, not a client?"

Joan shrugged. "He's both. We don't see him socially very often anymore, but the volume of business we do with him is ... brisk."

"Buying or selling," Lenny asked.

"Even, I would say. It's been several years since I involved myself in the daily operations of the galleries, but the Santa Monica store, in particular, worked with him on a frequent basis. Delia will be able to tell you all about that. Did they find her? Is there any word on her whereabouts?"

Jim glanced at Lenny. “How did you know she’s missing, Joan?”

“It was the first thing out of Stephen’s mouth when he picked us up this morning. It hit the news, I guess. Did they find her?”

“To our knowledge, the search is ongoing,” Jim said, nodding. “We found the following entries disbursed through the files; they concern the last week of Mr. Chandler’s life. As you can see, not only is the format different, the font is quite unique. It appears that although your husband embedded these files he wanted them to be easily found, either for his access or for anyone who came into possession of them.”

Joan leaned forward and extended her hand. “May I read them?”

Jim handed her a sheet of paper and nodded. “They’re highlighted in yellow. Does any of that make sense to you?”

Joan stared at the paper in front of her. “Ah, that’s the font Joe uses ... on personal stuff. He picked that one because he said it reminded him of my handwriting.” Blinking, she paused a moment and drew a finger across the page with a deep sigh.

MauriceDuBois/805051..nfldsmo..w\lcon

“Well, let me see. First thing wrong, obviously, is he wrote Maurice first. That’s unusual. Joe always starts all the entries with last name first; strange.” She shook her head slowly back and forth as she studied the entries.

“I don’t know for sure, but I wonder, could ‘nfldsmo’ stand for north field, Santa Monica Airport. SMO is the FAA identifier, like call letters. We only use that airport when we ship or receive from over seas clients to the Santa Monica shop.”

“What about when you get stuff in from over seas. How does it arrive?”

“Depends on which shop it’s going to and what the shipment contains. Heavy, bulky pieces like furniture or large sculptures usually come by sea. If they’re consigned to the Santa Monica store, they come in here. If they’re for San Francisco, they ship there. For any of the other shops, except for Phoenix, of course, they come into San Diego.” She shrugged and shot a glance at Devon.

“Paintings, smaller objects, or jewelry comes by air freight. We use the services at Montgomery Field for most of our consignments. The heavy stuff comes in containers to the San Diego

port. It's off-loaded onto ground freight and delivered to whichever shop ordered it."

"What about Custom's inspections? Who deals with that?"

"It's all done by the freight company. We never get involved in that."

Jim nodded at Devon. "Do you have anything to add? Are you familiar with the files Joe kept?"

"Not really, but let me take a look."

He placed a hand on Joan's shoulder and glanced at the papers. "Is it possible he ran the dates backwards? I can't imagine why he'd do that, but could 805051 be 15May08, like that? 1con probably means one container. I agree with Mother about what sm0 means, but nfld might also be the name of a vendor, maybe even a shipper, something like that. Possible?"

Joan shrugged. "Sounds as logical as anything else. Tomorrow is May 15 and if this means anything at all, we're running out of time."

"Mother, let me see the rest of the entries."

She handed the papers to Devon and shook her head. "I can't imagine why he did those entries in a different format. A container coming into Santa Monica is a regular occurrence."

"Except for one thing I see right off the bat. There's no mention of origin of shipment and usually the consignment ... no usually about it. The origin is *always* listed. Look here." Devon pointed at the other entries. Each one cited both origin and destination of the consignment.

"Is that significant?" Jim asked.

"Well, not as far as these files go because they're obviously internal records. But the absence of an origin on the original papers would be. Customs, the receiver and the port inspection papers require it."

He hesitated a moment, staring closer at the papers. "This nfld reference? I bet it doesn't mean north field. There's no reason why that would be in Joe's files. I doubt that he'd know what strip would be used, let alone bother to note it ... and what could it mean anyway? How does that matter and can it even be relevant? The planes are assigned by the Air Traffic Controllers depending upon the weather and the wind at the time. I think that's the clue we need to decipher ... nfld." Eyebrows elevated, he glanced at his mother. "Can you get hold of the consignors Joe used?"

“He turned that all over to Delia. It’s been ages since he involved himself in the shipping details. The FBI has Delia’s computer, so I have no way of accessing ... but the Santa Monica store may have records as well.”

* * *

Maurice DuBois pulled his ringing cell from his pocket, glanced at the caller id and said, “Excuse me. I have to take this.”

He rose from his chair, opened the French doors and walked out on the balcony.

“Oui,” he said, voice lowered. He listened a moment; twice he pursed his lips. “Excellent, Kaleil. Even the weather cooperates as Allah smiles on our plan. We promise our people retribution against the infidel, and at every turn they foil us. It will be different this time. Within seventy-two hours the dead and dying will overwhelm the hospitals and morgues. The Americans will learn what it’s like to have bodies rotting in the streets.” He paused a moment, listening, nodding.

“Our records show the death toll could reach one hundred thousand, and the permanently injured thrice that. Another successful assault on the United States will make the European nations quake with fear. We will give them a gift from Iran. Plans are nearing fruition for similar attacks on Paris, London, Madrid and Amsterdam, but first the United States; then Tel Aviv. Then we will set in motion the changes that bring down the Western world.”

Large black eyes glittered in the twilight. “They will embrace Allah or they will die. There is no middle ground.” He heard the subdued cries of his compatriot and muttered, “Allah Akbar.”

“The fax from Interpol is late. What the hell is holding them up?” Agent Spencer flipped through the piles of papers before him. Transcripts of Joe Chandler’s files, five years of business transactions for each store he owned and resumes of all gallery employees spread before him.

Malloy gestured at another pile, not nearly so large, of Delia Rowan’s files. He picked up one containing information about Ric Hartman and his wife, Clarice. The three had been friends for

several years when a golden opportunity presented itself. Delia hired them to manage the Santa Monica store and shortly thereafter they developed a plan to fence stolen or fraudulent art through Delia's wealthy and connected lover, using the Chandler shop as a conduit.

"It's hard to believe that Chandler was so out of the loop, isn't it? I mean, with this kind of stuff going on right under his nose, how the hell did he miss it?"

Spencer shrugged. "Well, being located in Santa Monica probably had a lot to do with it. He and Joan spent most of their time in Palm Springs or Newport Beach. The drive up there can be ugly, especially during work rush hours. Plus, until recently, Chandler trusted Delia. Looks like over the years he turned the responsibility for operating most of the galleries over to her."

Malloy pulled a photo from the file. Maurice DuBois. "The art world must be a huge clique. What are the odds of four likeminded types joining up to swindle and con their own community?"

He flicked the picture at Spencer. "He sits in his Paris shop and with contacts reaching out to a wide variety of scoundrels in the art world, begins funneling worthless or stolen artwork to the Santa Monica shop. From there it looks like Delia and Ric found buyers thrilled at the deals they made. They must have been excellent reproductions because few if any of the buyers ever knew they bought fakes; at least no complaints were ever filed against them."

Spencer shook his head, lips pursed. "Y'know, I'm just not sanguine with this art stuff. I know it's very lucrative, but DuBois is a reputable dealer in Europe, a multi-millionaire. Why is he bothering with all this unless he's a thrill seeker who likes to live dangerously? There's more than meets the eye with DuBois."

"Who knows what motivates a criminal? Some do it just to get away with something or to taunt the cops. The coincidence of that whole charade tickles me, I have to admit. If they hadn't sold a stolen Picasso to a man who died shortly thereafter, they might still be undetected."

"And again," Spencer said, "consider the law of averages. What are the chances that the museum curator asked to appraise a New York art collection would be a friend of Joe Chandler's? It's like a tragic comedy of errors. He spotted the Picasso immediately, of course, and checked the paperwork. Once he saw Chandler

Gallery as sales agent, he called Joe, inadvertently causing his death. When Delia found out that Joe intended to turn her in, she and her gang killed him.”

“I wish we’d nabbed Rowan; she had all the answers. I hope we can get Ric and Clarice Hartman alive. They participated in the murders of Chandler and the APP driver and in the art frauds. They have lots to share. With the APB out for their arrest, we should pick them up pretty soon.”

“Yeah,” Spencer said, rolling his eyes at Malloy, voice morose. “We had one of those out on Rowan, too.”

They stared at each other a moment, shrugged and went back to their files.

“Once Interpol finally gets off its dead ass and gives us the background they have on the foreign dealers, we might see a connection in the files. Damn!” Spencer glared at the fax machine again and started another list.

“According to these manifests, Chandler had shipments in and out of Europe on a weekly basis. Even though the majority of the cargo went into San Diego, a fair amount ended up at the Santa Monica shop, a disproportionately large number, all things considered. On its own, that store did almost as much foreign business as the other shops combined.”

Malloy nodded. “But that’s mostly what that shop does. I remember Mrs. Chandler saying that each of the stores had a specialty; that one focused on French art. The San Francisco shop specialized in Oriental pieces.”

“I wish we could get in touch with Mrs. Chandler. I know her son took her on a cruise, but they docked yesterday. I’ve left three messages on the home machine. If she doesn’t contact me in another hour or so, I’m sending a car out to check on things. Wouldn’t surprise me if more mayhem is in our future. Shit. I wish Inter....”

The fax machine chirped to life and made several small noises as it prepared to receive. Soon papers rolled out of its mouth; nine pages in all.

Spencer glanced quickly through the stack and handed half of them to Malloy.

Five minutes later they stared at each other, faces grim.

Mouth slack, Spencer shook his head back and forth and flipped his fingertips against the edge of the papers. “Son of a bitch. Do you frickin’ believe this? What the hell’s wrong with Interpol,

sitting on this for so long? Holy shit, man, Maurice DuBois aka Ahmed Faisal, is a frickin' damned terrorist. Look at all this shit."

Spencer scooted his chair over to Malloy's desk and put his half of the fax on the desk. "He's a French National, born in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. Parents immigrated to Paris when Ahmed was nine. They all changed their names: Francois, Michel and little Maurice; they became French citizens."

Malloy nodded several times, his forefinger sliding down the columns. "Says here his father became well-known in the art world and Maurice followed in his footsteps. They had several shops around Paris. The parents died quite a while back and Maurice inherited everything, including a villa in Marseilles and the galleries. He kept two; sold the rest." He glanced at Spencer and shrugged.

"He's a Muslim, a prominent member of the most radical mosque in Paris. They're a major recruiter for homicide bombers. Shit, man, they run a madrassa that the French Suréte has eyeballed for over a year. Oh, and of course, the bastards have close ties with Al Qaeda. A number of mosque members are thought to be complicit in several terrorist attacks that French Internal Affairs and the Suréte managed to derail at the last moment."

"So far, we've kept one step ahead of them." Spencer shook his head again. "I wonder if Joe Chandler knew the other side of Maurice DuBois. Until that stolen Picasso turned up last month, Chandler's record was spotless. It's possible he might not have known."

"Okay, the files from both computers referred to business. The decryption guys said the codes were internal shorthand. We got nothing in the end that pertained to this case."

Spencer hunched his shoulders. "Well, not exactly nothing. What about those strange entries regarding DuBois? We never got to the bottom of them."

"Jackson said the first series might refer to a date or maybe to a bill of lading. After that it seemed to be just a string of random letters and numbers. He said they may be personal things, notes Chandler wrote to himself. What was your take?"

Malloy leaned over and dragged a thick folder from the drawer. He plopped it on the desk and pulled out a file.

“Okay, here they are. I’ve never been big on puzzles, stuff like that. It’s gibberish to me. What do they mean to you? Any hints? Do you make any sense of this?”

With all the entries lined up under each other, any similarities in pattern or repetitions should have been apparent; in fact, they did not. After Maurice DuBois, all the symbols, the numbers and letters appeared random.

“This guy could be about to commit some terrorist act and we can’t figure out what it is. I’m going to try Mrs. Chandler again. She may know something without realizing how important it is.”

As he reached for the phone, it rang. “Spencer. Yes, we....” He nodded from time to time as his face drained of color, suddenly haggard, drawn. “I understand, sir. We’re on our way.”

“Good God, man, what?”

“That was Bradley over at the Riverside Sheriff. One of the gang Jim Sessions caught started to talk and he still hasn’t shut up. Seems DuBois started shipping canisters of anthrax into the country about six months ago. Plans to spray it over Los Angeles.”

“Oh, my God Almighty, man, you can’t be serious. How much of it does he have? I mean, that stuff ... like a pinhead amount is lethal if inhaled.”

“I know. I remember reading an article about an experiment with anthrax back in the ’60’s. The government sprayed a thirty-two mile long line of anthrax across the Johnston Atoll in the South Pacific. It traveled sixty miles before it lost infectiousness.”

“Son of a bitch. What do we do now?”

The phone rang again and this time, Malloy got it.

“Mrs. Chandler, we’ve been trying to contact you. Oh, you did, fine. What we wanted to know is how much success Jim and Lenny had deciphering your husband’s files? We came across numerous strange entries for Maurice DuBois as well as others that didn’t name anyone, and all input differently. Did they ever make any connections or did you recognize anything?”

He paused a moment then glanced at Spencer. “Okay. Well, if you come up with anything, don’t hesitate to give us a call.”

* * *

Joan doodled on her accounting paper, unable to make a connection. That last glass of merlot might not have helped and yet

she felt strangely excited, on the brink of a discovery or maybe a stroke.

She erased the name *Maurice DuBois* from her list of entries. Now the rows and columns seemed less daunting, somehow. She agreed with Devon. The entry of 805051 probably was a date and according to him, at least, done in reverse order.

Why in the world would Joe write a date backwards? May 15. That's tomorrow. Whatever this is about, time is closing in on us. Could it be August 5, 1951? Nah, that makes no sense at all.

She stared at the column and wondered again why Joe hadn't filled in the merchandise origin and description. Sloppy recordkeeping made him crazy, especially in the old days, but this verged on criminal neglect. Interior memo or not, too much necessary information was missing. He had mellowed some, but would he ever stand for this?

"Devon, a thought just occurred to me. Maybe these aren't Joe's notes after all. Is it possible he got these notes from Delia's computer?"

"I have no idea. Why don't you think they're his?"

"You know as well as I do. Joe kept meticulous records. He couldn't stand a loose thread and stuff that didn't conclude in a timely manner made him go ballistic. This ... it's foreign to all I know about him. There's no place of origin here, for God's sake, no description of the merchandise, nothing. I don't think they belonged to Joe."

"Then how did he...?" Devon chuckled. "The old-fashioned way ... he stole them."

"I figure they're Delia's. What do you think?"

"I think you're right. Whether or not she liked it, he still controlled her schedule. If he decided to send her up to Santa Monica or San Francisco, she couldn't argue."

"He wouldn't need to send her anywhere. The computers stayed in the office. Once she went home each night, he had unlimited access and she'd never know it."

* * *

"This is making me crazy." Terry shuffled the papers in front of her and glanced at Ella for a moment.

“Me, too. I have no idea what any of this means and I gotta say it’s getting a little old. These letters and numbers, this is backwards, that gets read from the middle out. How would you ever know? Like here, look at this one. We have *sema*.” Her voice changed and grew melodious, singsong. “Spell that backward and it’s *ames*.”

She turned to the dog at her feet and stroked her head. “Her’s a good girl, yes her is, huh *Ames*?”

The dog wagged her tail, burrowing her muzzle under Ella’s hand for more pets.

“What did you just say?” Jim peered at Ella. “*Ames*?”

She looked up from the dog and grinned. “Yeah. Well, he wrote *sema*, then *smo*. It’s part of the dumb code; I just meant to be funny.” She tapped the paper on the desk before her.

“Maybe not,” Lenny said, leaning over her shoulder.

“Why?”

“Do you remember that scare a while back? Someone mailed anthrax-infested letters to a couple of Senators and some TV talking heads, trying to shut the media up. It was called the *Ames* strain. Several people died, even with such limited contact.”

Terry shook her head. “Well, even so, that doesn’t mean anything related to this, does it? He spelled some stuff backwards, but right afterward, here, *smo*. That’s the call letters for Santa Monica Airport, right?”

Lenny sighed and shook his head. “I guess it is a stretch; I just hoped for something to turn up.”

Jim scanned the list again and found another reference to *ames* buried between other letters and numbers. *Ames*. He tapped the list a couple of times and nodded.

“Okay, if this is Chandler’s file, I don’t know what it means. But how about if it’s stuff he boosted off Delia’s computer?”

“The Feds have it.”

“That’s true, Terry, but they took it *after* Chandler died. He had access to it right up until she killed him. It was the company computer so he had knowledge of passwords and all the files. Maybe she kept the records for all the shops and buried these weird entries in real files so no one would ever find them.”

“You mean Delia agreed to the murder of thousands of her own people? For what? Why?” Ella stared at Lenny, blue eyes wide. “Who the hell would do that?”

“Terrorists do that. Every chance they get. Shit, man, they blow up their children with abandon. What’s a little anthrax for the infidels?” Tone bitter, he glanced at his friends.

“Stop it!” Terry said with a shiver. “We’re letting our imaginations run away with us. Sema spells Ames backwards. So what?”

“I know how you feel, sis, but whatever it is, if May 15 is significant, that’s tomorrow.”

Lenny’s cell rang; he glanced at the caller id and smiled. “Hey, how’s it going?”

The color drained from his face and twice he ran a hand across his suddenly sweaty forehead. He nodded again. “What? When?” He listened for several moments, shaking his head. He glanced at his friends then turned his attention back to the caller. Finally he said goodbye and snapped the cell closed. He stared at Terry.

“You okay?” she asked. “You’re white as a sheet, honey. Who was that?”

“Detective Beldon returning the favor, and, oh, God, you’re never gonna believe this. We’re right about the freakin’ anthrax. You remember those guys we busted? The ones that kidnapped Devon and Joan down in Ensenada? They’re talking their heads off and guess what?”

He jumped to his feet and let out an explosive curse, glancing from Jim to the girls. “They’re all Muslim terrorists. Son of a bitch, I never saw that coming.”

Jim stared at Lenny, green eyes wide. “You can’t be ... you’re serious, aren’t you? Holy shit.”

Lenny shook his head back and forth, drawing deep breaths. “Evidently some of the other prisoners smarted off about water-boarding Muslims in the Los Angeles prison system and those bums started screaming.” He cast an eye at the girls then continued.

“Maurice DuBois, alias Ahmed Faisal, is bringing or has already brought a considerable amount of anthrax into the country with plans to spray it all over Los Angeles.”

“Oh, my God,” Ella said. Her color drained as she leaned back in her seat. “You can’t be serious. That’s actually what the Ames-sema reference meant?”

Terry rolled her eyes from Lenny to Jim, hand to her mouth. She began to tremble. "Anthrax?"

"Son of a bitch." Jim stared at Lenny. "Did they say when? How?"

"They didn't know the exact date, but they said it's very soon. They're going to spray it from an airplane."

Jim shifted in his chair, jaw clenched. "I'm sure the FBI knows about the anthrax since they're assisting in the interrogations. That means Spencer and Malloy had no intention of cutting us into the deal and since they don't appreciate our help, that's fine. Screw 'em. We'll do it alone."

The enormity of the situation overwhelmed them as they sat in mute silence, digesting this latest and most deadly piece of the puzzle. Then a momentary grin flitted across Lenny's face.

"Beldon told me there's more than two million pounds reward for the apprehension of this gang. We've already caught half of them. We need to get the other half. Shoot, that's not chump change we're talkin'."

"It sure in hell isn't. That's what I call incentive," Jim said in agreement. "Well, DuBois is accustomed to shipping into Santa Monica. He's probably developed a variety of contacts there over the years. My guess is that's where they'll fly out as well."

Jim nodded at Lenny. "That airport is very busy, all kinds of stuff going on with museums, tours, kids and families walking around. It's a great cover; just blend in with the folks."

"You got that right, and they have small planes to rent as well; several accredited flight schools, stuff like that," Lenny said.

Ella gazed at Jim. "I've been there a couple of times, always lots of stuff happening."

Lenny tented his fingers, deep in thought. He raised his eyes to Jim, lips pursed. "I think you're right about them using the same airport. They use it for shipping purposes on a regular basis so it wouldn't raise any eyebrows no matter how frequently they're there or how late at night. Being part of the everyday norm is a great place to hide."

"What does anthrax do? What happens?" Terry stared at Lenny and shivered. "Does anyone know?"

"Gives me the creeps, no two ways about it." Jim shot a glance at Lenny. "Anthrax is the worst of the worst. When they spray it, no one will even know it at first. The people first infected

aren't contagious, but the clothes they had on will contaminate and infect anyone who touches them.

He paused a moment, gazing at Terry. "In a short while, twenty-four hours or so, depending on the health of the individual, it's like you have the flu or something. By the time you figure out how sick you are, it's too late. It destroys the lungs among other things."

Lenny took Terry's trembling hand and gave it a squeeze. "There's no point in downplaying the danger here. If he succeeds, the September 11th events, at least the death toll, will pale in comparison. If you could even imagine something like that."

They paused again in an uneasy silence while the smell of fear wafted around the room.

"My head is spinning," Lenny said, gazing uneasily at Jim. "We have to make a plan and quick. If we're right about the dates, then they want to do this tomorrow. Once they get off the ground, they're unstoppable."

"Should we call the cops?" Terry asked.

"I think they're on the same page with us, maybe even a little ahead. They have all the info we do, y'know."

Jim scowled, shaking his head. "I could kick myself around the block for taking so damned much time finishing your training with Cricket. We could sure use her, too. Once we get this settled, that's the first order of business. We'd be so much more effective if we had two dogs."

"I know. It's been a busy couple of weeks. Let's get that done ASAP."

"Well," Ella said, indignant. "What is Amy, chopped liver?"

Jim scowled at her and nodded. "Exactly. She's too spoiled to do anything but protect you ... which is fine, but no help here."

"That's ridiculous. She hasn't forgotten her training just because she likes to dance with me. What bullshit. Besides, you and Lenny need all the help you can get here. Amy is ready; so am I."

"You? Not a chance," Jim said.

"Well, you can't stop me and we're going to help. Right, Terry?"

Before she could respond, he interrupted. "What the hell does *help* mean to you?"

"I'm a great shot. Amy is fit and in super condition. Rudy told me she's one of the most talented dogs he's ever worked with. What do you think his opinion of her abilities for this job would be?"

"You can jump in here any time, Lenny. Tell them they can't come."

"Well," Lenny said, "I don't know that I agree with you. Having Amy back up Tony sounds like a good plan. I don't like ... shit, I *hate* the idea that the girls will be along, but we're only going to get one chance at this. Otherwise, thousands of people will die, including us."

"Terry and Ella could be among that number. It's crazy. They need to get out of town while there's still time."

"Forget that," the girls said in unison.

"Depending on how and where this goes down, they could be in the middle of it no matter where they were." He looked at Jim, face serious, almost haggard. "We have no idea what *Los Angeles* means to them. I mean, downtown? Hollywood? Who knows? Then there's the wind that controls the direction of the blow. Sixty miles could travel down to Orange County. No way of knowing."

"I can check the wind speed and direction for tomorrow over the net." Jim booted up his computer and set to work.

Lenny nodded. "Good idea. Okay, the plan I have is still in the formative stages for sure, but how about this. Let the girls ride up in the Jag with Amy. They can pretend to watch the airport traffic, check out the sunset. Being a private airport with so many public facilities, it won't be at all unusual. People love to go there with their children. They can follow us in and park near the hangars."

"I'm with you so far, but what and *who* are we looking for? Something like nfld or dlfn, in case we're going backwards again. God, what a freakin' nightmare." Jim turned back to the computer although he continued to talk with Lenny.

"Nightmare, indeed, Jim. Just pray we can make the connection in time. I figure you and Tony should stay out of sight, hopefully close enough that you can see and hear me. I'll nose around, check into the hangars, see if we can spot DuBois. If I see anything suspicious, any strange activities, we go back in with Tony and overpower the guys. Ella can send Amy in if we get in trouble and she'll do fine, I'm sure. Rudy's too thorough for that."

Ella glanced from one to the other. “What makes us think they haven’t already done it?”

“Nothing but tomorrow’s date. Hey, Jim, you find out the story on the wind?”

“Do you think that’s a firm date or is it maybe a window of time, like a couple of days in either direction could work, depending?” Terry’s eyes glittered as she worked through the computer pages.

Lenny shrugged. “They had originally forecast a high coming in tomorrow evening with continued low humidity and winds at twenty or so. It must have picked up a marine layer along the way, ‘cause it’s shifted a bit and will blow through tonight instead. Tomorrow’s forecast is for negligible wind and the possibility of a light sprinkle.”

“They’re gonna go tonight, aren’t they?”

“Looks like it.”

“Hey, what’s a Valkyrie?” Terry pointed at her printout.

Chapter 17

Light traffic made the drive to the airport a breeze. They hadn't spoken since they started the drive. The impact of what lay before them, the incredible odds and the more than unthinkable results of failure left them speechless. Terry pulled into the turn lane, keeping her distance from the Suburban.

"You scared?" she asked, her voice pitched low.

Ella nodded, glancing at her twin. "Hell, yes; how about you?"

"I'm numb, actually. Have been since we uncovered the plan. I cannot imagine hating anyone enough to do what these butchers have in mind. Inconceivable to me. I think about those Muslim women, those mothers ... I mean, I've never had a child, but to be able to send your own flesh and blood out to die like that, die as a homicide bomber, and do it seemingly without a care is beyond me. They rejoice." She swallowed twice, tears filming her eyes. "I couldn't blow up a dog."

"I know, sis, the whole thing makes me sick. With the right provocation I'm more than capable of killing someone who threatens me or mine. You know that very well. But to set out to indiscriminately murder innocent strangers ... I mean, what's with that? Women sending their children out to murder other women's children? Good grief, we need a brand new women's movement."

"I don't see that getting a lot of traction. At least, not where it's most needed." Terry kept her distance behind the Suburban, leaving three cars between them as they lined up to enter the airport. The hangar area, located on the end of a long row of garages and last in line, hummed with activity.

Halfway down the row, Jim backed into a slot in front of a little convenience store and parked. He glanced at the nearby hangars, slightly out of breath.

"Shit, man, I'm scared to death," he said to Lenny. "This is so way out of my league. You know what we do ... runaways and stalkers and domestic abuse, not crazy insane terrorists with anthrax, for God's sake. I got the frickin' heebie-jeebies. I hope we live long enough to collect the reward."

Lenny snorted. "It's always like this, Jim, you never get used to it. Been a while for me, too, but you never shake that feeling. Check your weapon."

"I did that a minute ago. Okay, here's the deal. I'll take Tony out and walk into that little alleyway. I don't want anyone to spot him if we can help it. You go in, get a drink and something to chew on. See if anyone's in a talkative mood find out whatever and just casually walk up to them and start a conversation. You know what to do from there."

They nodded at each other. "Good luck," they said in unison.

Lenny walked into the little food mart, made small-talk with the cashier and returned almost immediately with a bottle of water and a bag of salted peanuts. Heart thumping, he meandered down the sidewalk, making himself stop and stare in the shop windows.

As he came abreast of the first hangar, he read the sign over the office door: Northfield Flight School, Ltd. *NFLD*, just like in the codes. This had to be the place, but a flight school? They'd figured on a commercial operation. Lenny uncapped this water bottle and took a long drink. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Jag parked by the curb, Terry behind the wheel. Ella and Amy walked down the grass path that led to the runway, pretending to watch the take offs and landings.

A bright light focused on the plane and the area closely surrounding it, leaving the remainder of the cavernous hangar in deep shadows.

"Hi," Lenny said to the guy undoing the strings of a banner. "What a neat plane. She's really beautiful."

The swarthy man stared at him a moment and then allowed a pleasant smile to twitch his full lips. "Thank you. It's a lot of fun."

"What a great shade of red, and I like the pin striping," Lenny said, now within touching distance of the plane. "It's in great condition. I bet you have her named."

The man removed the last part of the banner from the tail section, rose to his full height, perhaps 5'7" and stared up at Lenny. He smiled again, showing small white teeth and patted the side of the plane like a much-loved horse. "She's the best. Her name is Valkyrie."

“Valkyrie? Wow, that’s way cool, dude. Like a warrior princess, huh?”

The man blinked. “Something like that.”

Lenny walked to the nose of the plane, smiling as he glanced at the dark red propeller. Chortling, he said, “I suppose that’s her stinger?”

The man smiled in response but said nothing as he continued to check the plane.

Lenny glanced around the dark, cavernous hangar at the barely discernable outlines of other planes.

“Are all these yours? Whoa, like a fleet. So, which is your favorite, you lucky guy?”

“Nah, we rent space here. Those planes belong to different people, some are even cargo carriers, but this one is mine.”

Ella sauntered up the walkway just then, a smile on her face. Amy strolled at her side, alert.

“Excuse me for interrupting.” She turned, still some distance away, and pointed at the Jag. “My sister and I are interested in learning how to fly. Do you give flying lessons?”

As the man watched Ella approach, his expression changed from mild irritation to open admiration. “Yes, ma’am, we’re the best. I’m Gary Northfield at your service.” He took her extended hand and glanced at the classic car. “We also lease space to store your plane if you have your own or I’ll give you lessons in this little baby.” He shrugged at the plane.

“Her name is Valkyrie, ma’am,” Lenny said, his voice as bland as a baby’s.

The man glanced at Lenny, a slight furrow in his brow and then turned back to Ella. “I’d offer to take you up tonight, but I have a previous commitment. Have you ever been up in a small plane before?”

“No, we just thought it might be a lot of fun.”

“Oh, it is. Come by tomorrow morning and I’ll take you up for a ride. You’ll love it.”

“Thanks so much, I’ll do that. What time is good?”

“Oh, how about ten?”

“We’ll be here.” She glanced around the hangar as though selecting a piece of fruit or a slice of pie. “My, isn’t that one over there gorgeous; reminds me of my car.” Ella pointed to a plane in the middle of the dark hangar. “Can I take a closer look at that one?”

Clearly troubled by her request, it was also obvious he didn't want to turn away a paying customer. Gary shrugged, unsure what to say. "I guess it couldn't hurt. Outside only, of course, but sure. Be careful you don't trip over anything, okay?"

Ella strolled toward the interior of the hangar. "Thanks. I'll be careful. See you in the morning."

Lenny continued to engage the man while Ella disappeared into the shadows of the cavernous hangar. Thanks to Amy leading the way, she met up with Jim and Tony at the end of the huge building, deep in the shadows of the farthest corner.

She embraced Jim, held him tight and drew a deep, shuddery breath. Voice just above a whisper she said, "There are some men in the office or whatever that room is. I only caught a glimpse, but two for absolutely sure. What should we do next?"

"All I want you to do is go home, but since I know you won't, here's the next best thing. Stay here in the corner and pray that the owner of that plane in front of us doesn't decide to take a ride. The second you see us go into action, call Spencer. Tell him we're at Northfield Flight School and what's going down. If those dudes manage to take us out and get the plane moving, he has the clout to have the airstrip blocked. We have to do whatever it takes to keep that plane here in the hangar."

"Maybe it would be better to call them in right now. Safer?"

"There's a multi-million dollar reward for the capture of these goons, *plus* the reward for the art. They tried to cut us out of the loop from the beginning so I'm not about to share with the FBI, at least not yet. Besides, they'll screw it up somehow, just like they did with Delia. I'd have had her in a New York minute."

"Okay, so you're going to wait here until the pilot and passenger come out. Then you're gonna sneak down the wall here and between you and Lenny, you're gonna take them out? That just about it? Close?"

"Close enough. If you see where she can be of assistance, send Amy in, but you stay well out of it. Promise?"

"I'll do my best, Jim, but I can't promise. We don't know what might happen."

* * *

Lenny made small talk for a short time longer and then glanced at his watch. “Oh, man, look at that. I guess I’d better get going. It’s been nice talking to you. I appreciate the time.”

He turned and made his way back toward the Suburban. Once out of sight, he made an abrupt turn and darted back into the hangar.

Jim inched his way along the wall, watching every careful, silent step he took. One wrong move could blow the whole deal. He reached down, tapped Tony’s head to get his attention and made a fist. He jammed it silently into his palm, extended his index finger and made a circle. The Doberman melted into the darkness.

As he drew closer, Jim heard three men speaking in clipped foreign tones as they worked in the circle of light, loading the plane. Their hurried movements and quick, rapid-fire way of speaking indicated the urgency in their efforts as they unpacked the duffel bags.

Concealed in the shadows and with his shoulder to the wall, he eavesdropped while his eyes searched the darkness, hoping to locate Tony. Jim pulled his gun from his pocket, slipped off the safety and peered around the end of the wall.

On his right, lights from the offices of Northfield Flight School cast a meager glow through the frosted window. The men working on the plane returned to the office.

Jim saw the Jag parked across the drive in a nearby spot. He couldn’t make out anyone behind the wheel and hoped Terry lurked nearby in the darkness. That car was their last and only hope. If somehow the terrorists got the aircraft started down the runway, he’d drive it into the little plane and make them wreck. *Why the hell didn’t I get the key?*

Lenny worked his way around the planes stored in the hangar. During his chat with Gary he’d scoped out the meticulously clean floor surrounding them. Nothing to trip over or bump into but the planes themselves and even as dark as it was, that would not happen.

He peered under the tail section of the plane nearest the office. Unless his eyes betrayed him, Tony lay in the shadow of the plane’s wheel, black body invisible to anyone on the other side of it.

Lenny smiled at the perfect mental link between Jim and Tony. The dog fixed on a point some distance away, his ears moving in that quick up and down movement unique to dogs with clipped ears. His attention focused on someone or something in the secluded inky darkness. Without a doubt, somewhere in those shadows his partner waited, shielded by the night, unseen to all but the dog.

Ella pressed against the wall, hidden in the murky blackness. She had no intention of missing the action and tapped her thigh, bringing the dog in close. She figured having Amy at her side improved their odds of success in this chilling and perilous plan.

If they failed ... if that plane became airborne there was nothing left to do but pray. She snapped her fingers just loud enough to get the dog's attention. Index finger raised to her lips, she tapped her thigh again and pointed at her shoe.

Amy moved into Ella's space, virtually touching her leg. Ella reached down and removed the spiked collar, ensuring no errant bit of moonlight would give away the dog's location. She tapped Amy lightly on the forehead to make her look up, put her index finger to her mouth one more time and made a circle in the air. With great deliberation, she made a fist and silently punched her other palm. The last time she gave Amy that signal, someone died.

The ridge of fur rose on the great dog's back; she laced her ears to the sides of her head, tail stiff. Her lips began to draw back from her teeth. Now firmly pasted to Ella's side, they crept down the wall, duplicating Jim's path.

Eyes well-adjusted to the blackness, Ella spotted Jim standing at the edge of the wall. She and Amy remained in the corner, unseen, waiting.

Maurice DuBois, accompanied by two men carrying bulging tote bags, emerged from the back of the garage.

"Are we about ready to go?" DuBois asked as he approached Gary.

Northfield grinned, started the engine and checked the gauges. He turned the engine off, climbed down from the cockpit and nodded at DuBois.

“Just one more thing, sir. I need your check.” He pointed at his office and DuBois followed close behind. They shut the door, once again.

The two men mounted the short ladders and heaved the duffle bags into the cockpit as they prepared to board the plane.

Cloaked in deep cover, Ella opened her cell and hit speed dial. “Agent Spencer?”

Chapter 18

Flashing his PI badge with one hand and the Police Special in his other, Lenny jumped from behind one of the planes and shouted, “LAPD, get your hands in the air. Get ’em *up*, up, up, *now!* Do it ... *now!*”

He gestured with his gun toward the pilot. “Get down, get down from the plane, step back down. Fast. Do it!”

The men glanced at each other, hesitated and then climbed down the ladder.

“Now get your hands on the plane, dude, high up, high as possible. Do it, asshole or I’ll blow your frickin’ head off. Do it *now.*”

Jim emerged from the shadows, gun drawn. He strode quickly to the co-pilot and prepared to handcuff him when he felt a gun press into his back.

“Don’t make another move, Mr. Sessions or I’ll drop you in your tracks. Put your hands behind your head. Serge, get back in the plane and start the engine.” He raised his voice. “And Mr. Browning, unless you want to watch me splatter your buddy all over the place, you’ll put your gun on the ground, too, very slowly.”

Ella listened to the melodious voice with its lyrical French accent and felt her stomach flip. DuBois didn’t make idle threats, especially on the brink of such a momentous occasion. Extreme times called for extreme measures. She bent over, pointed to DuBois and whispered, “Go.”

Like a silent guided missile, Amy raced toward the man and leaped at him, stiff-legged. Maurice shrieked as she struck him in the back with such force his gun flew up in the air and skittered across the cement. He and Jim toppled to the ground, the raging Doberman on top. Jim rolled away, allowing Amy unfettered access. She clamped on Maurice’s arm.

The astonished pilot reached for his weapon at the same moment Tony exploded from under the fuselage of the plane, banging his head on the metal stepladder. The dog smashed into the back of the man’s knees. With a screech, his legs buckled and he lost his balance and crumpled; the side of his head smashed the cement floor a moment later. He landed flat on his back not three

feet from DuBois and moaned once. A steady trickle of blood flowed from his nose.

Ella stepped from the shadows, gun in hand, eyes flicking from one gang member to another. Gary, the only one left standing faced her gun; she smiled. "Put your hands behind your head and back up against the wall."

Jim jumped to his feet retrieved his firearm and yelled, "Tony! Down. Amy, down."

Tony obeyed instantly, no longer biting his foe, but snarling horribly, his gnashing teeth just inches from the man's lips. Saliva dripped from the furious dog's fangs. He growled, sending spittle flying in all directions; blood dripped into his left eye.

Amy ignored Jim but not Ella. The dog relinquished her grinding hold on Maurice's arm, but growled just that much louder, interspersing her hideous snarls with scissor-like snaps at his face.

Not to be outdone and as though in concert, Tony's growls grew even louder, his tones escalating until they neared hysterics.

The excited dogs egged each other on in a frenzy, jumping on their prey with stiff forelegs, nudging them hard with their muzzles and trying to make them run, all the while, snarling and snapping.

"What the hell is that?" Jim said, pointing at the dogs. "*Tony!*" His voice roared above the snarling. "Down. Quiet."

Jim ran to Ella's side, gun still trained on the gang. Relieved to see her wink, he turned around, amazed at the dog's continued cacophony.

"Tony, shut up," he screamed, then turned to Ella, indignant. "Will you make her shut up? Please?"

"Amy, quiet."

Silence reigned for a moment.

Soon another wail rose in the night air.

The sounds of sirens floating in the distance told them help was on the way. Shortly thereafter, lights tore up the road and the cars, sirens still wailing, slid to a stop, peppering gravel in all directions. Next came shouts of, "FBI! Everyone freeze!"

The End

Epilogue

Three men clad from head to toe in white suits much resembling astronaut garb, picked up the bags containing the canisters and carefully inserted them into bomb-proof containers. They placed the containers onto the HAZMAT truck and slammed the door. The huge vehicle trundled down the driveway, headed for the county lab.

“We should run the bunch of you in.” Outraged, Spencer watched the cops load DuBois and company into the waiting paddy wagon. When the wagon drove off, he turned to Jim and Lenny, eyes narrowed to slits.

“I frickin’ can’t believe this shit! What’s *with* you guys, you bring your ladies? Hell’s wrong with you? Didn’t you realize what the hell was going down here?”

Malloy glared at Lenny. “Why the hell didn’t you tell us about this? Why tackle something like this on your own? Why wait until it was almost too late? Do you realize what might have happened?”

Expression furious, he glanced from Lenny to Jim, demanding a response. Lenny refused to meet his eye, but not Jim. Belligerent in the leftover rush of the past ten minutes and still enjoying the adrenalin, he looked ready for a fight.

With all the testosterone bouncing around, Ella decided to interject before someone said something someone else had to enforce.

“Agent Spencer.” She extended her hand and offered her most beguiling smile. “I’m sure we can work this out to everyone’s satisfaction. We didn’t withhold anything solid, and in fact, until twenty minutes ago, we didn’t even know we were right.”

She released his arm and gazed up into his eyes. “It was a coincidence, really. We kept working with the Chandler files, the words, what they might mean, and we saw “Ames” which is what I sometimes call my dog.” She paused for breath. “And then it clicked. Ames virus, the anthrax strain.”

Agent Malloy butted in. “That’s when you should have called us.”

“And said what?” she asked. “The presentation of the word was “sema”. Ames spelled backwards. We felt it was a bit thin on its own merits, so we checked it out first. I called you the moment I knew we were right.”

Somewhat mollified but still unhappy, Spencer ratcheted down the heat a couple of degrees. He shot a glance at Malloy and shrugged. “Okay, we’ll need to take your statements.”

For more than an hour, Spencer grilled them, asking questions, demanding answers. Finally, there was nothing left to say.

Eyes dancing, Jim nodded, teeth showing in a grin. “Don’t forget, we earned that reward ourselves. No sharing with you. Have them make the check out to Sessions and Browning, Private Investigators.”

“Extraordinaire.” Ella grinned.

* * *

Ella shivered. They sat in the lounge at their favorite booth, limp, hardly able to speak. Even though tension and stress always made her hungry, she wasn’t sure she could get up one more time. Her knees knocked together every once in a while and random chills shot up from her stomach as she realized what they’d done tonight. Her mind raced in overdrive while her body remained in park.

Ice cold beer, liberated from the cooler, went down real well and the empty dim-lit lounge provided a much-needed sense of calm, lulling their keyed up, whirling minds.

The girls heard the distant bell go off, glanced at each other with a sigh and headed for the kitchen. Their pizza was ready. Ella donned mitts and carried the hot pan while Terry bore a bowl of salad, a bottle of dressing and four forks.

Ella put the pizza and the plates on the table and shook her head. “Man, what a night.”

They served themselves, remarking on burnt fingers and hungry, rumbling stomachs.

Terry shivered, reaching for Lenny’s hand. “My God, truly, I’ve never been so scared in my life. When I saw DuBois sneak up on Jim, I couldn’t do anything but stand in the corner and pray. Then, when Amy came tearing out of the dark like that, I almost screamed with excitement.”

Lenny cupped her face in his hands, a tender smile on his lips. "You did great, hon. Prayers are always right on."

Ella cocked her head at Jim and snickered. "And you! You better take back every mean word you said about Amy." She nodded at the dogs. "Look at her."

With a chuckle, Terry leaned forward to get a closer view. "Ah, what a doll; I mean, isn't that sweet? She's cleaning that owie he got from banging into the plane steps."

"Owie?" Lenny said, casting a quick, sarcastic look at Jim. Blue eyes brimming with laughter, he turned toward Terry. "Owie. I love it."

Indignant, Ella shook a cautionary finger at both men. "Well, it's not that funny. What would you like better, a booboo? A ya-ya? Owie works great."

Leaning over for an even better glance at the dogs at her feet, she said, "So cute. We'll have to call her Florence."

Jim snorted with amusement. "Nah, she's just lulling him into a false sense of security. Don't buy it for a moment. When the time's right, she'll rip his throat out."

"Eeuw! What's with that kind of talk?" Terry glanced from Jim to Amy and back, shaking her head. "She loves Tony."

Ella put her arms around Jim's neck and nipped his earlobe. "You be nice. Besides, she saved your muffins tonight, old buddy." Her eyes tilted at the corners as a chuckle whispered past her lips. It rippled into the beginnings of a full fledged, slightly hysterical laugh. "Maybe I should say she saved your bacon?" She guffawed.

"Oh, God, here we go again." Jim shook his head.

Amy glanced up at Ella for a moment and then resumed licking Tony's wounded forehead. As he made a move to get up, she wrapped both front legs around his neck and held on.

Tony sighed. He relaxed in her embrace, closed his eyes and succumbed to her ministrations, comfortable but wary. Amy had such mood swings.

Other Books by Gayle Farmer

The Sessions and Browning Detective Series

Secret Lives

FireStorm

Cold Fusion

The Doubletree Kids Series

Follow Your Dreams

Couples/All In The Game: Two Books In One

High Hurdles

Riding High

**Visit Gayle's website at
www.GayleFarmer.com**

**You can find all Gayle's books at
www.OmegaPublications.net**