

Chapter 1

The ambulance raced down the two lane road through the green pastures of Tennessee as Kathryn Timms convulsed under the nylon straps of the gurney inside. Through her tears she could see a blur of an EMT drawing medication from a vial. Just as the man punctured Kathryn's skin with the 22 gauge needle, she squirmed, lodging the needle deep in her arm. She had wanted to make the convulsions look real to gain access to the clinic, but hadn't counted on the EMTs using sedatives.

"Goddamnit. I missed," he said.

"Fucking rookie," the other said, grabbing her arm.

"Give her to me." The second one jerked Kathryn's arm into the light and found the vein. "It's all in the wrist," he said and laughed.

The jarring of the gurney awoke Kathryn and in her medicated fog, she could hear the commotion of the emergency room.

"Talk to me, Ray?" the doctor asked running along side

of the patient.

"Found her at the Jensen's hardware store," the EMT replied, speaking quickly. "Mr. Jensen said she began having seizures back by where they keep the nails and screws."

"Vitals?"

"Pretty normal. Pulse 80, BP 120 over 90. Temp 98.5," replied the EMT.

Kathryn felt the soft hands of the doctor as he lifted one eyelid to check the pupil. "What's your name?" He was a black man who looked too young to be a doctor. He had a smooth, soothing voice and a warm, caring touch.

"I.D. says Melanie Tillman," answered Ray. "Thirty. From Michigan. No one at Jensen's knew her."

"Melanie," the doctor said, stroking her hair. "You're going to be fine. "I'm Doctor Langston. We're going to take good care of you," he said as he lifted the other eyelid. "Is there someone we can call?"

She rolled her head side to side. The effects of the sedative were making everything around happen very slowly, yet so quickly she could barely keep track of what had just occurred. The last thing she remembered was the bright penlight in her eye.

Kathryn awoke in the private room. The brightness of the walls under the florescent light stung her sleepy eyes.

She rubbed the crust from the corners as a nurse walked in.

"Well, look who's awake," the nurse said cheerily.

"How are you feeling?" She was a slim faced brunette with big hips, and said her name was Suzy, with an 'y.'

"Okay, I guess," Kathryn said. "Where am I?"

"The T. Edgar Williams Clinic just outside of Brooksville," she said with a flair of pride. "I hear you're not from around here, Melanie."

She had to think twice about her new alias. "No," she said. "I'm just passing through."

"You caused quite an episode at Jensen's. I don't think he's had that much excitement since his paint shaker exploded, spraying Chemise Coral all over his wallpaper display. He calls it Chemise Coral, but everyone else calls it pink. I guess Mr. Jensen just don't think it's right to have a pink hardware store, 'cause he yells every time someone calls it pink." She shook her head as if in disbelief. "Now that was something. I wasn't there, but I heard. Everybody heard."

"Must've been pretty exciting," Kathryn said as she looked around the room for her daypack. She was feeling much better. The effects of the drugs had subsided. "Have you seen my bag?"

"Sure. It's in the locker. Want me to get it?"

"Get what?" A woman said, her tobacco-taxed voice

coming from behind Suzy. Kathryn remembered the voice. It was a voice she'd tried, but could never forget.

Suzy's eyes grew wide, and Kathryn couldn't tell if she was feigning fear or truly scared.

"Her daypack," Suzy said, her voice trembling.

"It's in the locker," the Mothersole rasped in a lifelong smoker's voice. "Go get it." As Mothersole got closer, Kathryn could smell the mix of nicotine, burnt tobacco and rubbing alcohol on her. Her face was fat and wrinkled, and her eyes were permanently squinted. Her hair was dark gray and wiry like tangible smoke. "Been here before?" she asked. It wasn't a friendly question. "You look familiar."

"No. Just passing through," Kathryn replied.

"To where?" Mothersole asked.

Kathryn was about to answer when Suzy burst through the door holding the forest green daypack and Kathryn's clothes.

"Here you go. Everything's accounted for."

"You searched my pack?" Kathryn said indignantly. She knew they would. It was procedure. But she had to act surprised.

"Melanie," Nurse Mothersole began, talking to her as if she were a four year old. "Sometimes people come to hospitals after they've tried to hurt themselves. We must make sure that they can't do that in here. Can you

understand that?"

"Yes, Nurse Mothersole," Kathryn said obediently and shifted her eyes to the window. "If it's okay, I'd like to be alone now." The window faced west, and the long shadows approached her as the sun came to rest for the evening.

She gave them five minutes to think of a reason to return, then hopped out of bed and checked the corridor.

Empty. She grabbed a note pad from her pack, gathered the ATM receipts from her wallet, and spread them on the bed in front of her, arranging them in chronological order. They were all from the First Bank of Tennessee in Nashville. She took the first number from the account balance and wrote it down. From the second receipt, she wrote down the second number from that account balance, and so on with the rest.

She continued writing the numbers that corresponded with the balances until she ran out of receipts. When she was through, she had a series of number groups--the first with four numbers, the second with six numbers, the third with four numbers and the fourth with five. The computer password didn't need to be written down. That, she had memorized. Kathryn wadded the receipts and stuffed them into her pack, then wedged the notepaper into her panties for safe keeping.

When midnight came, and the hospital was asleep, Kathryn dressed and peeked out the door. The hall was dimly

lit with no one in sight. Her soft-sole shoes squeaked upon the polished gray tile as she crept down the hall, counting the rooms, looking for the one she stayed in five years ago.

The overwhelming stench of urine pulsed as she passed by each room, and she wondered what other kind of experiments were being conducted at the clinic.

Except for her noisy shoes, the rest of the clinic was silent. No snoring, no screaming, no babies crying. No code blues, and no crash carts. She modified her gait just enough for the shoes to stop squeaking, making her as quiet as the rest of the patients.

The door to her old room was closed. She timidly approached and wondered if it was still a birthing room. If so, she had to warn the mother. She tried the door, but it was locked. Kathryn pressed an ear against the steel door to listen for any sounds of life.

She never heard the latch. She never heard the door open, but suddenly in the doorway, an old man with pale blue-gray skin, yellow teeth surrounded by crackled purple lips, and red sagging eyes stood before her holding a crying baby. The baby screamed for his mother--screamed for Kathryn.

Kathryn bolted from the door, her shoes chirping on the smooth tile. She looked back down the hall. The man was gone, and the door was closed.

She was leaning against the wall praying her heart wasn't beating as loudly as it sounded when a door across the hall opened, and a doctor stepped out. Kathryn ducked into the nearest room, and watched as he passed by and into the lounge.

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Dr. Langston saw Rick and Ray in the break room and was thankful he would have some company other than Nurse Mothersole tonight. These guys weren't the brightest, but at least they could carry on a conversation and didn't smoke 5 packs a day. The AM radio was on as he walked in, and some blowhard was rambling on about black helicopters.

"I can't believe you two listen to that guy," the doctor said. He cracked open a small bottle of inexpensive spring water. "He's one of those anti-government wackos, preaching the gospel and proliferating militias."

"He don't preach much gospel, Doc," Rick said. "He just references it a lot."

"What's the difference?" Langston said and took a sip from his water. "What's he yapping about today? How the FBI has murdered a bunch of women and children? How the government can control the weather?" He sat in one of the orange plastic chairs, putting his legs up on another chair. "This guy is worse than any daytime TV talk show host."

"Bullshit. This guy knows what's going on. He's ex-

special forces," Ray said. "He used to work for the CIA. You know how they get their recruits, Doc? They kidnap women from Russia, impregnate them with frozen sperm from dead American spies, and then the mother's give up the kids at birth."

"Why Russian women?" Langston asked. "Why not American women?"

"You may know a lot about medicine, Doc," Rick said. "But you don't know shit about the real world."

"Geeze, Doc." Ray said. "Do we have to draw you a friggin' picture? They use Russian women so the baby's know how to speak Russian." He sipped his coffee, looked to hid buddy Rick and chided, "How many years of college to be a doctor?"

Dr. Langston laughed. "I can see it now. Welcome to the CIA Academy," he began. "First we're going to learn about counter-terrorist driving, then infiltrating a foreign government's embassy, and finish up with interrogation techniques guaranteed to make 'em sing. Then, when were all done, we'll have graham crackers and milk, and take a nap on the mats. If you have to go potty, just raise your hand." The doctor turned off the radio and flipped on the TV.

"Now, let's deal with some real key issues," he said as he switched to Nickelodeon. "Let's see what's Spongebob's up to?"

"Uh, we gotta go, Doc," Ray said standing up suddenly. "Got a lot of work to do." Rick said and stood, gathering his paperwork.

"You guys can't go. You can't leave me here with that fucking gargoyle. It's bad enough to work with Nurse Motherlode during the day. But at night? It scares the shit out of me."

"Uh, Doc," Ray said, nodding, as if trying to get him to look.

"What?" Langston asked, and turned around. Mothersole stood in the doorway, her girth filling the entire jamb.

"Don't go anywhere yet, boys," Mothersole ordered. She lit a Lucky Strike, inhaled the first hit and held the smoke in her lungs for at least ten seconds. "I've got a couple of questions about our newest guest."

"We've already told you everything, Nurse Mothersole," Ray said. "It's almost midnight and we still got a ton of work to do."

"Let 'em go," Langston said. "What else can they add? They've had a tough day."

"You keep out of this," she said. "Two weeks on the job earns you no rights with me, Langston."

The doctor slammed his water down and stood. "This is bullshit, Mothersole. You need to realize that I'm the goddamn doctor and you're the goddamn nurse." He stormed

from the break room and down the hall.

* * *

Through the big break room window, Kathryn could see the nurse and the EMTs talking. She got down on all fours and crawled quickly under the window. At the corner of the hallway, she stood and darted the last twenty feet to the offices. It all seemed too easy.

The first door was secured by a Cypher-Lock. Kathryn took out the paper with the numbers and punched in the first four numbers. The door clicked open. Inside, she moved through two dark offices. At the rear of the second one was a utility closet with another Cypher-Lock. She punched in the second series of numbers, and the lock clicked open.

The inside of the closet was a black, cement-reinforced, steel file cabinet. A long steel rod barred the drawers closed. For some reason she always thought that top secret files should have been kept in a more glamorous place.

The first combination worked fine, as did the second. Everything was going smoothly. She removed the bar, delicately resting it against the wall and opened the top drawer. Flipping through the files, she took those marked OPPRO and stuffed them into her daypack. She replaced the bar and secured the cabinet. It was just too easy, and she was getting the feeling something was dangerously wrong.

But she couldn't let the uneasiness stop her.

Outside the utility room, Kathryn sat at the big steel desk and flipped on the computer. Blank disks were in the lower left-hand drawer, right where they were supposed to be. When the computer asked for her password, she typed it in, and a list of files appeared. She loaded a blank disk into the A drive.

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Nurse Mothersole was finished with the lazy-ass EMTs, and that punk-ass doctor, so she strode to the nurses station, leaving a waft of aromatic smoke in the air masking that damn urine smell she had never gotten used to. She knew she had seen the new girl before and wanted to do a little checking up on her.

She settled into the worthless chair. It was the third one she had gone through in a year. The pieces of crap barely lasted three months before they fell apart. She had overheard the guys joking about her weight causing the chairs to break, but she knew it's because the goddamn Chinese made them. She fired up the computer and another Lucky Strike.

Mothersole entered her password LSMFT and waited. Then just as she was about to get into the system, the computer responded, "PASSWORD IN USE. ACCESS DENIED."

"Bullshit," she said to the lousy Japanese computer and

tried again. And again, she got the same message.

"Goddamnit!" she said and pushed herself up from the chair and moved like lightening down the hall.

* * *

Kathryn slid the last disk into the computer, and continued the downloading. Two minutes more and she would be out of there.

While the system released the classified information onto her disk, she memorized the last five digit code. She didn't want to be stopped at the door, holding the code in one hand while trying to open the Cypher-Lock with the other.

When the disk was full and all the information had been copied, she put the disk in the pack with the others, and logged off the computer. She stood, ready to go and saw Nurse Mothersole waddle by the big window.

Kathryn slipped to a small alcove, between a file cabinet and the wall. She noticed an umbrella was standing in the corner as she heard the metallic click of the door unlocking. Kathryn had the umbrella opened and was crouched behind it just as the door opened, spilling light into the dark room. Her heart pounded again, and she knew she was caught. She was going to die. There was no way they would let her live.

She prayed. She prayed hard behind the big umbrella.

She prayed for her son.

The door opened and Mothersole walked in. "Come on out, Melanie, or whatever the hell your real name is."

Kathryn could smell the woman's tobacco stench from across the room.

"You're in over your head," Mothersole said in her cancer voice. "I know I've seen you. It's only a matter of time before I figure out who you are." Kathryn hoped that the umbrella wasn't trembling along the rest of her.

"Even if you escape tonight, these people will track you down like a like a dog." Mothersole moved slowly through the room toward the desk, still trying to catch her breath. "Didn't anyone ever tell you hiding under the desk is so damn predictable?" she said as she stepped behind it, as if hoping to surprise her quarry. When she bent for a closer look under the desk, Kathryn repositioned herself.

"Maybe you're not so predictable." Mothersole looked around the dark room, then flicked the desk lamp on. The open umbrella caught her eye, and she took a shiny letter opener from the desk and slowly approached the umbrella. With two steps to go, the big nurse quickened her pace the way place kickers do, and sent the umbrella skyward.

Kathryn charged from the woman's side while the nurse was off balance, trying to recover from her kick. She slammed into the nurse, pushing her to the floor, then

jumped over Mothersole and rushed through the offices to the outer door.

She fumbled with the lock, but had the door open and was halfway out when she felt the tip of the letter opener go into her back. She arched out of reflex, and felt the burn as the tip scraped down her back through the first three layers of skin. The opener caught on her leather belt, causing her to lose her balance, and Kathryn fell to the floor.

Mothersole clambered on top and backhanded Kathryn's face, her ring leaving a small gash on the right cheek.

With her hands pinned under the weight, Kathryn was helpless. Nurse Mothersole raised the letter opener above her head with a bead on Kathryn's heart.

The nurse's arm came down hard just as Dr. Langston dove into her, knocking her off Kathryn. Kathryn stretched for her daypack as the doctor and Mothersole wrestled on the ground, vying for control of the letter opener. A security guard drawing his weapon brushed by her as she ran out the door. Seconds later a shot sounded inside the building. She turned for one last look at the distant lights of the T. Edgar Williams clinic.

Jonas had told her it was going to be dangerous, and that there was a good chance she wouldn't escape. But Jonas had also said, stealing the files would be the most

challenging aspect of the mission, and if Kathryn did survive, the rest would be a milk run.

Chapter 2

Cooper Sumner turned in his oversized bed and felt for the velvet skin of Gabrielle. But as his hand searched the cotton sheets, he came out of his sleep and his eyes opened to the empty side of the bed and the untouched pillow. His heart came to the realization she was never coming back. He was alone again.

Coop slipped on his bathing suit, shuffled down the oak staircase and across the cold tile floors to the brushed aluminum kitchen. Mr. Coffee, alone on the counter, had a full pot of Community Dark Roast ready for him. He looked around at the empty house and gave a cheery "Good morning," mocking the bleak mood that blanketed him. "Good morning," came his sharp echo. Except for a leather club chair, a small table next to it, and a stereo, the downstairs was bare. A new TV, still in its box, sat on the hardwood floor next to the Sony stereo. Gabrielle had been after him to buy more furniture. As a surprise Coop was planning to furnish the entire place as a wedding present to her. In

the meantime, he had bought a TV because Gabrielle liked to watch ESPN.

He scrounged unsuccessfully for something to eat and took his mug outside to the crisp spring air. There was more furniture on his expansive deck than in the house. Two teak chaise lounges and a matching table were faced toward the sunsets, an umbrella table was nestled in the deck's southeast corner giving Coop an unobstructed view of the sunrise as he had his coffee and paper. Tucked in the corners were a pair of Bose 151s to carry the music outside. On sunny days he preferred Jimmy Buffett; starry nights called for classical. This morning though, he preferred the quiet sounds of the beach.

Overnight the storm had moved into the gulf, the north winds flattening the water for miles. In the distance, the strong winds built the seas giving the horizon the choppy and blurred appearance of a jagged-edged, small, flat world.

The sun had been up for a while and was beginning to light the pale green shallow waters of the gulf. A pod of dolphins surfaced, their backs glistening momentarily in the morning light, only to submerge again. Coop pulled a chair from the table and faced the sun, stared into his black coffee and wondered where today would take him.

Until a two years ago, Coop's life had always been planned. He always knew where he was supposed to be and

what he was supposed to be doing. But retirement meant personal freedom. And personal freedom was something Coop never had. He had spent the last fifteen years on missions in Russia, Afghanistan, Libya and several other hostile countries doing odd jobs for the CIA, NSA, ISA, and a few other agencies he still can't mention. His whole life, it seemed, he had a mission, a duty, a reason why he existed. This past year his mission had been Gabrielle.

As a child, Coop's mother had abandoned him, leaving him on the steps of a rural Ohio orphanage. He grew up there along with fifty two other boys, and together they faced the rigors and discipline of living in an institutional environment. Before leaving the home at eighteen, he was accepted into the Naval Academy where, during his plebe year, when his class mates were struggling with the regimented life, it was almost a vacation for Coop compared to life at the orphanage.

Coop took a sip of coffee and looked back at his house. He didn't own too many material items. But what he did own he loved. The Mediterranean style home was more than he needed, but when he retired he figured he deserved the luxury of a five-thousand square foot gulf front home. It, along with his Hummer and his Harley, were paid for. Coop owed no one.

His alimony, the money given to agents while living

black--working undercover, usually ranged from six to seven figures depending on length of assignment and probability of return. The more the alimony, the less chance he would be around to collect it. And historically, when men came back enough times to retire, usually around age thirty five, they blew their money in few short years trying to make up for all the lost time. Not Coop, however.

Coop had always looked for the biggest price tag and always returned. Some say he was blessed--that he had an angel looking down, protecting him. He never lost a partner and never left anyone behind. He'd had taken seven rounds going back for teammates over the years. Two landed in his left buttock spaced just enough apart that when he lay on his right side, from the back, Gabrielle had said it looked like a smiley face. On a botched mission in west Africa he ran some FNG who had taken one in the jugular over nine miles to the LZ. Coop had worked too hard for his money and he wasn't about to blow it.

Suddenly next door the undeniable voice of Richard Simmons came on over the speakers, bringing Coop out of his thoughts. Outside the opulent hot pink house, Dick Velour, the overweight, fifty year old, self-ordained Cash King and Investment Guru was on his deck Sweating to the Oldies in a black Speedo. A bloody mary and a brimming ashtray were well within reach of his hairy arms. Coop waved out of

neighborly politeness when their eyes met, but offered no further encouragement. Velour enjoyed talking about his money.

"Morning Coop," Velour called, raising his glass in a toast.

"Good form," Coop said, trying to hide a smile.

"This stuff really helps. I swear I'm more focused now than ever," he said and took a long sip. "I made forty-five big ones yesterday." He set the drink down and reached for his cigarette. "You should let me handle some of your inheritance. I could do the same for you."

Coop had no inheritance. But it was the best way to explain his money. "I think I'll keep mine just where it is. My CDs are raking in about four percent, Dick. I can't complain."

He also had no CDs. His money was kept in the Grand Cayman branch of Coutts, under Sumner, LTD.. There, monies accumulated tax free and stocks were sold with no capital gains penalties. Not quite within the tax code, but the Treasury Secretary signed off on this one personally. Over the years, Coop had called his own shots and the portfolios been growing at respectable rate. Every month a small check was deposited into a local bank to cover his meager living expenses. For traveling and major purchases, he held a Coutts Visa Gold card. CDs and savings bonds, however, were

the two topics guaranteed to piss off Velour and shut him up.

"CDs?" Velour said, exaggerating a laugh so he could be heard over Richard Simmons. "If you ever find a set of balls, let me know. I'll make you some real money."

He smiled, wishing he had done background checks on his neighbors before moving in. If he had known about Velour, he might have chosen another beach. Maybe another state. "Thanks," he said and waved him off.

Coop was almost inside when Velour yelled, "How did it go with Gabrielle?"

He turned to respond, wondering how the hell he knew. "It didn't."

"A beautiful girl like that? You didn't ask her?" Velour shook his head as if disgusted. "A set of balls, son. A set of big brass ones. That's what you need."

The phone rang rescuing Coop from Velour. He darted to the counter hoping it would be someone it wasn't.

"Coop? It's Dan," the man said. "Go secure."

Coop hung up and walked upstairs to his office where the secured line was kept. The phone rang as soon entered the room. "Hey, pal," Coop said. "Long time no hear." Coop looked out the front window. The Donahues across the street were still not back from their vacation and the papers were collecting in the driveway. A Ford sedan with

smoked windows and distinctive red Missouri plates and passed in front. Dr. Chang, the beautiful young internist, bent over for her paper. "How's things in D.C.?" Coop asked.

"I'm working too damn much. I wish I could sit around and let my mind wander like you."

"What're you talking about," Coop protested. "I work."

"Bullshit," Dan said. "I've seen will-work-for-food guys exert more energy than you."

"Look," Coop said, "Until you've walked a mile in my flip-flops--"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Look, I called for two reasons. First, how did it go with Gabrielle? She say yes?"

"Never got around to asking her." And he left it there.

"No details?" Dan asked, as if he were disappointed.

"Let's just say we had a compatibility problem."

"Sorry to hear that," he said. "But don't give up, Coop. One day you'll meet the right woman," Dan said.

"You'll fall in love, get married and have kids. She'll screw around on you. Then you'll have a nasty divorce and spend the rest of your life paying alimony and cursing the day you met her. So, hang in there, man."

Special Agent Dan Banister had been in the field for ten years and had taken a hit in the chest. The wound and

the subsequent surgery caused a horrible, phlegm producing cough and cost Banister half a lung. He had the option to retire or to stay on with a desk job. He chose to work. Banister's main job was to line up small, easy assignments for former agents of the different organizations. Since Coop had worked for all the agencies for one project or another, Dan still kept in touch, giving Coop the chance to make money. Coop usually turned them down.

"How's your Chinese?"

"Phenomenal," he said staring at Dr. Chang sitting on her deck drinking coffee. She was wearing a bikini top and denim shorts. A Mediacom truck was a few houses down, but no workers could be seen.

"Glad to hear it. I've got a job for you."

"Not interested," Coop said.

"It's a milk run, Coop. You'll be in Beijing a week. A month, tops."

"Nope."

"Pays a hundred thou."

"I'm busy that week." Outside, Dr. Chang was gone. The Donahues pulled in the driveway, tires bouncing over the papers. And the Missouri Sedan stopped briefly next to the Mediacom truck. Dr. Chang walked back outside, sipping what looked like a now full cup of coffee. "Thanks for thinking of me, but I'm retired."

"How retired can you be if you still have a phone scrambler?"

"Old habits die hard," Coop said. He had no idea why he kept the scrambler. Other than the money, the scrambler was the only material connection between his present life and his past.

"If you change your mind, let me know? By the way, how's the book coming?"

"I haven't started it yet, but I think today's the day."

"Maybe it's time to take that goddamn monster of a bike you have and hit the road for a month. Go write that book you've been yapping about. Quit talking about it and start doing it. Didn't Hemingway say something about that?"

Coop sensed something was wrong. Dan was not a big fan of small talk, but today he was asking too many questions. "What's up, Dan? Why all the questions? What's going on?"

"Nothing, Coop. Just checking on you. It's part of my job, you know."

"Thanks for checking, but I'm fine."

"Call me if you need me," Dan said.

An hour later he was swimming in the gulf. The beginning of spring was his favorite time of the year on the coast. No tourists and hardly anyone from town. Only a handful of spring breakers, dry north winds and clear blue

skies. As he swam, his arms moved from the cold water to the warm sun and back again. His goggles kept an eye out for the sand shark or stray hammerhead on the bottom. He swam south towards the Yucatan Peninsula five hundred miles away trying to get in as much distance as possible.

Distance heals.

Coop switched to the breaststroke and estimated the distance to be about one mile. He made his slow turn toward home. In the distance he could see his house amidst the white glare from the beach.

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As dusk approached, Coop was shoveling sand and wrestling palm trees into their new homes when Dr. Chang's boyfriend, a pretentious anesthesiologist pulled up in his Jag and laid on the horn. Coop watched as she walked down the wide wooden steps of her house. She was wearing a red gown so thin and breezy, a strong wind could have blown it off her. He stopped working, leaned on his shovel and while taking off his work gloves, said in perfect Mandarin Chinese, "You look lovely tonight, Doctor. I hope your date appreciates beauty as much as he appreciates intelligence." It was the first time he had spoken to her and as soon as he said it, he wished he hadn't. Cooper Sumner, retired CIA turned Creepy Stalker.

She stopped on the last step and look at him as if

surprised at his mastery of her native language. "Thank you," she replied in her tongue. "And you look dirty. I hope your date appreciates fertile soil as much as she appreciates men with such good taste."

Coop smiled and went back to work, wondering what the hell the guy in the Jag thought was more important than helping Dr. Chang into the car.

After a quick shower, Coop put on a pair of shorts and a light sweatshirt and pedaled his Cannondale mountain bike through the cool evening air to Spot's. The orange clouds were glowing in the aftermath of the sunset as Coop locked his bike amongst the rusted cruisers and ten speeds in the wooden rack outside Spot's Exotic Animals and Gulf Side Watering Hole. He walked across the sandy sidewalk, past beach strolling couples holding hands, toward the reggae music coming from the bar. It hadn't even been twenty four hours since he and Gabrielle walked the beach. If he had realized it was going to be their last time, he may have enjoyed it a little more.

Lazy Day was playing to a full crowd, and Spot's fiancée, Anna, was behind the bar. She saw Coop come in and asked one of the other girls to cover for her.

"Hey, handsome. Buy you a beer?" She handed him a Dos Equis.

Coop straddled a bar stool, grabbed a napkin and

wrapped it around the beer. The place was half filled with the college crowd spending another wasted night of spring break.

The ceiling fans spun slowly, mingling the humid gulf coast air with the semi-sweet redolent combination of suntan lotion, sweat, perfume, and stale beer.

"Thanks, Anna." He took a sip. The first beer of the day always had a special taste to it. "Spot around?"

"He'll be here later. He is flying. He must have so many hours." She scooped him a bowl of peanuts. "Why didn't you become a pilot?"

"I guess it wasn't chosen for me." He looked around the bar for any familiar faces. "I know a little about it," he said. "It's the landings I always have trouble with."

"What did you do in the Navy? Spot never told me."

"I worked at the Pentagon." It's what he told everyone.

"Did you meet Wolfe Blitzler?" She asked with the genuine eagerness of a child asking someone who had been to Disney World if they had met Mickey Mouse. In many ways she was still like a child. With her inquisitive nature, her enthusiasm for the routine, and her ability, through a vulnerable trust, to make anyone feel as comfortable as if they had known her forever.

A twenty seven year old student from Hungary, having

been in the U.S. for only six months, Anna seemed continuously amazed at everything she saw. Things that Americans take for granted: grocery stores, fast food, The Gap. Spot said she had once spent two hours at the Everything's a Dollar store trying on big sunglasses, looking at the toys, and reading the books. Being with her was like reliving first experiences as a child, and at the same time, as an adult.

She was not attractive by traditional standards, but Anna possessed a continually emerging beauty. The more she said, the more she was around, the more beautiful she became. It was an appealing quality and it was easy to understand why Spot had fallen for her and proposed after only a few months.

"Well?" she prodded.

"No," Coop said. "I haven't met Wolfe Blitzer."

"Too bad. He is one very sexy American."

"If I see him I'll tell him you said so."

"No. Please don't. Spot might be mad."

"I didn't think he ever got mad."

"He doesn't. I just don't want to test him." She reached below the bar for a handful of saltines and wedged them into the basket. "So Coop, how did it go with Gabrielle? Are we going to have a double wedding?"

Coop lowered his head, looking into the bottle of Dos

Equis, not wanting to answer.

"Coop?" Anna tried.

When Coop looked up again ready to talk, Anna's attention had moved on. Her eyes were alight and a big-tooth smile graced her face. "Spot!"

Coop felt a friendly hand on his back.

"How are my two favorite people in the world?" Spot asked as he slipped behind the bar for a few of Anna's kisses. Gabrielle never kissed Coop that way. It was always quick pecks. He didn't mind, though. He was simply thankful to have her--to finally have someone.

"How'd it go, fly-boy?" Coop asked.

"Same old shit," Spot said, pouring himself a beer. "Take her up. Log it down. Maintain proficiency." Spot had been Coop's roommate for four years at the academy and a right tackle for the Midshipmen. The solid, two-hundred-ninety pounder had the opportunity to go pro, but instead, kept his commitment to the Navy. It turned out he liked flying a hell of a lot more than football. His dream was to fly fighters, but was too big to fit into the cockpit so he had to settle for CH-54s. He turned to the bar, set his beer down and reached another cold one for Coop.

"How's the house coming?" Coop asked.

"Fucking hurricanes," he said. "Hurricanes and contractors. You never know when they're going to show up."

He raised his glass and emptied the entire beer into his mouth. "There's no telling when the house is going to be done. Probably another month or so. The place is so damn dusty, I can't stand it." He turned to the beer tap and filled his glass.

"I must get back to work," Anna said, as if wanting to dodge a sensitive topic. She tied the apron around her thin waist. "Sleeping with boss only gets you so far," she said and gathered a few glasses, then headed to the kitchen.

"Any luck with moving in with Anna?" Coop asked after she moved out of range.

"No. She's pretty damn adamant against cohabitation. She says her mother would roll over in her grave. She says it makes things too comfortable. So you always wonder if you are in love with the person or in love with the comfort."

"She's got a point." Coop tipped his beer to his lips.

"It's just the whole marriage thing again, Coop. Know what I mean? I was hoping if I move in with her, she won't want to get married so fast."

Spot had spent most of his Navy years in Pensacola. First going through flight training, then later returning as an instructor. And in his fifteen years of active duty, the only time he saw Coop was one night while he was on alert off the coast of North Africa.

Spot's number had come up to drop two Russians Mafia types into the water twelve miles north of the Libyan coast.

The two had been intercepted flying a cargo plane full of weapons and forced to land at a covert airstrip north of Athens. Eventually, after days of continuous interrogation, as the CIA called it, the two broke, giving up the information the CIA needed to temporarily neutralize a particularly violent Libyan terrorist group.

In return for their information, the Russians were promised passage close to their original destination. It was the CIA's call: They were to be dropped in the water twelve miles from shore in a shipping lane. Their cover story would be that their plane had gone down and they spent three days in the water. Their bruises were sustained in the crash.

It was midnight when Spot landed at the airstrip only long enough for the spooks to load the Russians into the helicopter. As he flew over the Mediterranean, he looked back several times to check on his passengers. He had a clear view of the short one who kept yelling something in Russian. The tall one was harder to see in the low light. He only saw the hands, resting on the knees, protruding from the shadows.

Hovering forty feet over the drop zone, with all lights extinguished except for the green jump light over the open

hatch, the prisoners were ushered to the door. The short one was still screaming, fighting the marine guards, knowing he would die. After a quick struggle, they tossed him out of the hatch.

The other Russian stood squarely in the doorway like a diver on the high platform concentrating, focusing. Spot watched as this high ranking member of the Russian Mafia, turned to face him, gave him the thumbs-up, then leaped into the sea. It was a face Spot had seen almost every day for four years, then not again until that dark night twelve miles from Libya.

Spot fought every urge to lower the loop and pick up his best friend. But he knew that whatever Coop was doing, it must've been right.

A few years later Spot returned to Pensacola and with less than a year left to serve, it came time to renew his contract with the Navy, Spot couldn't decide what to do. His wife had run off with the plumber, and the divorce cleaned him out. But since he had been married to her for so long, she was entitled to half of his retirement. And, right or wrong, he wasn't going to let that happen. But the airlines weren't hiring, and the Navy was cutting back on flight time. There was no viable option.

The solution came to him on a ten beer night at the Flora-Bama when he purchased a Fantasy Five lotto ticket.

He bought it from the window just inside the back stage at 9:28, and by 9:59, Lt. Preston "Spot" Matthews, was worth over \$650,000.

The following Monday he drove to Tallahassee and collected his money. On Tuesday, he made an offer on a run-down beach bar. On Wednesday, he took an early out from the Navy. Seven months later, after spending all of his free time working on the bar, Spot's Exotic Animals and Gulf Side Watering Hole opened for business. The place was a hit with the military, civilians, and tourists alike. It had even survived back to back hurricanes. Everything was going well for Spot. Everything except the pressure Anna was putting on him to get married.

"But enough about me," Spot said. "What'd Gabrielle say?"

Coop lingered for a moment, his hand fighting to stay wrapped around the comfort of the cold beer. But he succumbed and reached into his pocket and placed a small velvet case on the bar.

Spot looked at the case, then to Coop. "What the hell? She said no?" He asked as if he didn't believe it. "I don't believe it," he said.

"Believe it," Coop said.

"How could she? You're rich, you're handsome--even if you are missing a part of your ear."

Coop subconsciously felt for the missing lobe of his right ear that had been bitten off by an angry Afghan.

"Hell, you're my best friend!" Spot continued. "What kind of woman could say no?" Spot slammed his open palm on the bar. "Hey," he said with a smile and a wink, "Maybe she likes girls," then laughed as if it was some kind of terribly funny joke.

Coop didn't laugh. He just nodded. He was still having trouble with the idea and didn't really want to talk about it.

"Bullshit," Spot said in amazement.

"No shit," Coop replied. "I found her with the waitress from The Oasis."

"A lesbo, huh?"

"Don't call her that," Coop said. "It's something she's been struggling with," Coop said.

Spot stepped away from the bar and crossed his arms. "I'd be pissed."

"About what?" Coop said.

"That she didn't tell you sooner," Spot said. "Maybe she would have let you watch or something."

"You think this is fucking funny, Spot? Jesus, man, I loved her."

"She did wear a lot of flannel shirts."

"Thinking back, I can almost put the pieces together,"

Coop said. "I should have seen it coming."

Spot poured himself a draft, dumping off the last inch of foam. "Did you even get a chance to show her the ring?"

"No," Coop said. "She never saw it."

"That sucks, man. I'm sorry."

"Never again, Spot," he said and pounded the bar for emphasis. "Never again. I'm swearing off women."

"Giving them up for good?" Spot asked, as he got his friend another beer. "That's kinda hard, Coop. Sounds so final." He nodded toward a group of LSU girls playing quarters. "How could give up something like that?"

Coop wrapped a napkin around the beer to keep it cold. "Easy," he said. "I never learned much about relationships. I know about women, but I don't know shit about relationships." He sipped the beer, letting out a small belch. "You've been married before, you know all about that shit."

"Lot of good it did me. Ask my fucking plumber how good I am at relationships. He'll tell you how great I was."

Coop sat on the stool watching the girls roll quarters off their noses, bouncing it into the glass. He inadvertently made eye contact with the blonde and immediately looked away. "It's not that I have anything against lesbians," Coop picked up again. "It's just that I

don't think they make the best wives."

"Who knew?" Spot said, shrugging, sipping his beer.

"It could have happened to anybody."

"She never did like to kiss me," he said. "I always knew that."

"And could she beat the shit out of you in racquet ball," Spot said. He pulled Coop another beer from the cooler. "What now?" Spot asked.

"Relax, hang out here and drink your beer." He took a long draw of the cold beer and set the bottle on the napkin.

"How are your wedding plans coming?"

"I'm so fucking confused," Spot said. "On one hand I want to spend the rest of my life with her. On the other hand, I don't want to get screwed again."

"You think she'd do that?"

"I don't know," Spot said with a slight shrug. "You never know."

"Did you ever get her an engagement ring?" Coop knew he hadn't, but he wanted to be sure.

"Not yet," Spot said, turning to pour a beer for a customer. "You know with my house being worked on from the hurricanes, it's costing more than insurance is willing to pay. I told Anna I'd get her one as soon as I could."

Coop pushed the box to Spot. "Then consider this my wedding gift," he said.

Spot stared at the box so long, the beer he was pouring spilled over. He flipped the tap off. "There's no way, Coop. I can't."

"Take it," Coop insisted.

"I can't," Spot said. "It's too much."

"Hell, it's just going to sit in a drawer," Coop said.

"Take it. Unless you don't think Anna will like it."

"Are you shitting me? A full three carats? She'll love it."

"Then it's our secret," Coop said. "She doesn't have a need to know."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say I get free beer," Coop said.

"You get free beer," Spot replied and slipped the box in his pocket.

Coop's eyes fell back into his bottle, staring at the small bubbles. Giving Spot the ring was the final act of acceptance. Gabrielle was never coming back.

Distance heals.

Spot reached over the bar and put a wide hand on his buddy's shoulder. "Cheer up, Coop. There'll be others."

Coop looked up. "Not for me," he said. "Never again."

"We'll see," Spot said. "A few more beers and you'll be over at the LSU table bouncing quarters into a glass, deciding which ones you'll take back to that fucking mansion

of yours."

Coop laughed. "I don't think so," he said. "I've got an early day tomorrow."

"What's going on?"

"Distance," Coop said, pushing his empty bottle away, ready for another. "I've decided to take a little road trip."

"When?"

"Manana."

"Like that?" Spot asked.

"Like that," Coop said. "But I need your help. I need you to stay in my house and take care of things."

Spot nodded as if he understood. "Your cat."

"It's not my cat," Coop said.

"You feed it, don't you?"

"Yeah, but--"

"I sleeps at your house, doesn't it?"

"Sure, but--"

"Then it's your cat," Spot said.

"It's not my cat!"

"Regardless," Spot said. "This is going to take some thought." He stroked his chin as he considered his choices.

"I can sleep amidst the thick dust of reconstruction in a small, though very cozy home, or vacation at a palatial, however, sparsely furnished, gulf front estate. Hmm.

That's a tough one."

"I have the cable hooked up," Coop said.

"HBO?" Spot asked.

"And Showtime."

"I don't know," Spot said. "I usually like to stay in homes with furniture, but if you throw in the keys to the Hummer, you've got a deal."

Coop held up his glass for a toast. "You can move in tomorrow. I should be gone by noon. Come over early and I'll give you the keys and the security code."

"I'll be there."

The blonde LSU student, the one with the small nose and huge brown eyes, approached Coop. He could smell her perfume before she was near enough to speak.

"Excuse me," she said in a southern accent, drawing it out for almost eight syllables. "Do you have an extra quarter. I missed the glass and it rolled off the table. We can't find it, and it was our last one."

Coop looked over her head to the table and all the eyes turned away. The conspiratorial smiles, however, remained in tact. Before he could answer, Spot dug one out of his pocket and gave it to her.

"Thanks," she said and flashed him a fake smile. Her brown eyes fell back on Coop. "You know how to play quarters?" she said taking thirteen syllables to say it.

"Whyn't you join us?"

"I don't think so," Coop said, and turned back to Spot, effectively dismissing her. A woman was the last thing he needed.

She walked away exaggerating her swing just a bit as if she thought Coop would watch, and she was right.

"Can I have a quarter please, mister," a tiny voice said. "My daddy won't give me anymore." The softness of her voice contrasted with her harsh Hungarian accent. Cooper turned, and Anna was standing next to him, playfully batting her eyelashes. "These girls will go to great miles to get you, Coop. You be careful."

"That's great lengths, honey," Spot said.

"Thank you, sweetie," she said and leaned over the bar to give him a kiss. She turned to Coop. "He is the best at helping me with my Americanisms," she said. "He hates to do it, but I make him. Once, at dinner, I ordered Flaming Yon and Grandma Yea!, and the waiter looked at me like I was..." she twirled her finger around her temple, "...you know, kooky."

"Filet Mignon and Grand Marnier?" Coop asked.

"Exactly," Anna said. "That's what I ordered. But the waiter, he did not understand. But my sweetie, he helped me." She took the stool next to Coop and said, "So, how did it go with Gabrielle? I've been killing to know." Spot

tried to interrupt, but Anna continued. "When's the big day? Are we going to have a double wedding? We can have it here, if she wants."

"No wedding," Spot said.

"I never asked her."

"You did get cold hands, yes?" she asked. Spot let the mixed Americanism go.

"Yes, but cold hands means warm heart," Coop said, not really sure why.

"Let me feel for myself," Anna said and reached for Coop's hands. "Ooh, they are like ice cubes. Your heart must be on fire."

"It's from holding the beer," Coop said.

"No," she said. "You have a napkin around the beer. This is your heart on fire." She said it with the conviction of a fortune teller. Coop halfway expected her to bring out the tarot cards.

"My heart's not on fire," he protested. "Especially not tonight. So can we change the subject?"

"Yeah, let's change the subject," Spot said, getting another round of beer.

They sat in silence for a minute before Anna asked, "How's your kitty-cat?"

"I don't have a kitty-cat," Coop said a bit too forcefully.

"Okay," Anna said. "How's your cat?"

"It's not my cat." Coop was protesting again. "I hate cats. All they do is get hair everywhere and throw up all the time."

"Have you named him yet?" Anna asked.

"It's a her," Coop defended. "And why would I name a cat I don't have?"

* * *

Coop closed the sliding glass door of his deck behind him. The gulf was flat. Small waves nudged in, kissing the white sand. Dick Velour had gone out again and left his flood lights on, lighting up the beach like a football field. Coop set his drink on the table and shook the bag of Friskies again. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty."

Bright lights on the beach cause problems for marine life. Sea turtles come onto the beach at night to lay their eggs. When the eggs hatch, the baby turtles instinctively begin walking toward the light of the moon, to the water, and to their waiting mothers. But when bright lights are left on ashore, the turtles get confused and never find their family, the moon or even the water, leaving the beaches full of orphaned baby sea turtles.

Coop went to the edge of the deck and shaded his eyes from Velour's light. "Here kitty, kitty, kitty," Coop called, shaking a bag of cat food. "Here kitty, kitty,

kitty," he called again scanning the base of the sea oats looking for movement. Hell, he couldn't even hold on to a stupid cat. She'd probably found a girlfriend too. Coop shook the bag one last time and stretched out in the chaise-lounge, the bright lights blinding him. He stood it for one more minute, then yelled over to Velour's.

When Velour didn't respond, Coop had only one alternative. He went inside for a moment, then returned to the deck twisting the silencer into the barrel of the Browning nine millimeter. And in four quick shots the beach was dark, and once again, safe for the turtles. This was the fifth time he'd shot out the lights, and Velour still didn't have a clue why he kept having to replace them.

In the dark, the bioluminescence sparkled as the gulf's surge pushed the water ashore. Cooper sipped his third Bombay Sapphire, eyed the Pleadies through the telescope, and though tried not to, thought about Gabrielle. He wanted to reach over to the other chaise-lounge and feel her there. If he closed his eyes and imagined, he could feel her tan, smooth skin. He could trace the small scar on her left knee with his finger. If he breathed deep enough he could smell her scent on the beach-towel that had been hanging over the rail since her last swim. She was now completely off limits. It was different than if another man had taken her. For that, he was prepared. But against a woman, there was

no competing. At least they had one more thing in common. He felt a smile break across his face.

Coop rose from his chair, walked to the railing and looked out into the darkness. Even at night the sand was paper white and tonight it glowed in the half moon. Up and down the beach, it was still. No movement in any direction, except the water pulsing ashore, as if in rhythm with the heartbeat of the earth. But as Coop looked closer, the beach was alive with its own nighttime inhabitants. Sand crabs scurried about from one hole to the next, night birds dipped in the shallow waters, a lone dolphin surfaced just within the realm of visibility, purging his used air.

He walked down the stairs and looked under the deck for the cat, then around to the side of the house. As he made his way to the front, checking the base of the oleander hedge, a car pulled up. He stood in the shadows and could hear the raised voices from inside the Jaguar. Suddenly the door opened and Dr. Chang jumped out, hastily shutting the door behind her. It wasn't until the Jag took off did she realize she had shut the door on her strapless dress.

The car accelerated, tearing the light dress from Chang's tiny body, leaving the doctor in the middle of the street completely exposed; no bra, no panties, standing directly under the streetlight.

Coop waited a moment, not wanting to embarrass her.

Besides, the light from above did her justice. He watched from the oleanders as she walked up the stairs to her door, then quickly realized she had left her purse in the car. Chang flailed her arms in frustration, letting out a few words Coop couldn't quite make out.

It was time to leave the shadows and help. As he crossed the street, he removed his sweatshirt, keeping his head and eyes down. "Here," he called as he reached her driveway. Her driveway was paved with a mix of cement and sea shells, and was wide enough to park three cars side by side. Coop heard the footsteps coming down the stairs, and felt the shirt ripped from his grasp.

"Thanks," she said quietly.

Still with his head down, "I'm Coop. From across--"

"I know."

"C'mon," he said and turned. "I'll get you some clothes."

"You can look now," she said.

The shirt swallowed the doctor. The arms were completely scrunched up, and the waist ribbing rested around her mid thigh--a very smooth, delicate mid thigh. They locked in an awkward stare as if they had no clue as to what to do or say next. He thought briefly about inviting her over for a drink, but remembered his oath to swear off women. He could've ended the whole night right then by

volunteering to get his burglary tools. He could have her in her house in ten seconds. But he couldn't quite remember where he put them.

"I could use a drink," she said. "Do you like the stars?"

"Excuse me?"

"Stars. You know the things in the sky you see at night."

"You've seen my telescope," he said, knowing she'd probably seen it on one of her walks along the beach.

"No. But I'd like to," she said. "I'll bet the Pleiades are beautiful. Can we see them?"

"Well," Coop said hesitantly, searching for the right excuse. It was already midnight and he was tired. Tomorrow was going to be a long day and the last thing he wanted to do was sit on the deck with a nearly naked woman and stare at the stars.

On the other hand, she was locked out of her house and had no where else to go. And it is a dangerous world. What could a couple of drinks hurt? Coop looked to the southwest and pointed. "I think they're over there," he said.

She took his arm and held on tight. It was a closeness Coop had felt before with Gabrielle. A comfortable closeness.

And maybe after a couple of drinks, he just might

remember that he had left his burglary tools in the top left drawer of his desk.

Chapter 3

The waves rolled in, and the surfers were out in droves taking back the wild surf the north winds had stolen. Overnight the winds had changed directions, and were now sending the swells and the humidity up from Mexico. The air was thicker and not as clear. It was the kind of day that makes the locals hose the sea spray from their cars and gulf side windows. The green-gray water surged Coop forward as he swam the last two hundred yards of his routine.

Fatigued, though feeling invigorated with the thought of his trip, Coop pulled the last stroke, caught a good sized wave and rode it in until his chest hit the sand. He was surprised to see Dr. Chang walking down to the water's edge to greet him.

They had found a dozen constellations last night shortly after building the drinks. The rest of the evening was spent talking. She told him how as a young girl she had immigrated to San Francisco. He let her do most of the talking, not really letting much known about himself. He

preferred that way. She had moved to Pensacola after spending a weekend on the beach during a Medical seminar. Eventually she planned to return to China for a visit.

Susan stood as he approached. "I wanted to see you before you left."

He toweled off his head, his short hair snapping to attention. "I was going to stop by," he conceded. Even with the strong south wind behind him, he could smell her just-showered scent.

She slowly backed up, motioning him to follow. "I have a favor to ask."

"Ask away," he said.

"My grandmother, the one in San Francisco, collects post cards," she said. "I was just wondering if you could send some to me from time to time, and I'll forward them to her."

Coop was hesitant. The entire mission of the trip was to forget about responsibility and obligations for a while, and agreeing to send regular postcards contradicted the trip's mission.

"I don't mean every day," she added, apparently in tune with his thoughts. "Just when you get to somewhere interesting."

He could take the time to send a few cards. It wasn't that big of a deal. "Don't expect any long, descriptive

narratives," he warned.

"You don't have to write anything but the address," she said.

He followed her up to his house and plopped into one of the chaise lounges, and she fell into the other as if it were her own. Jimmy Buffett was coming through the speakers.

"When are you leaving?" Susan asked.

"Around noon. I want to get about four hours in today."

"I think it's so exciting to just take off and do whatever you want. Just you, your bike and the open road."

She took off her sunglasses, wiped off the mist and returned them to her small face. "You never did say what your book's going to be about," she said and crossed, then recrossed her legs. "Actually, you never said much at all last night."

"I was listening to you," he said.

"If you won't tell me, at least promise to sign my copy?"

"If you're still around when I'm finished."

The sound of glass shattering came from inside the house sending Coop to investigate. He padded over the wooden deck, caught a splinter in his toe, and hobbled inside. He could hear Susan laughing. In the kitchen, the

cat was slurping up the remaining milk from Coop's cereal bowl in the sink.

"There you are," he said and gave the piebald cat a little scratch between the ears. "Where the hell've you been?" Coop poured a bowl full of Friskies, set it on the floor and returned to Dr. Chang.

Susan lay on the chair with her eyes closed, sunglasses resting on her head. "What was it?" she said without opening her eyes.

"Damn cat."

"I didn't know you had a damn cat."

"I don't have a damn cat. I fed this one once and it keeps coming back."

"If you stop feeding it, the damn cat won't come back."

"I keep telling him that," Spot said as he walked onto the deck, startling Susan. Spot stuck his hand out and Coop made the introductions, mentioning each other's occupations.

People like it better that way. Not so much as a scorecard anymore, but a chance to predict what to expect from their new acquaintances. It's a way of establishing instant comfort between two people. Coop had spent his entire life learning how to fit in with all segments and make anyone instantly, yet at the same time, genuinely like him. Lately, though, he didn't care what most people thought.

Susan reached to shake hands while dipping her glasses

with the other, giving Spot a full and blatant appraisal.

"Why do they call you Spot?" Susan asked.

Spot laughed and said, "It's a long story."

Susan stood and gave Spot another look, an obvious look of approval. Coop didn't know whether to feel jealous or relieved.

"I'll bet you two have a lot to go over," she said.

"I'd better be going." She caught Coop off guard by giving him a hug. "Thanks for being there last night." Then she surprised him again when she stretched in bare feet to reach his cheek, giving him a friendly kiss. "Don't forget the post cards." He gave her a slight wave as she left, not really knowing what to say.

When she was out of sight, Spot said, "Don't tell me you--"

"No."

"What's this 'Thanks for last night' crap then?"

"She was locked out last night. I let her in."

"Bullshit," Spot said. "Women don't just say that, you know. And when they say it in front of another guy, they're up to something." Spot fidgeted in the chaise until he got comfortable. "I know these things."

"I'll bet you do," Coop said.

"Seriously," Spot continued. "She said it thinking I would assume you did her last night. Only she didn't count

on your integrity. Most guys would have lied and said they nailed her. She wanted me to think you got laid last night."

"Why the hell for?"

"I'll tell you why. She's got something bigger in store for you, stud. For one fleeting moment she wanted you to feel like you had her." Spot took off his sunglasses and cleaned them on his shirt. "She's got a missile lock on you, Coop. I'd watch out." He returned the glasses to his face and looked around the beach, taking in the beauty, the solitude. "Look, I don't mean to rush you, but what time are you leaving?"

"Can't wait to get rid of me?"

Spot shrugged of the response and looked around the deck. "Got any outlets out here?"

"Outlets?"

"Yeah. For the band. They've got to--"

"What band?"

"C'mon, dude, you can't have a decent kegger without a band."

Spot followed Coop inside and stopped at the stereo, pushed the AM button and searched until he found General Wright's show.

"You're not really going to listen to that nut are you?" Coop asked.

"Why not? The guy's ex-Marine."

"So was the guy the climbed the tower in Texas."

"You always say that," Spot said. "Today he's going to talk about Berkshire's murder cover up."

"Again?" Coop said. "A guy offs himself in a public park, and automatically it's a murder."

"Well if it was suicide, where's the bullet? Where are the footprints leading down the dusty road? The only road in, I might add." Spot went to the fridge and grabbed a beer. "And why weren't his shoes dusty?" He twisted off the cap and took a sip. "Oh no. This guy was hit."

"And according to him, it's part of a vast government conspiracy," Coop said.

"You bet. Shh. Here it is."

"...and the jack-booted thugs of the BATF, the FBI, and the IRS took careful aim at that young up-and-comer and squeezed the trigger. Friends do you know what it's like to squeeze the trigger on a man. Some of you do. I sure as heck do. After serving in uniform during two wars, I seen the enemy eyeball to eyeball. And I think you'll agree with me that it makes every muscle tighten. And the last orifice to go over the fence seems like it will never relax.

"That young politician...now I know we didn't need another, but that's not the point. The point is that his life was vaporized in a split second, and now he has to live

with the disgrace of moving from God's green pastures to God's white and beautiful heaven, having looked like he had committed the ultimate sin. We have to follow through with this. We know whose office the order came from. We have to put an end to it. It's up to people like you, people like me and people like our first caller. Go ahead, Jack in Helena, Montana--,"

"Turn that shit off," Coop called from his chair, leaning over his scuffed Eagle Creek daypack.

"I want to hear what he's going to say."

"I'll save you the time. He's going to blame everyone's problems on the government," he said as he stuffed a few pairs of jeans into the black pack. "And he's going to try and convince you that we as Americans aren't going to be happy and successful unless we have the right to bear arms," he said as he stuck the Browning 9mm in between the jeans and the tee-shirts. He carried the weapon more out of habit than fear. He didn't expect any excitement on the road. He just felt naked without it.

"What's wrong with the second amendment?"

"Nothing. I'm just saying that he relies on those less...," he searched for the right phrase, "open to opposing views to follow his lead. He looks for those who only get their information from one source." He slipped in a few pairs of thick white socks. "People hear one thing

long enough, they tend to believe it, Spot."

"Are you telling me there are no government conspiracies?"

"Sure there are," Coop said. "But not to the extent that this guy says. Hell, according to him, you're part of a conspiracy. You flew a black helicopter once, didn't you?"

"They were testing a special kind of paint," Spot said. "To see if it would give off a radar image."

"Sure," Coop said. "That's what they told you."

"How about you?" Spot asked, getting a beer from the fridge. "You could be part of a conspiracy too. You did work for the CIA."

"That's right. Me and a couple hundred thousand other people who have worked for them are all part of some giant government conspiracy," he said.

"It could happen," Spot said and finished his beer. He helped himself to the last Dos Equis, and noticed Coop's small bag. "A month on the road and that's all you're taking?"

"It's enough. If I need anything else, I'll get it later." Coop looped the bag over his shoulder, grabbed the Calloway Titanium-Shaft Big Bertha Driver Spot had bought him for his last birthday and a few sleeves of balls. Spot followed him to the three car garage where he kept the

Hummer and the Harley.

The black and chrome Harley Davidson Fat Boy leaned on its thin kickstand, waiting to be ridden. Coop had made only a few modifications since he bought it. A buddy of his who had worked on every kind of transmission known to man installed a suicide gear on the bike just after Coop bought it. With two clicks up on the shifter, the bike would go backwards. Like the Browning, Coop never thought he would need it. It just felt good to have it.

"Man, is she sweet. I hardly ever see you ride this thing," Spot said.

"Well, today you can watch me ride all the way to end of the street. After that you won't see me for a month." Coop secured Big Bertha and the pack. He double checked his wallet for his license, concealed weapon permit, and his Visa card. They hugged goodbye and each patted the other hard on the back the way men do. Coop climbed aboard and hit the start button. The bike came alive. The noise made Spot step back.

"Put in reverse," Spot yelled. "I want to see you go backwards."

Coop double clicked up, setting the bike into reverse. "Make sure there's a few beers in the fridge when I get back," Coop called over the noise.

"Roger that," Spot said, and pushed the button to open

the garage door.

"And don't forget to feed the cat."

Spot answered with the thumbs up, and Coop gave the throttle a twist, sending the bike backward. When he applied the back brake, and shifted into first he was still rolling back so the front tire lifted a few inches off the ground. Then just for Spot's benefit, Coop jerked back on the throttle and rode a wheelie until he had to shift to second. He escaped around the corner, down Via DeLuna, and headed west in the cool April air, moving farther and farther away from Gabrielle.

Chapter 4

In his private office in Crystal City, Virginia, hidden amongst the towering hotels and high tech companies, Senator McAlpin palmed his thinning gray hair and leaned against the mahogany desk a lumber lobbyist had given him for his help in defeating an environmental bill. He was wearing his seer-sucker suit, because he thought the lines made him look a tad thinner. "Sit down, Beckett," he said. "You say you got news? What is it? I'm a goddamn busy man. If it's about tonight, I told you--,"

His assistant, Charles Beckett, put down the bottle of Jack Daniels and held up a slim finger, effectively hushing the Senator. He flipped on the radio, settled into the comfortable burgundy leather wing chair with a sip of his drink, and asked in a very low tone, "Cleaning crew come by yesterday?"

Beckett had ordered random sweepings for acoustical surveillance since a spike had been found buried halfway in the wall from the outside. Its placement allowed it to pick

up both sides of any conversation in the office whether in person or on the phone.

It took a week, but Beckett traced the bug to its owner, Senator Randolph Berkshire. He was some young, idealist politician who was hell bent on cleaning up politics, including, and especially, Senator McAlpin. Berkshire and his buddy Senator Varela, another young Senator from Florida, were on a mission to expose McAlpin and his contributions to the intelligence communities.

Beckett confronted Berkshire at a White House dinner, and of course, Berkshire denied it all. But Beckett waited until later that evening, and knowing that Berkshire tended to drink too much, kept pressing.

"Maybe we did," Berkshire eventually said.

"I don't think that was such a good idea, Senator," Beckett said. "Don't you know that those little devices leave electronic fingerprints?" He shook his head in disbelief. "Man, whoever does your work for you needs a little education. All it took was a couple of hours work and we knew it was you."

"So. We got what we want," Berkshire said. "And a little more. I didn't realize you and McAlpin were, how shall I say it...so close?"

Beckett struggled to remain composed. "Gentlemen don't listen to other gentlemen's conversations, Senator."

Two days later, The Washington Post reported Berkshire was found dead on a park bench after having taken his own life with a handgun. What they didn't report and didn't know was that an eavesdropping device has been shoved deep into his inner ear, a message from Senator McAlpin. More directly, a message from Beckett. It was the perfect hit. Only those who needed to know were aware it was a hit, and the idiot-masses would continue to believe it was suicide.

"Yeah. Yeah," the Senator said, bringing Beckett back to the present. "We swept the place just like you ordered," the Senator said impatiently. "Now what the hell do you have to tell me that's so goddamn important?"

Beckett had taken the call from Mothersole and began to explain to his boss just what had happened. "As soon as she is able to determine what was taken, we'll have a better idea," he said. Beckett removed the wire-rimmed glasses from his face and wiped his tired eyes. He twirled the glasses in his fingers.

"How the hell could this have happened?" the Senator said, still pacing the worn blue carpet. "Mothersole had one of her premonitions last week and said something like this was going to happen," he said shaking a thick finger at Beckett. "You should have sent down a few men."

"On another fucking Mothersole premonition? It was the third one this month." Beckett downed his drink and went

for another.

"Every agent we ever recruited is on those files," the Senator said. "It covers almost forty years of operations. How the hell could she have found them?"

"Mothersole thinks the woman may have delivered there."

"I bet it was the goddamn Russians. They're always in on shit like this."

"Maybe," Beckett said.

"Hell, son, she had to have some kind of outside help. She couldn't have done this alone. Women aren't that smart. And it sure as hell wasn't an American."

"I don't know, Senator. America's not trusting her government like they used to. A lot of people are getting suspicious about a lot of things."

"This woman stole secrets pertaining to agents deeply implanted in foreign governments. If she is Russian, Middle Eastern, or whatever, she's effectively killed everyone of our agents." His chair squeaked as the Senator leaned forward. "She needs to be demoted, Beckett. Maximally."

"We've downloaded stills from the security cameras and faxed her picture to some people in the field. We've got the airports and bus terminals staked. We're also monitoring all ticket sales. First in the local area, then spreading out. We've also got the interstates covered. If she catches a cab in Bumfuck Egypt, we're going to know

about it." Beckett added another ice cube. "We'll have her here in 24 hours," he said, sipping the drink. The bourbon used to burn as it went down. Now he felt hardly a tingle.

"Can I get you one, Senator?"

"What you can get me is that girl," McAlpin said and crossed his hands across his substantial stomach. He seemed a bit more relaxed. "Are you sure you'll have her by tomorrow?"

"Positive," Beckett said twirled the ice with his pinky. "We're getting an I.D. on the girl now, and as soon as it comes in, I'm having Justice issue an APB on her. Every backwoods yahoo across the country will be looking for her."

"What makes you so sure you're going to get the full support of local law enforcement?"

Beckett took another sip. "Cops hate cop-killers, Senator. We'll say she killed three D.C. cops during a liquor store hold up."

For the first time tonight, the Senator smiled. It made Beckett happy. "You're brilliant, Beckett. Absolutely brilliant."

"That's why you pay me the big bucks, Senator."

"You just keep earning them, Beckett. This is no time for a scandal. Rumor has it I'm going to suffer a Senate inquiry. So I can't afford any negative press."

"Negative press, Senator?" Beckett said. "I don't think this is what you would call negative press. Fucking your assistant is negative press," he said. "Involving yourself in shady, Wall Street deals is negative press. But this, Senator, this goes far beyond that. For this, we all go to federal prison. And for a very long time." Beckett finished his drink and set the glass on the Senator's desk.

McAlpin opened a drawer, took out his snub nosed .38 and hefted it in his hand. "That's not going to happen, son," he said, waving the gun around, taking aim at different objects in the room. "There's no way I can go to prison."

"Don't worry about a thing," Beckett said unfazed. "I'll take care of everything."

"I know you will, Charles. You always do." McAlpin slid the weapon into a clip-on holster and slipped it on his belt.

Chapter 5

Kathryn adjusted the brunette wig, slipped on the thick glasses and situated her fake teeth as she sat in her car outside the First Tennessee Savings and Loan of Nashville. It was the third bank she had hit this morning. Fortunately, it was to be the last. She checked her disguise in the rearview mirror of the Escort, then with all the confidence she could muster, said, "You're going to make a great mom." But the strange face with the bucked teeth looked back at her through the mirror with a hollow stare. And even through the thick glasses, Kathryn could read the uncertainty in her own eyes. Her life had been scripted for success, and no where in the writing was there a part for a child.

Kathryn was one of South's most sought after architects, specializing in the redesign and remodeling of Ante Bellum mansions. She had ten to fifteen projects at any given time in cities like Charleston, New Orleans, Savannah, and several smaller towns, never more than an hour

long Delta flight from her home in Atlanta. Ever since her work was featured in Architectural Digest and Southern Living during two consecutive months, the phones hadn't stopped ringing. Work was coming in faster than she could've ever imagined, giving her enough projects to keep her busy for two years. She had no intentions of walking away from her business and she certainly had no intentions of being a mother. But that was until she met Jonas.

Kathryn was at another Atlanta charity event when he approached her. She was sipping champagne with the Governor when the round faced, barrel-chested man wearing jeans and a khaki shirt approached her.

"I've seen some of your work," he said, ignoring the Governor. "You're quite good."

The Governor quickly stepped away from the man, leaving Kathryn alone with him.

"Thank you," she whispered as the politician left. "I was trying to get rid of him all night."

"I never really cared for politicians," the man said in a his deep, calming baritone voice. "Can't trust 'em."

"All of them, or just some?" she asked. She was ready for a little stimulating conversation. The Governor had bored her practically to death.

"All," he replied. "Every last one of those scoundrels. They're all evil," he said.

"Don't tell me you're one of those conspiracists,
Mr..."

"Jonas."

"Mr. Jonas."

"No," he said. "Just Jonas."

"Well?" Kathryn asked.

"Am I a conspiracist? That depends," he said. "Do you mean do I think the government is evil? No. But I think politician's are, and I think arming the IRS with automatic weapons is wrong."

"They don't arm the IRS," she said.

"Ma'am, the recent approved budget called for spending almost one million dollars on nine millimeters, AR-15s, and shotguns for our IRS agents. Now I ask you, does that sound like a kinder and gentler IRS?"

"That's absurd," she said.

"But it's true," he replied. "The budget is public record. Look it up."

"I'll have to do that," she said and sipped her bourbon. "So, what type of work do you do, Jonas?"

Jonas waited to answer. He waited until he was sure no one else was listening. Then rather than answer, he pulled a some photographs from his breast pocket. They were black and white shots of young boys in uniform. He handed one to her. "Does this boy look like anyone you know?"

Kathryn studied the photo. Something about the boy looked vaguely familiar, but she wasn't sure enough to say. "Not really," she said.

"You had a child once, didn't you?"

It was one of the most painful memories of her life she had tried to keep tucked away, hidden in a small closet of her mind. But suddenly the smells of that Tennessee clinic swept through the ballroom, the deep feeling of loss and disappointment swelled inside her as if she had lost her child at that precise moment, and a flash of nervous warmth spread through her body. She never felt her knees give way. She never felt herself fall in to Jonas' arms.

Kathryn had never told the father. They had parted a few weeks after the assignation. Six weeks later, Kathryn took the test and saw the unmistakable blue line of pregnancy. Unlike the majority of her contemporaries, Kathryn believed the woman's right to choose also included the right to choose adoption. She couldn't terminate the pregnancy, and she was certainly not the mother--type. A loving, two parent family was the only choice.

Kathryn had isolated herself when she began to show, managing projects from her home, working through sub contractors, and refusing new projects. The adoption agent had all the details lined up, a couple from Indiana had been selected to receive the child, the hospital and physician's

services had been paid. Everything was going smoothly.

Then came a problem with one of the estates in Tennessee. The sub contractors she hired weren't meeting the deadlines and, if she didn't respond immediately, she was going to lose the \$320,000 project. She wanted to fly, but the doctor advised against it. Instead, at seven months along, she drove.

Kathryn had researched the process of gestation and she knew what a Braxton-Hicks was. But as the pains kept getting worse, she kept driving. Even when they started coming closer and closer together, she kept driving. False labor, she kept telling herself. It was only after her water broke, did she begin to look for a blue road sign to a hospital.

She arrived in time to be checked in and questioned. A heavy smoking nurse read from a clipboard. Her badge said her name was Mothersole. "Any living relatives?" the nurse asked, exhaling the last bit of smoke from her lungs.

"No," Kathryn replied.

"No brothers or sisters?"

"No."

"No aunts, uncles, anybody?"

"No, dammit. Just me. Now can you start the goddamn epidural?"

The nurse smiled slightly as she took her place behind

the wheelchair. "Let's get you into a room. We'll get your epidural started as soon as we get there." She pushed her past the rooms of the small clinic. The stench of feces and urine permeated the walls, the floors, the ceilings. "I'll bet your girlfriends threw you a big shower," the nurse said trying to make small talk.

"I don't have any girlfriends," Kathryn replied, taking the pain of another contraction. After college she had lost touch with them. And her career had kept her from meeting any new friends.

"Then who's helping you through the pregnancy?"

"No one," she said. "No one even knows I'm going to have a baby." The nurse gave either a subtle laugh of satisfaction or a few grunts of sorrow. Kathryn couldn't tell and didn't really care. All she wanted was to get into the room and get the epidural started.

The last thing she remembered clearly was rolling to her side, the stick of the needle, and the pressure as the nurse inserted the epidural. She vaguely recalled a baby crying, the voice of a foreign doctor, and the fat nurse laughing.

Eight hours later she awoke from the drugs. Her stomach was flat but shapeless, the skin temporarily having lost its elasticity. The pain from the episiotomy slowly began to register with her mind. She looked around the

small room. There was no TV, no phone, no chair for visitors. Only a call button just out of reach.

It was over. And she was sad. She had carried the baby for seven months and, though she tried to convince herself she wouldn't, she knew she would forever wonder what her child was doing, what he or she looked like, and was he or she being loved. Adoption was a difficult choice to make. It would've been very easy for her to keep the baby, raising it as a single mother. Most consider that to be very romantic; a single mother raising a child while trying to manage a successful business. But she had a mother who chose a career over a daughter, and fortunately when her mother left, she had her dad to raise her. Adoption was an honorable choice, and she was proud of the decision she made.

The door opened and a nurse poked her head in. "How're you feeling," she asked.

"I could use something for the pain," she said. "I'm starting to feel the episiotomy."

"I'll get Nurse Mothersole." And she backed out of the door.

Moments later, the big nurse walked in and stood next to Kathryn. She grabbed her wrist and checked her pulse. The woman smelled like tobacco.

"Could I see my baby?" Kathryn asked. "I don't even

know if I had a boy or a girl."

"A boy," Mothersole responded.

"Can I see him?"

Mothersole set the wrist down. "How's the pain?"

"I need something," she said.

Mothersole pulled a syringe from her pocket and uncapped it. "Roll to your side," she said. "This will take the edge off."

Kathryn turned in the bed, trying not to disturb the delicate stitches. "When can I see him," she asked again.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Mothersole responded.

"I just want to see him," Kathryn pleaded. "I just want to hold him."

Mothersole pulled Kathryn back toward her. "Kathryn," she said. "There were some complications. The doctor had to make a choice."

"What kind of choice? What happened?" The medication was instantly taking effect. The pain was gone and the warmth spread to her chest and arms.

Mothersole took Kathryn's hand. The nurse's hands were rough and callused. "Your baby was still born," she said. She offered no apology, no excuse.

"I heard him cry," she said. "He couldn't." Her voice trailed off.

"It was just a dream," Mothersole said. "A hallucination caused by all the drugs."

"I just had an epidural," Kathryn said, her head clouding as she desperately tried to form sentences. "What did you give me?"

"Something to make you relax," Mothersole said. "Something to make you sleep."

"Am I going to sleep long?" she said. The injection was making her say things she didn't want to say. "I don't want to sleep long. I want to go home," she said. "I want to see my baby. My daddy would be proud. I want my baby. I want my baby," was the last thing she remembered saying to Mothersole.

* * *

When she finally came to, Jonas was kneeling over her, someone else offered her a glass of water, and a half dozen people looked on. "She's all right," Jonas said to the crowd. "Thanks for your help. Now let's give her some room." As the small crowd dispersed, Jonas helped her to her feet. "Therapy hasn't help much, has it?"

Straightening her suit, Kathryn asked, "How did you know?"

"There's a lot I know about you, Kathryn. I know your dad died your first year at Yale. I know your mother--if you can call her that--runs one of the biggest ad agencies

on the west coast. I know you consider yourself a lousy potential mother. And I also know five years of seeing a psychologist hasn't diminished the love and the bond you have for the son you delivered."

He was impressive on all accounts. Especially on the last two. "So you've done your homework," she said. "What do you want with me?"

Jonas wrote an address on the back of the boy's picture. "Meet me tomorrow at zero nine hundred."

Kathryn looked down momentarily to slip the photo into her purse. When she looked up, he was gone.

That night, she dug through old photos, looking for any picture of her as a child. Finally, after going through her father's old boxes, she found a few shots of her when she was five. She held up the photos next to each other for comparison. Kathryn and the boy had the same nose, the same eyes. Even though the picture was black and white, she could still see the black drops in the boy's iris.

She wasn't rich, but she had some money in the bank. So if this Jonas guy was conning her, he wasn't going to get much. With that in mind, she showed up at the address a little after nine. It was an old bookstore located in a mostly black part of Atlanta. The sign said the store was closed, but when Kathryn showed up at the door, a tall thin black man opened the door, ushered her in, and locked the

door behind her. The place smelled like what it was; an old library full of musty books.

"Upstairs," the man said. "He's waiting."

Jonas sat at an antique table full of scratches and vandal's carvings. Next to him, was a stack of pictures, in front of him, lay what looked like a handwritten letter.

"Sit down," he offered as he stood. "Tea?"

"Let's get to the point," Kathryn said. "I've got a plane to catch."

"Certainly," the man said.

"I'm not even sure why I'm here," she said, trying to hide her curiosity. He knew enough about her to make it interesting.

"Ever seen a black helicopter?" he asked.

"Jesus," cried. "Is this what this is all about?"

"No," he said emphatically.

"What the hell is it then," she asked.

The man began a story so far fetched, Kathryn had trouble keeping up. Jonas rambled on about black helicopters, factories in Mexico, the CIA, something he called Operation Prodigy. His diatribe lasted almost three hours, though Kathryn listened for only one hour. The rest on the time she spent thinking of her next vacation. Though the work was piling up, she had to get away. She thought about the Caymans, or Belize. St. Kitts would be nice. She

always wanted to learn to dive. She was going to stay at one of the dive resorts wherever she ended up. Usually they're tucked away from the usual tourist spots, giving you the opportunity to be a traveler and not a tourist. She had already decided on a date and was just trying to figure out which rental car company to call when something stuck in her ears.

"...your son's there," Jonas said, pointing at a photo of a red clay building surrounded by a ten-foot barbed wire fence. "They go to the rifle range every morning at ten. This one was taken just after he finished."

"My son?" she said. "I don't have a son?"

Jonas nodded toward the picture she held. "That's him," Jonas said. "And if you do exactly what I tell you, you can get him back."

And now, a month later, Kathryn was sitting outside the bank, doing everything Jonas had told her, including wearing the cheap wig, fake teeth and opening safe deposit boxes all over Nashville.

Once inside the bank, relieved there were no metal detectors, she peered out of the smoked-glass door to see if anyone had followed her. Once secure, she approached a teller. "I'd like to get a safe deposit box, please."

"Right this way, mam," the woman said, and came from around the window and introduced herself as Marjorie

MacDowell, a Vice President. "I'll just need to get some information from you," Ms. MacDowell said. "Do you have your drivers license, Ms.--"

"Thompson. Mindy Thompson," Kathryn said, looking through her purse for her identification. "I know it's in here somewhere. These purses," she said, "you'd think that for what you pay for them, they would keep you better organized." She held the purse at an angle so the woman couldn't see the small .38 caliber tucked in a corner. Kathryn continued to dig, careful not to bring out the wrong license. "Here it is," she said and held it up.

Kathryn halfway listened as the woman gave her ten minute speech on security, confidentiality, and access. In the end, whoever had the key had access. She just needed to dump the files off and get on the road. She didn't care about bank hours or how many tellers they had, or what time the guard comes in. If McAlpin knew she had a box, he could get to it anyway. "Can I just get to the boxes please?" she said.

"Oh," the woman said, as if she was disappointed that she wasn't going be able to finish her speech. "I guess."

Kathryn followed her down a long hallway. The polished floors reminded her of the clinic, but without the stench of urine.

Inside the vault, Ms. MacDowell expertly found the

right box and, using two keys, pulled number 335 out of its slot. "Will this size do?" she asked.

"It'll be fine," Kathryn replied.

"There are cubicles back there for your privacy," she said and handed Kathryn the box.

Inside the cubicle, Kathryn transferred the files and the computer disks from her backpack to the box. She shut the box and gave it to MacDowell. She hid the key in a small compartment of her daypack. Moments later, she emerged into the early Tennessee sun, ready for the drive to Arizona.

She had wanted to fly, but Jonas had said, "They'll have agents at every airport, bus terminal, and train station looking for you." His voice was deep and resonant and he spoke with the right mix of authority and tenderness.

"Every rental car contract will be screened for one way rentals. And those will be screened for women traveling alone, paying cash. The government can find out anything it wants, anytime it wants to," he said. "They'll also have checkpoints at every on and off ramp the interstate has."

"What then?" she asked. "How do I get back?"

"Take five thousand dollars and buy a car. Then take the back roads all the way to Arizona."

"Buy a car?" she asked, somewhat surprised.

"From some kid out of the paper," he continued.

"Dealers ask too many questions and want to keep you there all day. Give the kid his asking price in cash and take the car. Tell him you'll meet them the next day to sign the papers. The whole process should take less time than it takes to rent one."

She had found a bland Ford Escort with forty-thousand miles on it for \$4800. The air condition and the radio worked. It didn't go too fast, but it blended in with the rest of the cars on the road.

Now she sat waiting to pull out into the late morning traffic, looking for Highway 70 west, the first leg of her trip.

Chapter 6

April was still biting cold in the Virginia suburbs as Senator McAlpin and Beckett jogged around Burke Lake. The tiny gravel crunched under their slow moving feet and Beckett wished the Senator could run faster. It was too damn cold to run that slow.

Between huffs, the Senator said, "Twenty four hours, son. That's what you told me. Your twenty four hours is long gone."

"Yes sir. I know," Beckett said. He hated disappointing the Senator. "We got the film from the security cameras and we have identified her, though."

"Who is she?"

"Kathryn Tillman."

"She been to the clinic before?"

"About five years ago," Beckett said. "That's how we I.D.'d her."

The Senator stopped in his tracks. He wasn't going very fast so it wasn't such a sudden stop. "Goddamn it!" A

group of joggers were approaching, and he waited for them to pass, then kept his voice low. "If she goes to the press, we're fucked."

"If she was going, she would have gone by now," Beckett said.

"That's bullshit, son. She can go anytime she wants."

The Senator began moving again. "And I've got enough problems with the press right now. That little punk Senator from Florida is screaming for hearings on my agent recruitment practices. I think it's a bunch of shit. I mean who cares how we recruit those people," he said. "You know whose fault this is? Talk radio and that General Wright whacko." The Senator must have watched Rocky last night because he began shadowing boxing as he puttered. "What about the girl?" Beckett had never seen the Senator shadow box before. It was all in slow motion, and the fat man could barely get his fists past the girth of his waist. Beckett had to look away to keep from laughing.

"Well, sir, we've accessed her accounts--"

"Did you freeze them?" he said with a left jab. "I want you to freeze them." Then another left jab followed by a right hook.

"No sir. If we did that, she'd know we were on to her. We've just accessed them. This way if she makes any kind of transaction, we can find her."

"Good thinking. I want this bitch wiped out," he said and threw another jab. "And then I want to go after that fucking idiot General Wright. Goddamn, he's a pain in my ass," the Senator said and landed a solid right uppercut. He raised his hands in the air and did a little victory dance as if he were just declared the winner.

"Sir. The way I see it, if she had gone to the press already, we would have heard about it. If she had given it to anyone, we'd have heard about." Beckett shook his head.

"No. I think she secured it somewhere, like a safe deposit box."

"If she's stupid enough to put it in one, then our problems are over, son."

"Right now we're examining all of the security footage from all the banks within a 100 mile radius of the clinic and comparing it with the video from the clinic."

"What if someone else dropped it off?"

"I don't think so. If she had an accomplice, she would have had someone else with her at the clinic. She barely got out of there alive, you know."

"How could she have accessed all the information without inside help?" The Senator stopped again. "Who else works at the clinic besides Mothersole? Anyone else we're paying?"

"There's a new doctor. Langston, I think his name is."

"How does he play into this?"

"He doesn't. He has no clue."

"Background check come back okay?"

"Yes sir. The 398 came back clean."

"Where was he when all this was going on?"

"He tackled Mothersole out of defense of the girl. A natural thing to do if you don't know what's going on."

"Check this guy out again. Find out who he calls, where he goes to drink beer, where he gets his laundry done.

I want two men on him everywhere. If he shits, I want to know what color."

"Yes sir."

"And find the files. I don't care if you have to check every goddamn safe deposit box in the fucking country."

"Yes sir," Beckett said. They started to jog again but Beckett's cellular phone rang. Yeah? Okay. Outstanding." He folded the phone and slipped into his pocket.

"Good news?" the Senator asked.

"Very good. Let's run," he said smiling, nodding his head toward the path.

The path wound its way up small hills through the leafless elm and oak trees. A family of bikers passed them from behind, all wearing brightly colored helmets.

"Those things look so fruity," the Senator said. "Do

they really work?"

"You're going to say they do when the mandatory bicycle helmet law comes up for debate. The manufactures have put a lot of money into your campaign."

"As long as I don't have to wear one, the Senator said. "Who was on the phone?"

"You'll like this," Beckett said. He knew his boss was going to be proud of him. "We've found the girl. She wrote a check for car repairs in Cherryvale, Kansas."

"That is good news. Who are you going to send?"

"If I could, I'd send Mallory," Beckett said.

"He's the best," the Senator added.

"Yeah, but he's out of the country. On Company business."

"What about Stevenson?" the Senator asked.

"Can't. His wife's having the baby soon. He wants to, get this, 'bond' with his new son."

"How about Riddley?"

"Detox."

"I see," said the Senator. "What about the FNGs."

"Howell and Krispinski?" Beckett asked. "They're fresh out of the Company and have never done any contract work before.

"They can handle it. And they're cheap."

"All right. But if they fuck it up, don't come

bitching to me," Beckett said as they shuffled over the dam.

"And, Beckett,"

"Yes sir?"

"Make sure we send Stevenson's wife a card. Having a child is the most splendid event in a woman's life."

"I'll take care of it."

Chapter 7

After a week on the road, the soreness had all but faded from Coop's rear as the custom-made leather seat finally began to break in. He had reached the small, southeastern Kansas town of Cherryvale around five. He had planned to camp at Big Hill State Park right on the lake, but the weather was threatening, and he had camped for four nights in a row. Tonight a clean, comfortable hotel looked good. Actually, any hotel looked good. His back was killing him from sleeping on the ground, and he needed a shower. He was beginning to smell pretty gamey.

He found the Inn of Cherryvale--a pretentious name for a dusty roadside motel-- and pulled into the empty parking lot to check in. The room had one king bed and a small bath that had been last remodeled in the early sixties. A rotary dial phone was on the nightstand.

Coop sat on the bed and stared at the phone. He stared at it for almost a minute before he picked up the handset. He knew her number by heart, and knew she'd probably answer.

She may even talk for a while. He wouldn't mind hearing her voice. He had seen in the movies where the guy calls the girl, then hangs up as she answered, only wanting to hear her voice. And until that very moment, poised in front of the ancient phone, he never understood why they did that. Coop dialed the first ten numbers, waiting, summoning his courage for the last. He waited, hoping some sudden urge of adrenaline would rush through him, forcing him to dial the last number.

But then there was the waitress from the Oasis. He remembered seeing her a few times coming and going from Gabrielle's apartment complex. She might answer the phone, and he wouldn't know what to say. He would have to hang up without hearing Gabrielle's voice. He certainly couldn't ask to speak to Gabrielle then hang up the phone.

But it was late, and the waitress was probably already at work. As he tossed that theory around, his confidence grew. The waitress would be at work, Gabrielle would be alone. She'd have to answer the phone. She would think it's her waitress. Her waitress. She would hope it's her waitress. She would hope it's her waitress and not him. Coop stared at the phone for another minute before he lowered the handset to the cradle.

He lay back on the bed and shut his eyes. It had been a long day, and tomorrow's leg was even longer. Perhaps

he'd get a steak later. A steak always cheered him up.

After laundry detail and a shower, he walked across the parking lot to the Torch Lounge and Family Restaurant. The inside was like it should be with dark panel walls and plastic tablecloths. Football memorabilia decorated the room--mostly old Chiefs posters, game jerseys and kicking tees. A couple of autographed helmets were covered in dust and hanging from the ceiling by fishing line. One side of the building was the bar, the other was the restaurant boasting of home cooked meals like Grandma used to make. Coop never knew his grandma, but tonight he was hoping she was a damn good cook.

There were no windows in the bar, so it took some time for his eyes to adjust. An elderly woman in a tuxedo shirt and a red bow tie was finding things to do behind the bar. A table of three men looked as if they were about to leave. An elderly couple sat in the corner under a Bud Light sign, and an attractive woman sat alone, nursing what looked like a bourbon. He passed the bar and ordered a beer. No Dos Equis, so he took a Bud Light. He found a table where he could watch the comings and goings of the room.

The bartender delivered his beer and a bowl of fresh pretzels as the three men left. The woman ordered another bourbon, and the couple ordered more gin and tonics. He looked at the woman without being noticed. She was around

thirty. There were only two chairs at her table, and she had her purse in one of them. With only one napkin on the table, he pegged as a lone drinker. If she were waiting for someone, a seat would have been ready, and there would likely be another napkin on the table.

The woman personified suburbia, looking like she had just come from running the kids to swim practice in her Honda Accord, or more likely, her minivan. Maybe after happy-hour, she was off to a PTA meeting or a Junior League fund-raiser.

But at closer examination, her clothes were a touch too wrinkled, she rubbed her eyes as if they were tired, and her face took the sallow look of a bored traveler.

Coop ordered another beer as two men walked into the bar. One had stringy blonde hair too long for a man his age. The other was overweight, but had very muscular arms. They were a little too loud to be completely sober.

"Gimme me a beer, Betty," the blonde said. "And one for Dewayne too." With their backs against the bar, resting on their elbows, and holding their beers, they surveyed the room. They dismissed Coop and the couple immediately and walked over to the Junior Leaguer. With their backs to Coop, he couldn't hear what they were saying. From time to time he established eye contact with the woman and even once he flashed her the okay sign, and she signaled back that she

was fine.

A beer later, they were still there, though he had given up checking on her. He wasn't about to get involved in the local BS that goes on in hotel bars/family restaurants. He was just an observer. Nothing more.

Another beer, and Coop was looking around the room when his eyes met the woman's. She was frantically trying to get his attention and looked like she had been trying for awhile. Maybe it was because the two guys were such losers that he decided to help. Maybe it was because she wasn't so unattractive. Whatever it was, he walked over to her table with a plan in mind. A subtle plan.

"Oh, my God," Coop said, overly enthusiastic and bordering on flamboyance. "Is that you? I haven't seen you in years." He opened his arms for a hug, and as she held him close, he whispered in her ear, "What's your name?"

"Kathryn."

"I'm Coop," he said and released the hold. Ignoring the men completely, he pulled up a chair and sat facing her with his back to them. "Kathryn, I haven't seen you in years. How the hell have you been? Jeffrey is always asking about you, you know. How's Mel and the boys? I heard he's off the bottle."

"He's doing fine," she said. Coop could see she was trying not to smile. "How is Jeffery?"

"Wonderful. He's learning to drive again. Ever since he was thrown off that mechanical bull in Key West, he hasn't been the same." As he spoke, he watched the reflection in her eyes in case the two guys tried anything.

The woman possessed the most beautiful eyes. They were the shade of jade, only deeper. And on each iris, a little pupil-black had spilled into a deep ocean of green. Coop had almost forgotten about watching the reflection when a movement reminded him.

Coop was sitting with the two men behind him. It was a very non-threatening position, but a position that could quickly change. His chair was intentionally pushed away from the table, and he sat on the edge, allowing him to stand quickly without knocking over the table or having to back up. He watched her eyes widen as he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Me and Dewayne was here first, tinkerbell. So whyn't you do the polite thing and leave before we have to make you leave."

Coop stood slowly, raising his hands as if to surrender, mostly a show for the old couple and the bartender. Coop didn't want to be labeled a trouble-maker in some small town. "Look, mister," he said with a slight lisp. "I don't want any trouble. I'm just having a drink with an old friend."

"Elmo," Betty called from the bar. "Leave that couple alone."

"Elmo?" Coop said in amazement. He couldn't resist. "Your parents named you Elmo?"

"Yeah, what of it?" Elmo said.

"Nothing," Coop said almost laughing. He looked to Kathryn and said, "I just thought that Elmo was the kind of name people made up."

When he turned back to the two men, his jaw was met with a bony fist. Coop's head snapped back, and he grabbed his chin and rubbed it. "C'mon, Elmo. You're going to have to better than that," Coop said and pointed to his chin. "I'll let you try again. Right here."

Elmo looked to Dewayne for support. Dewayne shrugged and said. "Fuck it. Hit him again." Elmo nodded, reared back and swung as hard as he could.

In the last moment possible, Coop moved his chin out of the way, and as Elmo's momentum carried him, Coop used the leverage to catch him. He grabbed him under the arms, spun him around and pushed him into his buddy. The two collided, and before they could fall, Coop began pushing both of them toward the door, each stumbling with every shove.

Just as they were about to regain their balance, Coop would push again. If they had fallen, they would've been able to compose themselves, but a man will resist being

pushed to the ground. It was a matter of pride.

Elmo and Dewayne fought to keep their balance all the way out the door into the parking lot where, with no one around to have to prove anything too, they stumbled into their truck and drove off. Coop walked back into the dark bar, adjusting his eyes and wondering how the woman was going to react. He could never tell these things.

Inside, her glass was there, but her purse wasn't so he took his beer back to his table and finished it.

* * *

After a surprisingly thick and tender steak, Coop went back to his small room, got out the map and called Spot at his bar.

"How's the trip?" Spot asked.

"Going well." Coop cradled the phone on his shoulder and massaged his sore rear through his jeans. "How's the damn ca--"

"I'll bet you got a woman at every stop, you dog," Spot interrupted. Coop could hear the music in the background.

"Where are you?"

"Kansas. Cherryvale," he said. "Have you seen the ca--," Coop tried.

"Guess who stopped in last night and asked about you." Coop was about to guess it was Gabrielle, but Spot cut him off. "Dr. Chang. She wanted to know how your trip is going

where you are, things like that. She says she's still waiting for her postcard."

"Tell her I'll send her one tomorrow."

"Where are you headed? Everyone around here is dying to know. Anna won't leave me alone--Oh shit. She just walked in. She's been on pins and needles waiting for you to call. Hold on." Coop could hear Spot mumbling to Anna.

"Coop?" Anna's accent and soft voice were a welcome change from the hard road and the loud bike. "How are you? Where are you?" Her enthusiasm brought a smile to Coop's face.

"I'm fine. I'm in Kansas."

"I've heard of that place. Watch out for the tornadoes and the monkeys with wings."

"I will," he said.

"We all miss you," she said. "We are all living very carelessly through you, Coop." She covered the mouthpiece, and Coop heard more mumbling. "Sorry," she said when she returned. "Vi--care--e--us--lee. We are all living vicariously through you."

"Then tell everyone they're having a blast," Coop said.

She said goodbye and Spot returned to the line. "Some guy named Dan called. He wants you to call him.

"How's the ca--," Coop tried.

"How's Big Bertha?"

"Haven't used her yet. I'm saving her for the big drive. Has the ca--"

"Ah. The big drive. The world record drive. The mile drive."

"That's the one." He felt like Spot was dodging his question and tried again. "How's the cat?"

"Hey, Coop. I'd better go. One of the doormen needs me."

"Hold it, Spot. How's the cat?"

There was silence on the line. Then Spot said, "The cat? I don't know. I haven't seen it for a week."

"A week? What happened? Did you run out of food? Did you give her the right kind?"

"Yes, the food is still there."

"Did you change it everyday? You know she likes it when you change it everyday. I goes stale."

"I've done all that. I don't know how else to tell you, Coop. The cat's gone."

"Have you shaken the bag outside?" Coop asked.

"She'll come if you do that."

"Look, Coop," Spot said. "I don't know where the cat is. But if it makes you feel any better, I'll check for road-kill on my way home tonight."

"That's very thoughtful, Spot." Coop rubbed his eyes.

"Just do me a favor. Find the cat."

Coop hung up the phone, crawled into bed and made a few notes into his tape recorder. He had brought along a Panasonic micro cassette to take notes. The plan was to record the notes, label the cassettes, and when he amassed enough, mail them back to his post office box in Gulf Breeze. At the end of the trip, he would use the tapes to write his book. A book about what, he didn't know.

When the tape ran out, he labeled it, put in a small case with five others and slid the tapes into an envelope. He addressed it, stamped it, and lay it next to the nightstand to mail in the morning. Coop dozed off wondering why the cat would've left, and why he cared that it did.

* * *

Kathryn leaned against the headboard of the small bed as the constant thoughts from the past month returned and Kathryn, having no role model to follow, worried what kind of mother she was going to be. It was a role for which she had never prepared, nor had anyone's practical experience from which to draw. Her own mother had left when Kathryn was in second grade.

Jacqui, as she preferred to be called, rather than mother, was the only workaholic/alcoholic Kathryn had ever known.

On the weekends it was Bloody-Mary mornings, white wine lunches, and cape cod afternoons. The only time she didn't

drink was when she was at the office. She seldom made it home before Kathryn's bedtime, and when she did, she was usually passed out on the couch by nine o'clock.

So it was a big surprise that Tuesday afternoon when Jacqui came home before dark, bounded out of her convertible Mercedes and ran awkwardly to the yard where Kathryn was playing catch with her dad.

"I've got the best news," Jacqui screamed. "It's incredible!"

Her dad slipped off the glove and took Kathryn's small hand. Together they walked to the fence that separated the yard from the driveway. Across the fence, her mother stood beaming. But no matter how hard her mother had worked in the past, no matter how many nights Kathryn had tried to stay awake, waiting for her mom to come home, she never could have imagined she would hear what she was about to hear. "What's the good news?" her dad asked.

Jacqui could hardly contain herself, but this kind of news was best discussed over cocktails. "Let's go inside," she said. "I need to relax." Relaxing was her euphemism for having three or four drinks. And special occasions called for Margaritas, so she made her family wait until she had salted her blue rimmed glass, filled it with ice, Jose Cuervo, and a splash of mix. Then, as she settled into the corner of the couch, stirring her drink with her finger, she

gave her notice. "I've been given a promotion. Given? What am I talking about. Hell, I earned it."

Her dad leaned over the bar to offer a congratulatory kiss on the cheek, but Jacqui turned away at the last second. "Can you believe it?" she said to Kathryn.

"When does it go into effect?" Robert asked.

"As soon as we get there," she said.

"Get where?" Kathryn asked.

"Seattle," Jacqui replied. "The corporate off--."

"Seattle?" her father interrupted. "We never talked about moving to Seattle."

"I didn't think there was anything to talk about," she said. "I got a promotion." She declared it as if it were only factor to be taken into consideration.

"But I can't go to Seattle," he said. "And Kathryn's right in the middle of her school year. We just can't pack up and leave."

"That's fine," she said. "Come at the end." She took a long hit of her drink and brushed the salt from the corner of her mouth. "And your cases should be settled by then. You can start with a new firm there."

"Jesus, Jacqui, I have my own practice here. I just can't pack up and move."

Jacqui took another sip. "I guess you have a decision to make then."

A week later, Kathryn felt her father's thick hands on her shoulders as she cried on the front porch, watching her mother drive away.

Though she didn't understand why until she was an adult, life, from then on, seemed a little easier with fewer emotionally taxing days. There was no more trying to wait up for Jacqui to come home so Kathryn could tell her about her report card, no more listening from another room as Jacqui raged uncontrollably and incoherently at Kathryn's father, no more watching her pass out on the couch Saturday and Sunday nights after drinking all day, no more wondering if she was going to show up at her softball games.

But even knowing that her mother was two thousands miles away didn't stop Kathryn from searching the bleachers every time she stepped up to bat. Like every other child whose parents divorced, she prayed every night that her mom would come home.

But she never saw her mother again after waving to her from the porch. Jacqui did call occasionally, but mainly on her birthdays--her own birthdays.

Kathryn's father, a man who preferred to be called daddy, was a prominent Atlanta attorney who always managed to make time to see his daughter's school plays, cheer her on at her softball games, or help her with her homework. Her father hardly dated and never remarried. His entire

focus was on trying to be a good father. He had cut his work load in half, seeing only a few new clients whose cases he knew he could win or settle. Through the years, it was her father who stayed up with her through her first break up, the time she lost her best friend to cancer, and the many nights she couldn't sleep, wondering what she did that made her mother leave.

Her father was with her the first night she got her period, and was as surprised as she was. He thought she wouldn't get it until her sixteenth birthday.

"You know," she remembered him saying, "When you get your drivers license." But a week after she turned thirteen, it arrived.

After having gone to bed early with stomach pains, she awoke at two a.m., screaming at the sight of blood on her sheets. Seconds later her father rushed in, stopping at the doorway as if to assess the situation. She'd never forget the way he stood there, filling up the doorway, a reassuring look on his face. Instantly she knew she'd be all right.

A moment later, he had calmed her down with just a touch, found a left-behind box of Tampax, and gave the best instructions he could on how to use it. Once she was calm and in bed again, her dad went an all night pharmacy and picked up a fresh box so she could change it in the morning.

That was seventeen years ago, and every night rather

than praying for her mom to come home, she wished to have one more day with her father. Two months after she went off to Yale, her father, after just dropping off his first date in years, was killed by a drunk driver.

The memory of her father, the picture permanently etched in her mind was the way he looked at her the night at thirteen. It was a look of total strength, reassurance, and understanding. It was a look that made Kathryn know everything was going to be fine, because he was there to help her. She had never seen that look on any other man, until tonight, when she saw it on Coop's face.

She had waited for three days for her car to be fixed and was now getting restless, ready to knock on Coop's door and ask for a ride to Arizona. So far she had done just what the Jonas had told her. No ATMs, credit cards, and no main roads. But now she was stuck and alone, afraid to wait for her car any longer. The biker was her only hope.

She dug through her purse and pulled out a photo of a crewcut blonde five year old wearing epaulets and insignias.

She stared at the picture, fixated on the child's eyes, until she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 8

"...and that's why I say the Mexican economy is taking over this beautiful country that our grandfathers, our fathers, our sons and ourselves have fought for. Is this the tiny train of America's moral conscious jumping track? Have we beamed ourselves off the world for a day and got back on?

"For example, today we have babies being taken away from their loving mother's arms and being sent to special schools then indoctrinated in the covert services of the government. These children--ten, twelve and fourteen year olds are given fake papers and sent to Russia to go to Russian schools and join the Russian military, all the while covertly working for Uncle Sam. Man, I got to tell you, that's some kind of uncle who would do that to small children. But praise God, it looks like enough of you people have contacted your Congressmen and Senators, and now a hearing will be conducted. Once the evil is exposed and the judgement has been cast down, we can bring the children

home to mama and papa. We can put an end to the kidnapping of babies. We'll have to find something else to put on the milk cartons now that government is giving back our children.

"Friends, I was very pleased that we could unite our front and accomplish this sacred mission. It's under the rules of God and man that made America the great nation it once was. But America, I think, is in decline, and if you refuse to recognize that, maybe you should submit your backside as a bicycle rack to perform some good social service.

"On a side note, in Birmingham Alabama, next weekend, we will be conducting the ninth stage of our TACT training. This module will be on High Speed Defensive Driving. Fly in, or drive in. We will be providing the cars. Now, if you can't be with us in 3D, you can order the TACT training videos for all 13 modules by calling 1-800-555-TACT. While you're on the phone, why not order the 365 days of food and water. We don't make any money on this, folks. We just try to break even. I've got all the money I need to last me. And let me tell you it's not all dollars. When Armageddon comes, U.S. dollars won't do you much good. Gold is going to be the national standard. Which reminds me, on tomorrow's broadcast we will have a gentleman here that will be able to answer your questions on buying and selling gold.

"Now for the years that I've been host of this show, I've told you that the churches are charitable, and donations are tax-deductible. And their doors should be open. But sometimes, they're not. Now, I give to Salvation Army because throughout my life as a G.I., we didn't have to pay for the doughnuts when the Salvation Army was there. Their doors were always open. They always had three hots and a cot just for listening to the preacher. But at least those churches had their arms out.

"Then, there's the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, and others just like it. They are all multi-billion dollar organizations. All charitable, totally tax-deductible. They give the rich people that control them Cadillacs, boats, airplanes to fly and fine homes to live in. That's where your donations go-- to those rich people. And if you notice, you'll see that those are the same few people that are controlling the money supply throughout the world. All part of the G-7. The seven headed beast. Revelations. Let me read to you this passage, if I may..."

Dorothy Halston slipped her feet into her pink terry cloth slippers and shuffled across the oak floor to the bathroom, stifling a yawn along the way. The old house was unusually cold for a South Dakota April morning, and she wondered if the pilot light had gone out again. She exhaled

hoping she could see her breath, confirming her existence. It was three-thirty-nine as always, when she got into the shower and soaped up her gray hair and soft, wrinkled skin.

Dorothy put on her uniform, leaving the apron off for now and went to the kitchen for coffee. She flipped on the radio to General Wright. She loved listening to him. Her second husband, Garrett, had started listening in the mornings before opening the diner, and she reluctantly got hooked. It was General Wright's firm, but caring tone. One that reminded her of her own grandfather's. Though sometimes the topics forayed into the unbelievable and conspiratorial, she still liked to listen, and she only believed about half of what he said. She had been around long enough to know that the government is not always right. And until recently, it was difficult to believe the IRS was a criminal organization and paying taxes violated the constitution.

She had always excelled in school and though embarrassed to admit it, was actually a certified genius. But after marrying her first husband Winston, a professor she had met after one of his lectures, she was content to finish college and stay home. They were married for thirty seven years and had one child who died at birth after a complicated delivery. Because of the complications, Dorothy also suffered the loss of any other children she may have

ever wanted.

Though Winston was a great mathematician, he was not an intelligent investor. And when he died of lung cancer, he left Dorothy penniless. More out of need than love, she met and married Garrett, the owner of a diner out by the interstate. He had kept her safe, warm, and fed, though it was mostly diner food. Dorothy fell in love with Garrett over time and tried hard to be a good wife. They had almost twelve years together, and two years ago, he died a truly happy man. Those were his last words to her. "You made me a truly happy man," he said, and passed on. She sat at his bed until they took him away, and now she sleeps on his side and still dreams of him.

When she's feeling better, she often jokes with the other waitresses that with the average length of today's marriages, she could probably live long enough for one more.

Garrett had left her the diner. And though it was paid for, he'd had a problem with back taxes and Dorothy inherited those problems as well. Lately she could feel the IRS circling above as she planned ways to pay off the debt. Twice they levied her account taking over \$600 each time. It was everything she owned. If she sold the diner, she could just cover the taxes. She still had some time to formulate a plan. There's always hope.

The only family Dorothy had now was the waitresses and

the regulars at the diner. And if nothing changed, the rest of her life would be as it is everyday: rise at three thirty nine, open the diner, feed those that come by, then at nine that night, go home. She did afford herself the luxury of having Sundays off, but that day was mostly for catching up on the housework.

The cowbell thunked overhead as she opened the glass door and brought in the donuts Krispy Kreme had dropped off. She flipped on the lights and locked the door behind her. The place used to smell like old wood and bacon grease, though she didn't notice it anymore. She tied her apron and began making coffee and putting the donuts under the glass domes. Tiffany, her morning waitress, appeared at the door shivering in her light blue uniform.

"I can't believe how cold it is out there," she said after closing the door. "What is it? Twenty? Thirty degrees?" She walked behind the counter and tied her apron.

"Twenty-seven," Dorthy said. "It's supposed to get to fifty today."

"There's no way. It's too cold out there," Tiffany said and pulled a mug from underneath the counter. "You want coffee?"

"I'll have some in two minutes when it is done," she said. Pouring the coffee before it was ready was one of her pet peeves. "And so will you," she added. She never

understood why people couldn't wait for the coffee to finish.

"Yes mam," Tiffany said.

"How'd finals go yesterday?"

Tiffany stood by the coffee watching it drip. "Fine," she said. "I messed up one nail, though. I forgot the nail strengthener on the middle finger. The right middle finger." Finally, with the pot full, Tiffany poured two cups. "The middle finger. Can you believe it? I wonder what the hell that means." She handed a cup of coffee to Dorthy. "I bet a shrink would have a field day with that."

"It was probably just stress, Tiff. Don't make too much out of it." She was always making too much out of things.

"Stress? I'm not the one that should be stressing. Another guy from the IRS came by yesterday--this time with some loser taking notes. I think he was taking inventory."

"Damn! There not supposed to come by if I'm not here. Just because I'm an old lady, they think they can push me around."

"Can't you call someone and complain?"

"About the IRS?" Dorthy shook her head. "No, hon. No one controls the IRS." She took her coffee and went into the kitchen. She turned on the griddle and pulled the bacon out of the fridge. "They can do whatever they want."

General Wright says it's been going on for so long that everyone just thinks they're within their jurisdiction."

"I just don't think it's fair," Tiffany said, laying a pile of silverware on the counter.

"I don't think 'fair' is a term they're all too familiar with, hon."

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. "I've been through a lot worse." She nodded toward the door. "The breakfast rush is here. Could you let Earl in?"

Earl, a tow truck driver who made it a routine to stop by every morning for coffee took his usual seat at the counter. Just as Dorthy poured him a cup, her hand started shaking, spilling coffee all over Earl's lap. It was all she could do to set the coffee pot down on the counter.

Dorthy braced herself against the counter and tried to control her breathing as Tiffany and Earl looked on. She had experienced these overwhelming feelings--spells, she called them. No doctor could explain the cause. No tests showed any problems. The spells sometimes were an overpowering feeling of aloneness. And fairly often, though not lately, it was a sense of danger; an adrenaline rush from pure life-or-death danger. And on more than one night, she had awoken to the belief she were dead and alone. Often, the spells felt like premonitions or strong

intuitions as today's had been. She had sensed someone was trying to kill her.

Then slowly, as always, the feeling subsided and she put the coffee pot back on the burner and said, "Earl, you're not trying to kill me are you?"

"No ma'am," he said. "But if you keep dumping coffee in my lap, I'm going to have to find another diner."

Chapter 9

The alarm went off at seven. General Wright was spouting off about the evils of the CIA, the FBI, the entire body of Congress and the G7. Kathryn listened as callers told of their horror stories of run-ins with the government agencies. She made her way to the shower, then to breakfast, wondering how she was going to spend the day in this small town. One day in this place was one too many. She was getting antsy. And suspicious. She needed to find a way out of town. The hell with the car. She had to hitch a ride with someone--anyone. The Senator had no idea where she was. She was doing everything according to Jonas' plan. For now she was safe, but the longer she stayed in one place, the more vulnerable she became.

Like the past three mornings, the restaurant was nearly empty. The early sunlight shone on the dust and lingering smoke, thickening the air and making the room look bigger than it was. Betty was behind the counter standing over the griddle, working on eggs. The short-haired biker, her

savior from last night, sat in the far corner sipping coffee and reading the paper.

She felt guilty about running off last on him night but she couldn't take the chance he wasn't one of them. Guilt wouldn't kill her, but he might. Jonas told her these people would shoot on sight, and if he had wanted her dead, she would be. She approached him cautiously, as if he were a wild animal. He had the one thing she needed most: a fast way out of town. Kathryn had worn a pair of tight jeans, black boots, and short leather jacket hoping to make herself look like a biker chick.

He stopped reading the paper and stood as she spoke.

"I just wanted to thank you for last night," Kathryn said. "It's Cooper. Right?"

"Coop," he said, folding his paper and setting it aside.

The man looked rugged enough to provide good protection, even though he probably wasn't too bright. His eyes were indigo, his skin olive, and his dark hair was cropped close to the scalp. A broad upturned scar on chin smiled back at her and his right ear looked as if it had been torn off in some wicked fight to the death.

"Bitten," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"The ear," he said. "It was bitten."

"I hadn't noticed," she said.

"Liar," he said, motioning for her to sit.

"I don't want to interrupt," she said.

"It's no interruption," he said. "I could use some conversation." His voice was youthful and his articulation perfect. "I was just reading about some nut who's accusing the government of some shady practices." He shook his head. "That guy on the radio, General something, says he has proof of brain washing, kidnapping, and even, can you believe it, murder."

She signaled to Betty for coffee. "From what I've read about it, the Senate is actually investigating some of his allegations." She didn't want to seem too quick to agree with the General and be labeled a radical. She scooted her chair in. "I wouldn't be surprised if some of it's true."

"Me neither, actually," Coop said.

When the coffee arrived, Kathryn said, "Tell me, Coop, how did you end up in lovely Cherryvale? A woman, I'll bet."

Coop looked back into his coffee and gave a shrug of non denial.

"I thought so," Kathryn said. "You look like a guy with woman problems. What happened? She run off with another biker? Someone from your gang?"

"No," he said, offering nothing more. "What about

you?"

She drew a deep breath, got into character, and suddenly changed her tone and emotion as if a director had yelled, "Action!" "My car broke down," she whined. "And it's only a matter of time." She flashed her green eyes at him, knowing he'd melt.

"A matter of time before what? It gets it fixed?" he guessed.

"No," she said dramatically. "Before...my soon-to-be ex-husband finds me. I left him, and now he's after me." She faked a sob into her napkin. "He used to..." she sobbed again. "He used to...He use to...do bad things to me."

"What kind of car?"

That wasn't in the script. "An Escort. Why?"

"What year?"

"Ninety four," she said. "What difference does that make?"

"Did they say what's wrong with it?"

"Something about...CV axles," she said.

"When is it going to be ready?"

"In a few days. But I can't wait that long." She tried a big convincing sob. "I have to get to Arizona," she said and looked over her wadded napkin, hoping her eyes would sway him. "Before he kills me." One more sob ought

to do it.

"Sorry to hear that," Coop said.

"Maybe I could get a ride with you?" she said. Kathryn knew bikers were a very proud breed and very protective of their women. He had to say yes.

Coop drew back. "Isn't there someone else you can call?"

"No," she said and tried another sob. "There is no one else."

"What about a bus station. There's one in Independence. I can give you a ride to the bus station."

Kathryn blotted her summoned tears again. "I see you haven't ridden a bus lately. Do you know what kind of people ride buses?" She grabbed his thick forearm. "I promise I won't be in the way."

He rubbed his smiling chin. "I don't know," he said. "I'm kind of on a mission. I'm not going from Point A to Point B, lady. I'm taking my time." He sipped his coffee.

"I just don't think it would be a good idea."

"You said you could use the conversation," she tried. "It gets lonely on the road."

"Alone doesn't mean lonely," he said. "Besides, that's the way I like it."

Betty interrupted, "Here's your check," she said and tore it from the pad. "I've got to go to the hotel for

awhile. If you need more coffee help yourself. Just leave the money on the table, hon."

"Thanks," Coop said.

As soon as Betty walked away, Kathryn started again. "It's only to Arizona and you can go whatever way you like," she said. "I like the back roads."

"Look, I'm in no hurry to get anywhere. I have nowhere to be, and no one waiting for me when I show up."

"Either do I," she said, pouring on the enthusiasm. "See? We'll make a great team."

Kathryn could almost see his brain working, he was thinking so hard. And after what looked like careful consideration, he said, "Sorry, lady. Can't help you." He fished his wallet from his jeans to pay the tab. "Good luck, though." He grabbed his leather jacket and headed for the door.

"Wait," she called. "I need you. You can't--"

Coop never turned around. He just held up his hand as if to dismiss her, and the biker walked through the dark diner into the morning sun, leaving her alone and lonely.

* * *

Twenty minutes after he left the dramatic debutante in the diner, Coop strapped his daypack onto the big bike and secured Big Bertha. He hadn't thought twice about taking the woman. Well, maybe just twice. It was her eyes that

made him second guess himself. It was one of the most attractive features about her.

There was no way though. He was on a quest to discover America alone. He had traveled throughout most countries in the world, speaking six languages as smoothly as a native. But he had never climbed the Rockies, descended into the Grand Canyon, or taken the Alaska Highway. It was as if he knew every other culture better than his own. Even as a child he had learned about the ways of lands other than his own. For Europe, Africa, and Asia he had his classes to prepare him. For America, he had only himself, and there was no way he was going to lug around a woman on the run from her ex while he learned about the country he so long had risked his life for.

But then again, there were her eyes.

Coop had to make one last call to Dan before he checked out of the hotel. Maybe Dan was going to level with him and tell why he calling so much. Something was troubling Dan, and Coop knew it.

"Look," Dan began, his voice lowering. "I don't want to be an alarmist, okay?"

"What?"

"It's just that we've got some info that hints that the Russians may have found you."

"That's impossible," Coop said. "Unless one of our

guys turned."

"We're still working on it," he said. "We're trying to confirm it."

"Who do you think it is?"

"Dmitri."

"From the helicopter?"

"He escaped from prison a month ago. We have him on video at arriving at Dulles."

"Why is he's after me?"

"You set him up."

"That's bullshit. He's not after me. He could be after anyone. Hell, he could be after you."

"Keep telling yourself that, Coop, and you won't be around to finish that book. You've got to be ready."

"How would he know where to find me?"

"Coop, it's not like you're in witness protection. You know that. Besides," Dan said, "I think he had some local help."

"Who?"

"Not sure yet. We're still running that one down."

Coop promised to call regularly for updates and hung up the phone.

He fastened the strap to his helmet and pushed the electric start. The 1300 cubic centimeter engine rumbled beneath him as he looked through the giant window of the

diner. The Junior Leaguer was still sitting there, circling her spoon in her coffee cup, staring, looking like a lost puppy in the middle of traffic, wondering which way was home.

A blue Ford van pulled in and stopped in front of the diner, as Coop slowly pulled away. He watched as two men in suits exited through the rear of the van.

* * *

Kathryn kept stirring her coffee trying to decide what to do next. She couldn't wait on the car, though she had already given the man a check for the two-fifty. She hadn't wanted to give the mechanic a check in the event her accounts had been frozen, but he insisted, and Kathryn was surprised when Check-Approv-All gave their blessing to her transaction. It meant the people at the clinic still didn't know who she was. She couldn't take the bus. She couldn't wait for the car. And she couldn't call Jonas anymore. He had received reports from someone on the inside that his phone lines were being monitored, and it would be too easy to trace her calls, pinpointing her location. From here she was on her own with only her instincts to help her survive.

She took the spoon out of the coffee, tinked it twice against the ceramic cup and looked out the window in time to see two men in suits unsheathe their weapons and open fire on the diner. She pushed over the table and threw herself

behind it. The sound of the guns and broken glass shattered her eardrums. Her heart felt as if it was going to burst through her chest, it was suddenly tight and painful. She looked behind her to the counter. If she could make it to there, she could get out the back.

Then, as suddenly as the shots began, they ended. There was the sharp sound of glass fragments falling, one by one to the ground. Then the muffled sound of glass crunching under a pair of slowly approaching feet. The crunching grew louder and louder until it was on her. Kathryn huddled behind the table, shaking, too afraid to look. She dug through her purse, frantically searching for her .38.

"Surprise," the man said. By the trajectory of the voice, she knew he was standing over her.

Kathryn slowly lifted her head to see the man pointing the gun at her cheek. She closed her eyes.

"Consider yourself maximally demoted," he said in a low tone.

Kathryn heard the crack of the weapon, then felt the table move, then the weight of the man on top of her. When she opened her eyes, she was staring into the man's dead eyes and a small hole in the center of his forehead. She heard glass crunching behind her under quick steps. The crunching passed her, and she peered from behind the table

and saw the shadow of a man dart out the door. Kathryn watched as he circled the van. In the daylight, she could see it was Coop.

Another man, a clean cut white guy, keeping watch, shaded his eyes as he tried to peer into the dark diner, squinting in the bright sun. Coop crept low, stepping gingerly, his knees bent as he came within arm's length to the dead man's partner.

Kathryn knew what would happen next. Drop the gun. Call the police. Take statements. Have the guy arrested. So she was shocked, and somewhat relieved in a primal way, when Coop, having slipped up to the man from behind, put the barrel to the base of the skull and squeezed the trigger. Kathryn saw the man's clean-shaven, boyish face explode, his body go limp, crumpling in a pile at Coop's feet. There was a startling thump against her table, and she saw what looked like a dead, bloodied rodent, but what she knew was part of the man's skull. Coop knelt and picked up his shell casings.

Kathryn froze again in fear as Coop ran in. He stood over the dead man's body and looked down at her, then to the hole in floor where the table had been bolted.

"C'mon," he said. "We gotta get out of here." He grabbed the one of the autographed helmets hanging from the ceiling and handed it to her. "Wear this," he said. "It's

Jan Stenerud's."

"But--" she tried.

"Let's move it." He offered her a hand up. "We've only got a few minutes." He led her through the back, to the bike, climbed aboard and started it.

Kathryn slipped the Chiefs helmet over her short, blonde hair and buttoned the chin strap. She threw her leg over and reached her arms around his waist, holding tight. He mumbled something, but she couldn't understand what he said.

"What?" she said.

"You don't have to--"

"What?" she said.

Coop shut off the engine, grabbed her hands and pried them apart. "You don't have to hold so tight. I do need to breathe."

"Sorry," she said. "I've never ridden on one of these before."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Coop said and started the engine again and pulled out into the empty road.

* * *

The shoot-out had nothing to do with her husband. He knew that. The van was a rental. He had seen the papers on the dash. These men were not Feds. Though they looked the part, they were probably contractors--legalized hit men--

hired guns to solve problems.

Coop knew the route well. He had hired a couple of contractors himself in the past to help with difficult jobs.

They were an integral part of the nations defense, he was told. An integral part the righteous, pretentious, murderous Intelligence Community. An integral part of the reason Coop left the Community.

He was no saint. He accepted the killing. He had accepted it a long time ago. It was the motives that finally pushed him out. For the longest time he believed in what he was doing. Then he found himself on a hillside in Colombia staring through the scope at a drug lord's house, waiting for his target to come into view, the overweight, balding Senor Menendez, head of the Menendez Cartel.

Chapter 10

At the end of Calle Bonita, sitting in the van crammed with electronics, the young Treasury agent threw off his headphones. "Jesus Christ, it's been dead all fucking morning. How much longer are we going to have to listen to this loser?"

"Fishback says we don't have enough for an indictment yet," Hornsby replied. "We've barely got enough for a warrant," the older one said. "We've only been out here a week, Zeke. Have some patience, rookie. In a few days we'll have some down time to hit the beach and drink a few beers. I do need to work on my tan," he said holding out his arms, inspecting them.

Zeke laughed and said, "Now if I had said that to you, I would have been brought up on some kind of discrimination thing." They had been working together for three months. It was Zeke's first assignment, and Fred's last. Fred had two more months to retirement. "I don't see what Fishback is so worried about," Zeke said. "We've got a shitload on

this guy. It's so fucking obvious he's scamming his investors. We got enough to nail him right now on a Ponzi," Zeke said.

"Fishback wants everything by the book. He doesn't want Velour to walk on some technicality. The guy's got so much cash hoarded that if he flees to Brazil, there wouldn't be a damn thing we could do about it. Besides," Fred added, "you've got more tapes of his neighbor's phone calls than you do of Velour's."

"I couldn't help it. With those damn cordless phones, you never know what the hell you're going to pick up."

"If Mr. Sumner ever finds out we taped some of his calls, he could sue," Fred said.

"How's he going to know? I've got them all right here to destroy," Zeke said, pointing to a box of tapes marked Sumner/File 13. Zeke lifted the binocular and gazed out the window. "I've never seen sand this white before," he said.

"This area's beautiful," Fred said. "Mildred and me thought about retiring down here."

"It wouldn't be too bad," Zeke said shaking his head. "If you didn't have to look at that sorry bastard all day." He turned toward Fred and lowered the binocular. "You know who I really feel sorry for," he said.

"Who that?" asked Fred.

"That Sumner dude. He's got to watch that fat ass

prance around in his Speedo on his deck, as his gold medallion beats against his chest. I thought that medallion shit ended with the seventies."

"What the hell would you know about the seventies, punk?"

"I've seen VH-1," he said. "And my parents were into that. They had all that shit. Bell bottoms, eight-tracks, Vegas, Pacers, white polyester suits--my dad even showed me his."

"The Pacer," Fred said wistfully. "You could make a five foot sub in the back seat of that car."

A sudden movement in the mirror caught Zeke's eye and he felt for his weapon. A man approached. "Standby, Fred. We got company...my side." An older man with gray hair knocked on the window. Zeke rolled down the window, never taking his hand off the nine millimeter. "Can I help you?" he said.

"When the hell are you going to hook up my cable," the man yelled. "I've been down here for two weeks and you haven't even bothered to hook it up yet. I walk by here everyday and I see your truck and I don't see you doing shit. Doesn't anybody at Cablemasters work? They don't treat you like this in Michigan. That's where I'm from you know. Have you ever been to Michigan?"

"No sir."

"Here," he said and reached for his wallet. "I've got pictures."

"That's not necessary."

"I'm afraid it is," he said, and before Zeke could react, the old man put a hole through the young man's forehead.

Fred scrambled out the back trying to find cover but as he opened the door, was met with a twenty-five caliber fitted with a silencer. The last sound he heard was the metal click as the round spun from the barrel and found its place between his eyes.

The old man gave the thumbs up to his partner and climbed into the van. The partner shut the rear doors and watched as the Cablemaster van with two dead feds sped off.

* * *

The loud doorbell awoke Spot from a sound sleep, and he drowsily looked at his watch. "Shit," he said and jumped out of bed. It was almost noon and Anna was coming over for lunch, and she hated it when he slept until noon. Usually she's exactly on time. That's one of the things he liked--from time to time--about her. She was always on time. Not five minutes early, not five minutes late. But today she was twenty minutes early.

With sleepy hair and crusty eyes, Spot opened the thick wooden door. The bright light made his eyes water.

"Did I wake you?"

The silhouette was too diminutive to be Anna. "Dr. Chang?"

"It's Susan, please. I've seen your truck in the driveway for the past week, and I knew Coop was out of town. So I thought I would stop by." She slipped past him into the empty, high ceiling room and looked around. "Maybe we should take up a collection to get him some furniture," she said.

"If Coop wanted it, he'd get it."

"It's a shame. He must not be able to afford it," she said as if she hadn't heard Spot. "It is an expensive house."

"Oh, he can afford it," he said, almost flaring his chest, ready to stand up for his buddy.

"Right," she said patronizingly.

"There's not much he can't afford, Susan." So there, he wanted to say. "What do you think, doctors can only make the big bucks?"

"No. I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound that way. It's just that I never see him work. What does he do?"

"He's kind of retired. That's about all I know." Spot had never told anyone more than that, and he wasn't about to.

"Have you talked to him lately?"

"Yeah," he said. But she wasn't going to get any information from him.

"Well, tell him he needs to buy some furniture," she said and walked outside to the deck. Spot followed her out. "He's got such a great view," she said. A dolphin jumped out of the water just past the sandbar. Velour exercised on his deck. "Except you can see him."

Spot looked at his watch. He had fifteen minutes to get cleaned up before Anna came over. And if Chang were there, Anna would be pissed. Not only did he sleep until noon, but he's got a strange girl over. "Is there anything you needed?" Spot asked.

"Have you seen the cable truck at the end of the street?" she asked with an air of intrigue. "It's been there for over a week now."

"I haven't noticed," he lied. He was going to ask Coop about it when he called. There were a few other things going on that concerned him.

"Maybe it's just my imagination, but I don't think it's really a cable truck."

"I think you've been watching too many spy movies," he said and looked at his watch again, hoping she would get the hint.

"I think I'll call the cable company and find out for sure."

"You do that," Spot said, and again looked at his watch. This time she noticed.

"Got to be somewhere?"

"My fiancé is coming over at noon," he said and shrugged his shoulders as if to apologize. "I've got a lot to do."

"I'll let myself out then." She turned and walked inside. "Mind if I use your bathroom?"

"Help yourself," he said and went to the kitchen to start straightening up. Anna hated a messy house.

Chang was still in the head when the doorbell rang. Spot opened the door, and Anna stood there holding a bottle of wine. "Are you hungry?" She walked in the house and looked around. It was the first time she had been there. "Is he ever going to buy any furniture?" she said.

"That's what I asked him," a woman's voice called from the next room.

"Who's she, Spot?" Anna demanded.

"That's Dr. Chang. She lives across the street. She had to use the bathroom."

"Couldn't hold it until you got home, sweetie?" Anna asked.

"My systems backed up," Dr. Chang said.

"Sounds like a personal problem to me," Anna said.

Dr. Chang walked slowly into the room, trying to be

sultry, pissing Anna off even more. "I'll be going now," she said and walked through the opened door. "Nice to meet you."

Spot said goodbye, and Anna did not.

"I don't trust her, honey." Anna set the wine in the fridge. "I trust her not one bit."

"Grab me a beer while you're in there."

"How long have you been awake?" she asked.

"It's past noon," he protested. She hated when he drank after just waking up and always gave him shit about it.

"How about I make you some coffee instead?"

"A beer will do fine, thanks."

She moved to the empty cabinets for something to fix for lunch. "Does he ever eat? He's got no food."

"I think there's a can of tuna fish in there."

"I don't see it," she said and shut the cabinet a little too hard. "All I see is a coffee maker, a chair and a TV. Are you sure someone lives here?"

Spot looked around the empty room. "He's just not into material things. I set the TV up myself," he said proudly.

She walked out to the deck and stood against the rail.

Spot followed and stood behind her, lowering his chin to her shoulder. "What if we go out for lunch," he said. "We can ride bikes to the boardwalk."

She turned within the confines of his arms. "Sounds like fun. We can save the wine for later. My boss gave me the day off."

"What a coincidence. So did mine."

They took a couple of old beach cruisers Coop had in the garage and as they passed the end of the street, Spot noticed the Cablemasters truck was gone.

Chapter 11

The high sun warmed Coop inside the jacket, as the cool air chilled what little skin was exposed. It was a fresh, alive feeling, and one of the reasons he bought the Harley. He stole a glance over his shoulder and saw Kathryn's tiny head beneath the huge helmet, dancing with the rhythm of the uneven pavement. It reminded him of the little dolls with the oversized heads bobbing in the back windows of cars, making her look more like a Pee Wee Leaguer than a Junior Leaguer. It would've been great ride alone, but then there wouldn't have been the pretty debutante snuggled behind him hugging his waist so tightly, needing him so much. And every now and then, especially lately, it felt good to be needed.

Medicine Lodge was like any other small town. A row of shops lined the main street, a few cars were parked in the angled spaces, and a few citizens ducked in and out of the drug store, appliance store, and department store. Coop found a Texaco across the street from a drug store. He

leaned the bike into the grimy, gray gas station and stopped next to the pumps. Without saying a word, Kathryn set her helmet on the seat and ran to the bathroom. Coop filled the tank and found a pay phone. A green Chevy pick-up crept by while Coop called home.

After four rings the answering machine came on. "Spot, it's Coop. If you're there, pick up." He waited a moment, then hung up the phone. He tried the bar and was told Spot was off today. A red sedan passed in front of the gas station. He tried his friend, Dan at the FBI.

"Special Agent Banister," the man said. Coop always thought it was funny the phony way they answered the phone.

Banister was a guy Coop had been drunk with, and Coop could remember times they were so hammered, Banister couldn't even pronounce his own name. And now he sounded like some kind of government robot. Which probably wasn't too far from the truth.

"Special Agent Banister," Coop said in an equally authoritative voice as he rubbed his ring finger.

"Yes," Banister said and coughed so hard it hurt Coop's chest.

"This is Special Agent Green."

"Yes?"

"Do you have your super secret decoder ring on? I am about to send you a top secret communiqué?"

There was a pause. Then, "Yes. It is online and functioning properly."

"Please verify the model, sir. For proper protocol, I need to know if your unit is the Lucky Charms model or the Cap'n Crunch version?"

"The Crunch version." His tone and air were like that of an expert witness. "The bureau deleted the Charms model from inventory years ago. Something about a striking resemblance between the little fairy and J. Edgar."

"I must've missed that memo," Coop said. "Although now that you mentioned it, he does look a little queer."

"So does the leprechaun," Banister said mixing his coughing with a laugh.

"Well, Special Agent Banister, do you think you could take time out of your busy schedule of pushing those so-very important papers to help me out?"

"Sure, Coop. I'm glad you called," Dan said. "I've left several messages at your house." He let out a painful cough. "Who, or what, the hell is a Spot?"

"He's a friend. He's watching my house. Look, I need to find out the status on the Dmitri Chernyshev information? Any validity to the intel?"

"That's why I was calling. Could you hold?" He sometimes did that when he was about to have a massive cough spasm.

Coop stood in the phone booth, taking in the old town. A lady came out of the drug store dragging her teenager by the ear as the kid's friends watched from inside. The sheriff's car passed by twice, the second time very slowly. Coop was in no mood for the obligatory harassment of out of town biker by the local law enforcement.

Banister came back on the line. "Here we go. I got the file right here. Looks like he came into Dulles on a flight from Brussels two days ago. Airport security cameras picked him up." Banister paused. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"That night in the helicopter just before he jumped out. Why?"

"He's changed a lot. His hair's completely gray, and he's only forty."

"Russian prisons can do that."

Banister coughed. "Are you ready for the good news? He's definitely after you, Coop. We think his wife may be the mole."

"No shit?" Coop said. "I didn't know he was married."

"Neither did we. But prison records indicate a woman visited him every month."

"Got a name?"

"We're still trying to confirm it, but we think it's the Chinese doctor that lives across the street."

"That's crap," Coop said.

"Coop, she was hanging all over him at Spot's bar," he said.

Coop didn't want to believe it. Just when he thought he could stop being cynical and suspicious, shit like this happens. "Are you sure it's her?"

"She's only been there for a few months, Coop. Plenty of time to get to know your routines, habits, anything to make you an easy target," he said. "But you dropped everything and left town. And they weren't expecting that."

Coop remembered her request for post cards, and it began to make sense. "Run a check on a Dr. Susan Chang. She's a physician at Baptist Hospital." He spouted the order as if he were now the robot. It came without thought. Then the thoughts came all at once. She had been to his house. She knew about the trip. She had even tried to get into bed with him.

"Now, Coop, this is where it turns bad. Two days ago, on the beach, two Treasury agents were capped and their bodies dumped in the dunes along the National Seashore. They were found this morning by some kid and his dog."

"Our guy?"

"Looks like."

"Why Treasury agents?"

Banister paused, then spoke in a hushed tone. "The

agents were outside your house on a separate job."

"My house? Why mine?"

"It had nothing to do with you. They were investigating some guy named Velour about a Ponzi scheme."

"Dmitri must have thought they were there for him," Coop said.

"Righto."

"Where's Dmitri now?"

"We don't know. Spot's was the last place we saw him. So keep on your toes and maintain vigilance, my friend. If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to call...someone else."

"Very funny."

"Hey, I'm just trying to cheer you up."

"Keep trying," Coop said, and hung up the phone as Banister went into a coughing fit.

Kathryn was at the bike when Coop returned from the restroom. "Doing okay?" he asked softly. She looked like she'd been sick.

"I'm all right," she said.

"Can I get you anything?"

"I suddenly have room for lunch." She managed a smile. "I just keep seeing that guy's head."

He pointed to the drug store across the street. The sign on the window said it had a lunch counter. "C'mon," he

said. "These places have the best fries."

They sat at in a turquoise booth patched with silver duct tape and ordered sandwiches from stained menus. A transient sat at the counter smoking Marlboros and eating microwave burritos. The back door was behind them, the kitchen to the right. Coop sat facing the front door. The teenagers he had seen through the window were hanging around the magazine rack, flipping through Popular Science while trying to sneak a peek at the Playboys.

When Kathryn finally spoke it was a whisper. "What do we do now?"

He had wanted her to mention it first. "Before we do anything, you're going to level with me," he said. "Unless your ex-husband is a professional hit man, I'm going to have a hard time believing that was a domestic dispute." He watched her eyes, the black drips on the green iris.

"They work--worked for him."

"What the hell happened that would make him hire two guys to kill you? Fold his underwear wrong?"

"No," she said quickly. "He's with the mob."

The first answer is never the truth. She had answered too fast and given too obvious an answer. He watched her body language as she spoke. It was a technique he had learned from the FBI. Sure her story could have been plausible but her body language told him she was lying.

"The mob," he said, nodding.

"Yes. The mob." She was so unconvincing it was laughable.

"Which family?"

"The...Bambinos."

"The Bambinos?", he asked. "I've heard of them. They're deadly." Coop started to get up. "I think I'm in over my head here, lady. Good luck," he said and stood.

"No. Wait," she said and grabbed his arm, and Coop returned to his seat. "You can't go," she said.

Coop settled on to the bench seat, catching his jeans on the upturned corner of a piece of tape. "How long were you married?"

"Ten years," she said. Again, it was a little too fast.

"I knew you were trouble the moment I met you," he said. "I should've known with your blonde hair, green eyes, and southern drawl, you were the typical mob wife." Coop wondered if she knew how hard he was trying not to bust out laughing. As the waitress left the food, he leaned back in his seat. He picked up a french-fry and continued. "You know what I think?" he said, pointing the fry at her and shaking it. "I think you're full of shit." He grabbed her left hand and held it up. "You're not even married. Probably never were."

She tried to jerk away, but he held tight. "Why?" she asked. "Because I don't have my ring on?" She relaxed her hand. "Maybe I took it off, Sherlock."

"It's not the ring. It's the ring mark. Or lack thereof," he said. "No tan line, no dirt line, no smoothing of the skin. After wearing a ring, no matter how thin the band, the skin at your age would take a long time to get back to normal." The logic sounded good to him. Verisimilitude. It was a practice that came easy to him. She jerked again, and he let her have her hand back. "You really want to know what I think?" he said.

"What," she said and took a big bite of her sandwich.

"I think you've stumbled onto something, and you're in over your head. And judging from the two guys back there, it looks like you're way the hell out of your league."

"Boy! You are a genius," she said. "Learn to reason like that in prison?" Talking with her mouth full of gooey American cheese and white bread mildly diminished her Junior League air.

"You really pissed someone off--I'm thinking someone high in the government--and they're mad enough to maximally demote you."

She stopped in mid-chew. "That's what he said right before..."

"I thought so," Coop said. "It's a euphemism. But by

the looks of it, either you're not that important, or they couldn't get anyone else except a couple of FNGs."

"FNGs?"

"Fucking new guys."

"How do you know they're new?" she asked.

"The idiots wore suits, like they were still collecting that twice a month paycheck, trying to make the country safe for you and me."

"You seem to know a lot about this," she said as she leaned back as if to distance herself as much as possible from him.

He shrugged his shoulders to appear as innocuous as possible. "I've seen the X Files," he said.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"We?" Coop asked incredulously. "I don't know about you, but I'm going to finish my delicious grilled cheese sandwich and tasty fries and then take to the open road. Then I am going to find a huge hole into which I am going to hit a dozen golf balls."

"What about me," she said. "I still--,"

"Hold on, now," Coop said. "I've done my job. I played the hero once today." He ate another fry. "My obligation's fulfilled."

"That's it?" she said. "You're going to leave me? In this place?"

"You got it," Coop said.

"But--,"

"Maybe," Coop began. "If you tell me what's going on, I might let you ride along," he said. "And I mean the truth this time."

"I told you the truth."

"Very well," Coop said and ate another fry. A smile of deep satisfaction stretched across his face. "I told you this place had the best fries." He ate another. "Look, if you need some money, I can loan you a little. Unlike you," he said, pushing the taunting to the limits, "I can use my credit card." He ate another fry. "Let me know."

* * *

Kathryn sat silently wondering if she should tell him the truth; the truth about the school, the truth about her son, the truth about Senator McAlpin. She looked at her plate and then to Coop. His chin was smiling at her. No matter how serious he was on the inside, his chin always had a small smile across it and it wasn't that altogether unattractive.

She pushed her plate away, took a breath as if she jumping into deep water, and summoned the little trust she had left for people. "You're right. I'm not married. Never have been. And I did piss some people off," she said. The confession made the weight of her problems lighter, as

if someone else was there to help shoulder the load. She couldn't tell him everything. Some weight she'd have to carry on her own. "And they were politicians. One in particular."

"Who?"

"A Senator. Senator McAlpin."

"What'd you do?"

"I broke into a clinic he owns and stole some files."

"Because...," Coop led.

"Because I think he kidnapped my son."

Coop leaned back in his seat. "Why would a Senator kidnap your son?"

"I can't tell you," she said.

"What kind of files did you take?" he asked.

"I can't tell you that either," she said. "And you wouldn't believe me if I did tell you."

"And you want me to help you kidnap him back?"

"I don't have to kidnap him. I just have to pick him up from school," she said trying to make sound so very innocent like any other mother picking up any other child. "I just need a ride. That's all."

"You have proof that this boy is, in fact, your son?"

She shook her head. "The only proof I can offer is my son. You'll know he's mine when you see him."

"Why not go to the police? They like kidnappings."

"They wouldn't believe me," she said.

"And I should?"

"You have to," she pleaded. "My son's life's at stake."

Coop stared at his plate. In the harsh fluorescent light reflecting from the shiny floors of the drug store, Kathryn noticed the scar on his chin told more about him than he could ever verbalize. The blue eyes were very soothing, his face welcoming. But behind the warm eyes and the smiling chin, was a killer. She had seen it. She had seen him in action. He stalked his prey and killed with the precision and mindlessness of a machine. But for the first time since she began the trip, she felt safe.

"Look," she said. "I can't tell you everything. But I can tell you I'm not crazy. My son is in terrible danger, and I have to get him back."

Coop began to look everywhere but at her. He sat silent for a moment.

"I'll make a deal with you," she said.

He smiled. "And you're in a position to deal? The way I see it," Coop began. "You want me to give you a ride to Arizona to pick up your son. And from you, I want....let's see," he said, rubbing his chin, staring off in the distance. "Nope. Can't think of anything I want from you." He wiped the ketchup off his fingers. He tossed the napkin

in his plate and scooted out of the seat. "All I want is to see the Grand Canyon."

She grabbed his hand as he stood. "It'll take your mind off your woman problems."

"Who said I wanted to take my mind off her?"

"C'mon," she said. "It'll make a great story," she said. "You could put it in your book."

"How do I know you're not going to get me killed?"

"I swear it'll be easy," she said knowing he was coming around. "You don't even have to go inside. I just have to show them I'm his mother, and they'll turn him over."

"These guys aren't playing around," he said. "What if you panic and get me killed?"

"Panic?" she scoffed. "Me? I've been through so much I know how to remain cool under any kind of pressure. You can count on that."

"It did start out a bit exciting," he said as if he was thinking it over. "It would make a great first chapter."

"Is it a deal?" she asked.

Coop thought for a moment. "First, I need to know if you are in any kind of legal trouble. Are the cops after you?"

"No. Not that I know of," she said.

"Good. Because one just walked in."

Kathryn turned in her seat to see the teenage cop

walking down the aisle. His holster was unsnapped and his hand was hovering above his pistol. She looked to Coop for guidance.

"It's okay," he said. "Just relax. If he comes over, let me talk to him."

Kathryn was trembling. She could hear the footsteps get closer. She heard them stop just behind her. Coop's eyes watched the officer. She tried to watch through the reflection in his eyes.

"It's okay," he whispered, without moving his lips. "Relax. Don't turn around."

Kathryn was shaking so badly she had to sit on her hands. She tried her best to appear calm and in control but she wanted to scream and run. And if it weren't for Cooper, she probably would have.

"Freeze!" the cop yelled.

Kathryn froze. She watched Coop.

"Put your hands on top of your head," the cop said.

Kathryn waited for Coop to move first.

"Do it!" the cop screamed.

She gave up waiting for Coop. She threw her hands on top of her head, like she had seen the people do on COPS. Coop still sat there.

"All right stand up," the cop said.

Kathryn did as she was told and scooted out of the

bench making sure she had her hands firmly on top of her head. But as Coop sat there with a huge gloating smile, she realized she had been set up.

While standing in the drug store lunch counter with her hands on her head waiting to be cuffed and taken away as the man she trusted sat there, it all made sense. He must have called the police when she was in the bathroom at the gas station. He offered to buy her lunch, then sat with her long enough to get her confession. How could she have been so stupid? He probably had everything on tape. The comment about the fries was the signal that he had the confession. That's what brought the cops in.

She saw the exit sign over the back door and planned her escape. She couldn't even look at Cooper anymore. He was laughing at her.

How could she have been so naive? Jonas had told her to be careful who she trusted. And above all, she was never to tell anyone about the clinic, and that was the first directive she had broken. As she stood there waiting for the cold steel of the handcuffs, her blood and adrenaline rushed through her body. She summoned the courage to run.

Then just before she bolted, she felt someone tap on her shoulder. "Mam?" the young voice said.

Kathryn craned her neck to see the officer standing behind her.

"I was talking this guy," the young cop said, pointing to the disheveled man at the counter. "He stole some bean burritos and cigarettes from the Happy Seven Quick Mart."

"Allegedly," the bum shouted through a mouth full of burritos.

Kathryn slowly lowered her hands and turned around to face the cop. "You mean you're not after me?" she said.

She must have sounded disappointed because the cop said, "If you want I can arrest you. I don't know what for though."

"How about for possession of an overactive imagination bordering on paranoia?" Coop said from the booth and began laughing--a laugh too shrilly and too juvenile to belong to a man of his build. "Come on honey, sit down," he said as he wiped the corner of an eye. "Let this man do his job." Coop stood up and extended his hand to the rookie. "I have to apologize for my fiancé. She watches a lot of TV." Coop helped her back into the bench. "Where's your medication?" he whispered loud enough for the cop to hear, but soft enough so that the cop didn't think he was supposed to.

"I think it's in my purse," Kathryn said, playing along, trying to appear more collected than she was. She dug through her purse.

"Thank you, officer," Coop said and sat down. He waited for the cop to leave the building before he said

anything. "You're the coolest," he said and started laughing his high pitched, contagious laugh, one that infected Kathryn. In a moment Kathryn found herself laughing like she hadn't laughed in five years.

* * *

The young cop opened the rear door of the car and helped the suspect in. His partner, Filo, sat in the front playing with his kid's Game Boy.

"The strangest thing happened back there, Filo," the young cop said as he drove the cruiser around the corner to the station.

"What's that, Earnest?" Filo said, crinkling his face, his neck straining, his eyes searching the car.

"Well, see, as I was collaring the dirtbag...,"

"No. I mean what the hell's that? What stinks?"

"I don't know. Must be him," Earnest said pointing to the back. "He's the one that stole the burritos."

Filo grunted, and Earnest continued. "Anyway, this woman, she stands up and put her hands on top of her head, like I was cuffing her. Ever seen that?"

"No,"

"Why would she do something like that?" Earnest said and pulled into a parking space in front of their office.

"Beats me," Filo said.

"I know why," the vagrant said from the back seat.

"Shut the hell up," Filo said.

"If you let me go I'll tell you. I know where they headed. I heard 'em."

"The only thing you heard," Filo said, "was them voices in your head telling you to "Steal the burritos, Steal the burritos."

"Steal it, and you will fart," the vagrant added.

* * *

"God, that was close," Kathryn said, her pulse slowly returning to normal.

"I wouldn't worry about the police being after us for what happened at the restaurant."

"Why not?" she whispered. "You killed two men."

"Once the bodies are identified," Coop said, "the Feds are going to step in and take over the investigation and sweep it under the rug." Coop took a sip of Diet Coke and continued. "Contractors are about the only people in the world you can demote without having to worry about an investigation," he said. "The government couldn't give a damn about them. They were hired to do a job and failed." He ate another french-fry. "Now, we have to assume the Senator knows your coming after your son," Coop said.

"Right," she said.

"And he knows who you are."

"Right again.'

"As I see it, they'll be waiting for us coming in or heading out from the school. I don't think they'll try anything on school grounds," he said. "Too many kids could get hurt."

"You're right," she said.

"I just want to stop at the Grand Canyon when we're finished."

"The Grand Canyon? Why?"

"Why? Because I've never been there before."

"You've never been there before? I thought everybody and their brother had been there...twice."

"I haven't," he said.

"Well, I don't see what the big deal is. You're not missing anything. It's just a hole." She leaned over her soda. Her eyes focused on him as she sipped. "Just one big hole," she said. For a quick moment, she thought she saw some kind of return from his eyes. A small, ever-so-slight exchange of warmth or desire. Perhaps there was a something buried deep beneath the leather jacket and the muscled torso.

Coop laid a ten on the table. "C'mon," he said. "I want to put some distance between us and Kansas."

"I want to pick up a few things first," she said.

Kathryn stopped at the book rack and selected a few paperbacks, holding them so Coop couldn't see the titles.

But Coop knew what they were. Gabrielle had a weakness for them too.

"Romance novels?" Coop chided. "You?"

"Never trust anyone without a vice," she replied.

Then as Kathryn wedged the books into her purse, Coop caught a glimpse of the titles: 101 Ways to be a Great Mom, and One Parent; Twice the Love.

After a quick pit stop, they were rumbling past the police station as the young cop they had seen earlier was getting into his car with his partner. Kathryn watched Coop's speedometer as he kept it under fifty going through the small town. She couldn't decide if he was going too fast or too slow. She was in a state of anxiety, caught between the excitement of seeing her son for the first time and the painful anticipation of what she was going to have to do to get him. Kathryn had lied to her new partner. She knew she wasn't going to be just like any other mother picking up any other kid. It wasn't going to be like that at all.

Chapter 12

The gray and white American Exterminators van hummed along the straight, smooth pavement of route 169 just north of South Coffeyville, Oklahoma, and south of Coffeyville, Kansas. It was a good thing, too, because after driving for sixteen hours, Dmitri Chernyshev could use some coffee. Though he was drowsy, he was still happy--as happy as he'd let himself be. He checked his rearview mirror. No one was behind him.

Everything was falling into place. He had Cooper Sumner on the run. He had a new van with plenty of electronics in it, and had even christened it with a new name. And in his pocket, bulging against his lean bottom, he had an authentic U.S. Treasury badge to get him in and out of wherever he wanted to go. Everything was perfect. Now if he could only find a good radio station. He played with the dial as he steered the van down the empty road to Cherryvale and settled on the ramblings of some preacher-general.

He had wanted to listen to the tapes of Cooper Sumner's conversation before dumping the bodies. But the Americans had crammed so much electronics into the van that, unless he wanted to move the bodies into the front seat while he worked, he had to get rid of them first. So he found a nice spot along a deserted stretch of beach with plenty of scrub bushes, and tumbled the bodies out of the van and into the sand, hiding them in a patch of palmettos.

Then after stopping at one of the thousand Quick Sign shops for a magnetic sign to cover the Cablemasters logo, Dmitri found a quiet neighborhood and pulled onto a side street and parked. The van had all new, high tech equipment. Not like the old electronics he had used when he was forced to serve in the Russian Army. After an hour of frustration, he figured out how to work the new gear.

For hours he listened to tapes of Coop's phone calls. Cooper Sumner had a boring life with boring conversations. Except for one. It was a tape of Cooper Sumner telling Chang his plans. He said that he was heading to the Grand Canyon and was going write a book. How sweet. And Chang had confirmed that he was in Cherryvale, Kansas.

Dmitri looked up from the radio dial just in time to read the sign welcoming him to Cherryvale. The preaching of General Wright still resonated through the van, and Dmitri flipped off the radio. He could only stand so much.

As he passed the Torch Lounge and Family Restaurant, there were two police cars in front. He noticed the shattered glass, drove behind the hotel and parked. A fed in an exterminator's van would be hard to explain.

He took one of the navy blue windbreakers with the bold yellow US TREASURY on the back, zipped it up and approached the local sheriff. He took one look at the sheriff and knew this was going to be fun.

Dmitri flashed the badge, though the jacket was probably enough for the sheriff. "Any other federal officers here, Sheriff?" His English was impeccable. What little accent he had made him sound like he was from one of the ethnic communities in the upper mid west.

"Why are the feds involved?" the sheriff said offering his hand. He was skinny and his uniform was too baggy. It looked like he had lost a lot of weight in a short period of time. He looked weak.

"Tell you in a minute. What happened here? Any ID on the bodies?"

"None. The van's rented to a John Smith. I think it was a hold up. The restaurant owner is over there," the sheriff said pointing a bony finger to the lady with the red bow-tie standing inside the windowless cafe. "She said she didn't see a thing."

What the hell is a "thang?" Dmitri wanted to ask but

decided not to. He heard the sheriff call to him as he walked away, but Dmitri ignored him.

The woman was crying when he approached. He hated dealing with crying women. He hated dealing with women altogether. They're so damn emotional. He handed the woman a napkin from one of the tables. He saw the nametag. "It's only glass, Betty," he said with a warm smile and hugged her with one arm. "You'll be fine. I'll have one of our federal insurance adjusters in here in a matter of moments as soon as we finish. In a couple of days it'll be as good as new."

She took the napkin and blotted her tears. "I suppose you're right. It just looks so terrible. I've had this place for thirty years and it's just sad. This is my only source of income. What am I going to do?"

"Don't worry about that," he said and stroked her back. "You see, Betty, because your fine restaurant was involved in a federal incident, you'll receive loss of income compensation." He took out his notepad and started writing as he looked around the room. "Looks like a hotel and restaurant this size would clear about five, maybe ten grand a month. Right?"

"No sir. I'm lucky to get a thousand a month."

"Betty," he said placing a hand on each of her shoulders and staring her in her eyes. "It looks like a

hotel and restaurant this size would clear about five, maybe ten grand a month. Right?"

In more of a question, she replied "Ten?"

In big letters that she could see, he wrote down 'Betty-10,000 big ones!' She was his. "Now, I need to ask you some questions." He flipped to a new page in the notebook. "Who was in here today? Was there a tall man. Short brown hair. Mid thirties?"

"Yes. He had a funny name."

Dmitri showed her a picture and she confirmed it was Cooper. "Was he with anyone?"

"No. But I saw him talking to the other guest--the woman--last night and then this morning. But they weren't traveling together."

"Do you know who the woman was?"

"It was...Mrs. Tellman, from Boston."

"But they weren't traveling together? You sure?"

"Positive. He got in last night before dinner. I was kind of skeptical of him being on a motorcycle and all. You know how those bikers are. Nothing but trouble." She looked around the room and opened her arms wide. "See what I mean?" She spun slowly in a tight circle. "You think he did it, don't you? I thought he was bad news the minute I laid eyes on him. What did he do that you're after him?"

Dmitri almost smiled. Everyone is so quick to agree

with the police. It's as if they have no mind of their own.

He ignored her question, sealing his role of authority.

"Do you know which way he went?"

"I think he went that way," she said pointing over her shoulder. "Toward Independence."

Dmitri looked around the restaurant. "Have you noticed anything missing?"

"No money or anything like that. But--and this is odd--I'm missing one of my Chiefs helmets; my Jan Stenerud. I had it up there on the wall. And now it's gone."

"Have you mentioned this to anyone else?"

"Not yet."

"Do me a favor, will you? Don't..." Dmitri stroked his chin as he were hopelessly troubled.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head. This was his favorite part.

"Nothing," he said. "I just had a passing idea, but," he held up his hands as if in defense, "I don't want you to get involved. It's too much to ask of a citizen."

"What's too much to ask?" she asked.

Again, he held her shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "You see Betty, I've been after this guy for years. And every time I get close, the local sheriffs always mess it up."

"Like The Fugitive?"

"Exactly," he said without really knowing what the hell the hick was talking about.

"What did he do?"

Dmitri took a deep breath, inhaling loudly for effect. "He killed my wife, Betty. My wife and my child." He wiped a pretend tear from his eye with the back of his wrist. "So you see you have to help me. You have kids of you own, I'm sure."

"Yes."

"Well imagine if they were murdered and you knew who did it but the police kept fouling the trail."

"But Harvey's a good cop. Been Sheriff here for fifteen years."

"I'm sure he's a great sheriff. It's not him personally." With his hands still on her shoulders, he said, "It's the whole local versus federal thing. You understand, don't you? You've seen the movies."

"Well, yeah. I guess." She looked at his feet. "What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to tell the cops you saw nothing. That you had no idea who caused this. Can you do that for me? For Isaiah, my murdered son?" The biblical names always worked for these Christians.

"I can do it," she said proudly as if she were volunteering to go on some kind of secret mission.

"I knew you could," he said and pulled her in for a tight hug. "God bless you," he said and left her standing there. He walked back to the American Exterminator van. He smiled. That was him: The American Exterminator.

But after what Cooper Sumner did to him, you couldn't blame him. He spent seven years in a filthy underground Minsk prison because of Cooper Sumner. It had to have been him. That night in the helicopter was the last time he saw Cooper Sumner. He just sat there in that fucking chopper, not saying a word. Somehow, when they were tossed into the water they were separated. Dmitri heard the splash and heard Cooper call for him, but that was it. Dmitri was eventually picked up by a fisherman, and because security was so tight, was taken to the Libyan authorities who turned him over to the Russians. They immediately identified him and imprisoned him that night. It was three years before he got a trial, then a sentence of life.

After three years in prison he caught wind of other inmates planning an escape. He promised them more wealth than they could imagine if they would take him along. Since the others had already known of him from the outside, and they knew he could come through on his promises, they let him in on the escape. Dmitri had such a big name, it was almost an honor to help him. He didn't even have to dig. Six months before Dmitri's escape, his wife had positioned

herself close to Sumner, and Coop didn't suspect a thing.

Then on the night of the final step of the escape, the seven men crawled single file into the cramped tunnel they had tirelessly dug spoonful after spoonful, night after night, for three years. Dmitri was at the rear of the line.

Then with only a hundred yards to crawl to freedom, Dmitri dug his makeshift blade from his pocket. And as he closed in on the man in front of him, he raised his hand in the tight space and plunged the shank deep into the man's back.

The man died silently, and Dmitri crawled over the body to the next.

Number two let out a little sigh as the rusty blade settled into his spine. A quick twist of the blade, and Dmitri was ready for number three.

Unfortunately, Three made a bit more noise, causing the remaining two to look behind them. When they saw Dmitri wrestle the blade from Three's back, One and Two started sprint-crawling. Dmitri relaxed and caught his breath. One and Two weren't going anywhere.

So Dmitri crawled over Three and down the tunnel to Two, then One. He thought it was funny the way Two tried to climb over One, while One pushed Two away. It was if they thought a few more seconds of life would matter. No one but Dmitri was getting out of that tunnel alive. And no one was going to follow him or jeopardize his freedom.

* * *

He knew he had a few hours before Betty gave in to Harvey the sheriff. He found Independence, then bared right on route 160 towards Attica, Pixley, and Medicine Lodge. It was a hunch. But it was the first road heading west, and, if the tapes were right, Cooper Sumner was heading to Grand Canyon, there's a good possibility he's on that road. Dmitri edged the speed odometer to eighty, checking his rearview mirror every thirty seconds.

Chapter 13

"Goddamnit, Beckett," Senator McAlpin yelled as he set his drink down. "I ask you to take care of this shit and you send me two fucking losers," he said, rocking, using the momentum to get his heftiness out of the wing chair. "They had CIA written all over them. Jesus Christ, one still had his last pay stub on him. Can you believe that? Can you fucking believe that? Jesus fucking Christ, Beckett," he said. "It's like sending your dumbest rat into the maze with no goddamn cheese." He pointed a fat thumb over shoulder and shook his head. "Call Jim over there and tell him what happened. Tell him the pay stub was a fake. It was a ruse. The killer planted it on him. And tell him those guys were ours."

"Is the Director in tonight?"

"I'm sure he is, Beckett." The Senator walked around the borders of the Persian rug, examining it, still trying to catch his breath after dressing down Beckett. "You know what makes these damn rugs so expensive, son?" His voice

was calmer now, but he still made Beckett nervous. Nervous enough not remind him that he picked the FNGs.

"No sir."

"Details, Beckett. That's what makes these rugs so expensive. The craftsmen work very hard to make sure that the details are exact." McAlpin dropped to one knee, holding on to the edge of the desk for balance, then to the other knee. "The rug is only perfect if the details are perfect. And up until now, we've had the perfect operation. Know why, Beckett?"

"Details?" he said.

"Exactly. Because we've taken painful measures to make sure the details are looked after." The Senator pointed to the rug. "See this snag? This little thread is loose. What do you think would happen if I were to pull it?" he asked, not waiting for an answer. "This one little thread would tear the whole rug apart. Follow me?" The Senator drew a pocketknife.

"Yes sir."

"Well that's what this woman is. She's a loose thread in a fine piece of art. She can unravel the whole rug," he said, slicing free the errant stitch.

Beckett shook his head, thinking how good a drink would be right now. "I understand, sir. I'll get another guy on her tonight."

"Too late," McAlpin said trying to stand, struggling under his own weight. Beckett offered a hand up. "I've already called someone else. I managed to get a hold of Mallory."

It was a name he had heard over and over, but a man he had never met. Mallory was like some legend apparition in the Intelligence Community. As a Roamer, Mallory had worked with every agency at one time or another. Everyone had heard of him, but very few had ever seen him. There had been a few more like him in the Community, but Mallory was the latest Golden Boy.

"He should be here any moment."

"He's coming here? I thought he was out of the country."

"I called him personally."

Mallory never knocked, and Beckett never heard him come in. One second he wasn't there, the next he was. He was a tall muscular man, with long blonde hair. His icy gray eyes were devoid of any emotions. Beckett quivered as he realized he was standing next to a legend.

"Mallory," McAlpin said, "this is Beckett, my assistant."

Mallory stuck out his large hand, and Beckett hesitated. The man did not look like the type to shake hands. Beckett, feeling somewhat intimidated and being

somewhat cautious, timidly offered his hand. Mallory squeezed it gently.

"Nice to meet you Mr. Beckett." His voice was crisp and held no regional dialect.

"My pleasure, Mr. Mallory."

Mallory released Beckett's hand and strode to McAlpin.

"Senator," he said, opening his arms for a hug. "It's good to see you again," Mallory said, then whispered loud enough for Beckett to overhear, "Nice job. He's cute."

McAlpin broke from Mallory and looked at Beckett.

"Thanks," he said with a flare of pride. "But look at you. You look great." He held him at arm's length and admired him. "A perfect specimen of man, both mentally and physically." The Senator brought him tight for another hug.

After a round of small talk, Mallory got to the point.

"You didn't call me back from Tunisia just to chit-chat, Senator. What can I do for you?" He said it as if he was still trying to repay some debt long ago forgotten by the Senator, but still fresh on the mind of Mallory.

"Have a seat, son," McAlpin said. He took the cigar box from the mahogany desk and offered a Cuban to Mallory, then to Beckett. Beckett took two, clipped the ends, lighted one and handed it to McAlpin. "A problem has come up. There's a woman who stands to destroy a large portion of the intelligence organizations. She could, in effect,

destroy America." The Senator enjoyed being dramatic and used his talent just enough that only those closest would notice his act. Beckett watched the Senator and wrapped his lips around the cigar and sucked, drawing in the smoke.

"Do you have a picture of her?" Mallory asked.

The Senator took a large envelope from the desk and tossed it to Mallory. "Until today, we thought she was operating alone. We thought one of the doctors might have been in on it with her, but he turned out to be nothing."

Mallory took out the black and white and studied it. "Looks wealthy."

"Yeah, like a school teacher with a rich husband," McAlpin said.

"Is she?"

"No," Beckett said a little too fast, wanting to contribute something to the conversation. "We've got her phone tapped," he added.

"Where is she now?" Mallory asked.

"The last time we had a fix on her, it was in Cherryvale, Kansas," Beckett said. "We sent in two men for her. One took it from a distance through the forehead. Perfectly centered, I might add. The other, point blank, base of the skull. They found the top of his head thirty feet away."

The Senator took a puff from the cigar, stared at the

glowing end, and said wistfully, "Almost looked like one of our own did it."

"She's smart," Beckett added. "She's not using credit cards, or ATMs. And it looks like she bought a car just for the job."

"How did you find her?" Mallory asked.

"We put a Treasury Trace on her checking account. A check approval company reported one written for car repairs," Beckett said.

"And you think she might be with someone else?"

"Yes," said Beckett.

"Beckett," Mallory said with authority, "find out what other transactions were completed with credit cards that day. Then, identify those which are not registered within a fifty mile radius and start there. Same with ATMs. Also, check hotel and pay phone records for any long distance calls. I.D. the numbers called, then find out who lives there. Call the local post office and hold the mail for my inspection. I want to look for cards, bills, anything going out of town from someone from out of town. Got that, Beckett?"

"Sure," Beckett said. "But it may take some time."

"I know. It'll give me a chance to get out there."

"I love this man," the Senator said enthusiastically to Beckett. "That's why he's the best." The Senator tried to

stand from his chair and said, "I'll have a jet ready for you first thing in the morning."

"Don't get up, Senator," Mallory said, rising at the same time as Beckett. "I'll contact you with good the news."

The Senator took Mallory's hand, holding tight with both hands and said, "Be careful, son. I want you back alive."

"Count on it," Mallory said.

Beckett opened the door and wished Mallory the best. With the door closed, the two men alone, Beckett took his place behind the Senator's chair and gently massaged McAlpin's thick shoulders. "Don't worry. He'll find her," he said soothingly. "He seems very capable."

"I'm not worried about him," the Senator said. "I'm worried about the hearings. That punk Senator from Florida is breathing down my neck."

"Why not just eliminate the problem?"

"The Senator?" McAlpin said as if taken aback.

"Why not. It's not like we haven't done it before."

"You really think I should?" the Senator asked.

"Why not," Beckett said, rubbing McAlpin's rubbery neck. "How's that feel?"

"Great," the Senator moaned.

"I've got some good news."

"Yes," McAlpin said in a sleepy voice.

"We should have the information from the safe deposit boxes soon. I looks like she might have opened one. First Bank of Nashville's security camera might have spotted her."

"Really?" the Senator asked excitedly, trying to turn his heavy body in the small chair. "Daddy would love that."

"I know you would," Beckett said. "Don't get your hopes up though. The woman in the picture is undisguised, actually smiling for the camera."

"When will Daddy know?"

"Hopefully tomorrow." Beckett kissed the top of the Senator's head, stepped from behind the chair and took the Senators glass. "How about another drink?"

Chapter 14

Kathryn was too scared to sleep and found herself listening outside Coop's motel door, holding two bottles of beer. She didn't want to wake him, but she didn't want to be alone either. She promised herself she'd only knock lightly. If he was awake, he would hear it. If he wasn't awake, she'd tough it out alone.

She waited for an answer. When it didn't come, she tried again, only harder. She had probably just knocked too lightly the first time. She whispered his name, but still no answer.

Kathryn looked down the cement sidewalk toward her empty room, then to the four cars and one motorcycle in the large gravel lot, and an overwhelming feeling of aloneness fell over her like a thick blanket of fog. She turned to the door and began pounding. "Coop?" she yelled, hoping she didn't sound as afraid as she was. "Coop? You awake?" She banged harder on the old wooden door. "Coop!" she screamed, just as the door opened.

"What?" he said impatiently, wearing only a pair of boxers, wiping the sleep from his eyes. In this pose, it was easy to imagine him as a child.

"I thought you might like a beer," she said, and held out the bottle. "And some conversation," she added.

Coop took the beer, said, "You're right about one thing," and closed the door, shutting her out.

Kathryn banged on the door again. "Coop! Let me in!"

Coop opened the door, and let her pass. "Didn't we talk at dinner?" he said.

She brushed past him and sat on the corner of the bed. "Did I wake you?" she asked innocently. For the first time, she noticed the definition in his body. She had never realized how the deltoid flexes when a man drinks a beer. He was in perfect shape, and for a moment she wondered what it would be like to be with him. It had been over two years since she had been intimate with a man. So long, she thought, she doubted she could remember how. "To a safe journey," she said, and raised her beer to meet Coop's.

"Cheers," he said, and moved closer. He was standing over her, looking down on her, and she trembled at his closeness. His eyes were intense as he leaned toward her. Kathryn sat still waiting to react, not sure she could resist. Her eyes lowered to his tight waist, his blue boxers. "Coop?" she said sweetly, as he moved against her,

his big hands running down her soft back. Her body shuddered, and she wondered if he could feel it too. They had formed a bond, an alliance, but she wasn't sure if their relationship should move to this level. Kathryn had to decide whether to give herself to the man that saved her life or try to stay focused on getting her son back. Intimacy now would seem premature, but somehow it also seemed perfect. She felt his hands brush down her back. He must have felt her shudder that time. She wasn't going to resist. His hands moved to the smooth curves of the small of her back, then further. Wondering if he was waiting for a sign from her, she said, "Coop? It's okay," she said.

"It's not okay," he said. "You're on my jeans." She felt a tug underneath her, snapping her back into reality. "Could you move?" he asked.

She inched over.

"Thanks," he said and slid on his jeans and green tee shirt. "What's on your mind?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you want to talk about?" he said, and took a seat in the straight chair at the desk.

"I don't know?" she said. She caught a puzzled look from him, and watched as he opened the door.

"Looks scary out there," he said. "Very empty."

"Really?" she said casually. "I hadn't noticed."

He shut the door and sat on the bed next to her.

"Could you do me a favor?" he said and grabbed her hand.

"Would you mind staying in here for the night? I'll sleep on the floor. I'd just feel safer."

"Do you think I should?" she said, not wanting to sound too eager.

Coop smiled. "I think it would be a good idea. I have to take care of something first," he said and grabbed the tape recorder from the nightstand. "Give me your key."

She tossed him the key, and in two minutes he was back. "Everything okay?" she asked.

"Just a little subterfuge," he said, and made a pallet from the extra blankets and sheets, positioning it between her and the door. He sat on the hard floor, leaning against the big, comfortable, king size bed and sipped his beer.

Kathryn snuggled into the bed. She could smell his cologne. For fifteen minutes they sipped beer and talked about nothing. Kathryn mostly talked and Coop sometimes listened.

Twenty minutes after the lights were out, she said, "You seemed to know what you were doing back there." She let it hang in the air, waiting for a response, hoping to finesse a little information from him. She hoped the dark intimacy of the hotel room would act as a confessional where no question could escape an honest answer.

"I've had some experience," he said. By his yawn in his voice, she knew she had wakened him again.

She held her hand out at arm's length to see if she could see it. She couldn't. "Ever married?"

"Almost," he said.

"What happened?"

"Turned out we had one too many things in common," he said.

"Is that the woman you're running away from? What's her name?"

"Could we talk about something else please?" he said.

"How about your son? What's his name?"

Kathryn never had a chance to name her child before he was taken from her, but according to the files, the boy's name was now Zachary Montoya. "Zachary," she said. "I can't wait to see him."

"You'll see him soon," Coop said and reached up and patted her foot. The touch made her feel safe.

Kathryn waited for him to continue, but he didn't. It was obvious he didn't want to talk anymore, but she still wasn't quite ready to sleep.

* * *

Coop lay on top of the thick, musty-smelling blanket. The small pillow barely kept his head off the carpeted cement floor. He tried not to think about orphaning the

child, bringing another into his world of pain. But lying in bed at night, when it's the quietest time of the day, thoughts that kept him awake streamed through his head like a train through a tunnel. He hadn't thought about Menendez's death this much for a couple of months, and now, for a reasons that escaped him, the chatty little prom queen was making him recall every detail.

It had happened during the Christmas holidays. After spending two bitter cold years in Yugoslavia, he volunteered for a milk run in Central America--maximally demote Senor Menendez, the leader of the Menendez Cartel and former agent of the CIA. Menendez deserved the demotion. He bit the hand that fed him. He had used the CIA, and the information he gathered to rise to top of the cartel. Then when he was eventually arrested, he threatened to expose the CIA's activities in Central America. Activities that included the manufacturing of cocaine that could kill a person in one dose. A substance necessary to "change the public's mind," as the campaign promised. The feds released him, and before he could walk out the door, had put a contract out on him.

It took five days of crawling on his belly, dressed in a ghilley suit to get close enough for the shot and still have a head start for the egress. Finally, he had the shot lined up--a three second window of opportunity to nail Menendez between the house and his limo. He watched for

Menendez through the cross-hairs of the Leupold scope, like watching a movie with the sound off.

Menendez walked out of the house with his back to Coop as if he were talking to someone still inside. He was close to the door of the mansion, while guards with earpieces circled wide around him. A limo was being brought around from the other side of the house.

From the front door, Menendez's wife rushed outside and began to argue with her husband. Menendez slapped her, then followed with a solid right across the chin, and she collapsed. El Senor turned, facing Coop, and began for the car. Menendez had made it easy for Coop by wearing a white golf shirt with a logo on the left side just above the heart. With the cross-hairs fixed just left of the logo, Coop added pressure to the trigger.

Suddenly, a little boy entered the circular view of the scope and started punching and slapping at his father's legs. Coop paused. At this distance, if the scope had been knocked out of alignment just a millionth of a centimeter, he could hit the boy.

Menendez stood still for a moment, raised his hands in the air as if yelling to God, while his son beat on him. This was the shot Coop had waited for. He had to take it. Menendez would be behind the car in three seconds. If didn't tag Menendez now, the mission was a failure. Coop

leveled the sights on the man's heart and fired, then bolted another round into the chamber. Coop anxiously watched through the scope, waiting to see the results.

The little boy suddenly stopped beating his father's leg and fell to the ground. Menendez dropped to the ground next to the car, covering his son, and Coop readied for a second shot.

Coop watched as the boy squeezed out from under his father and ran to his mother's side. Menendez awkwardly picked himself from the ground and grabbed a weapon from the nearest guard, opening fire on the guards, killing them all before they could respond. In the shower of bullets, one found his wife. He turned and faced Coop's direction and began firing wildly.

Through the scope Coop noticed a dark stain just above the logo on his golf shirt. Menendez tried to cover it with his left hand as he fired the automatic weapon with his right.

With the security and spotters dead, Coop fired a second round. The impact knocked Menendez to his knees, then to his face. Coop waited and watched for anyone else to show. A movement near the house caught his eye and the boy appeared again in the scope's view. Coop watched as the boy neared his father, then bent over the way kids do when they're about to do a headstand. The child, now face to

upside down face with his father, stared for a moment, then knelt at his father's head. He gently pushed the man, as if trying to wake him. He pushed again and nothing happened.

The boy stood up and moved to the man's mid-section and pushed on his side. Again, nothing. The boy tried again frantically. When he couldn't wake his father, he sat near the man's head, facing Coop. Coop watched as the boy screamed, tears running down his innocent face, no doubt believing he was the one that had killed his father and his mother. But it was Coop the orphan, the unwanted child of some casual union, the byproduct of cold lovers not wanting to deal with their responsibility, who orphaned that little boy in the mountains of Colombia, dragging him into a painful, parent-less world.

* * *

"Cooper? Cooper? Hello? Are you in there?" she called.

He came back to the smelly blanket and the loquacious debutante. "I'm here," he said, wishing he weren't.

"Did you doze off?"

"Yeah." He had never told anyone about the job in Central America and the guilt he suffered. Once, during the quiet openness after making love, he almost told Gabrielle.

"I said, if you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?"

"Anywhere?"

"Anywhere," she said.

"If I could live anywhere, I'd live right where I live."

"Not me," Kathryn said firmly, then paused, hoping for interaction. "Would you like to know where?"

"I'd love to," he said, wondering if every night was going to be like this.

"I'd move to Belize. They have an barrier island right off the coast."

"That's a good place for one," he said.

"Did you know the national language there is English?"

"Sounds nice," Coop said. "Sounds very nice." The bright lights of a vehicle opened Coop's eyes. They were too close, too bright. He sprung from his pallet, grabbed the Browning and chambered a round. He stood to one side of the window and peeked out. After a moment of watching, he flipped the safety and stretched out on the floor.

"What was it?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said and lay back down. "Just the exterminator."

"An exterminator? At this hour?"

"Exterminators sleep too, you know." He fluffed his little pillow and rested his head.

Coop was almost asleep when she continued. "What was

your mother like?"

Every day of his boyhood life Coop had wondered about his parents. He was told repeatedly his father was an Admiral who, as an Ensign, had won the Medal of Honor, and his mother was a was an operative for the CIA. They had a short affair, she got pregnant, and she didn't want the child. End of story. "I never knew my parents," he said. "Why?"

"Lately I've been noticing more and more mothers with their kids," she said. "They all seem so happy. So loved. I just don't know how I'm going to do it." She sat up in the bed. "All this goddamn happy love! If I try to be that happy, it'll seem so fake."

"Maybe when you see him, your motherly instincts will take over," Coop said.

"Instincts? I have no motherly instincts," she said.

"Sure you do," he said. "It's just like back at the diner when you knocked over that table."

"So I knocked over the table. So what."

"That table was screwed down in to the floor with three in lag bolts," he said. "Your survival instincts gave you the power to knock over that table. It's like the story of the mother who rolls her car, trapping her kids inside, then manages to lift the car herself to save her children. Her instincts just take over."

"Then what the hell happened to my instincts when he put the gun to my head?"

"They'll only get you so far," Coop said. "You also need some thoughtful effort."

"So my instincts would've let me live for one more minute." she said. "Big deal."

"Well lucky for you I had to pee," he said. "And there's the third factor: Luck. Luck, instincts, and thoughtful effort. That's what's going to keep you alive," he said.

Kathryn seemed to be pondering the brilliant advice he offered. It was advice hard won, having picked it up over the years while surviving assassins, skirmishes, and wars in some of the most inhospitable terrain on the face of the earth. She was truly giving his words the weight they deserved. It was refreshing to see someone actually appreciate the benefits of his experience and knowledge. These were words that would stay with her forever.

"Don't forget shopping," she added with a giggle. "Luck, instincts, thoughtful effort...and shopping," she said.

It took a second for Coop to realize she was making fun of him. "That's right," he said, "Luck, instincts, thoughtful effort, shopping, and...beer," Coop added.

"Luck, instincts, thoughtful effort, shopping, beer,

and...beaches."

"Luck, instincts, thoughtful effort, shopping, beer, beaches, and...barbecue," he said.

"Luck, instincts, thoughtful effort, shopping, beer, beaches, barbecue, and...what about love?"

Coop paused, then said, "What's love got to do...got to do with it?"

She immediately added, "What's love but a second hand emotion."

"What's love got to do...got to do with it?" asked Coop.

"Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?" replied Kathryn.

"Good night, Kathryn," he said.

"Good night, Cooper," she replied.

In ten minutes she had fallen into a convulsive sleep, shedding the covers to the floor. Coop found the spread and draped it around him. It was going to be a cold night, and if she didn't want the blanket, there was no point in letting it go to waste.

Chapter 15

Lazy Day's mix of Reggae and N'awlin's music filled Spot's Exotic Animals and Gulf Side Watering Hole as the spring breakers danced to a full moon suspended low over the water. The temperature outside was in the high fifties and some of the crowd was wearing shorts. Spot was working the bar alone. Anna had class earlier, and had a final in the morning so she wasn't scheduled to work. The waitresses were pouring their own beers which threw Spot's accounting system way out of whack.

"The college kids nowadays just don't drink like they used to," Spot said to no one in particular as he mixed a bushwhacker. He remembered a time when he could put a whole six pack in a beer bong and inhale the whole seventy-two ounces in nothing flat. He'd like to see these little college pukers do that today.

Spot set the frozen drink on the bar. Susan Chang was on the other side. "That for me?" Chang asked.

"No," Spot said. "Did you order one?"

"No," she said, taking the drink. She put her lips on the straw, keeping her eyes on Spot. "But it looks good, so I'll take it." She took a ten from her wadded clump of bills and put it on the bar. "Keep it," she said.

Spot made a fresh drink and made sure it got to the right owner.

"Where's your wife?" Chang said.

"She's not my wife," Spot replied. "She's got classes."

"Too cute. She's how old? Thirty? And still in school?"

"Twenty seven. And I think it's great."

"But what kind of career can you start when your that old?"

"She's not even thirty, Susan. And she's not doing it for a career. She's doing it for herself."

"That is cute."

"Look at you. You're what--thirty-two? And you've just started your career."

"Bullshit," she protested. "I've been in school for the past twelve years. School's been my career so far. But let's move on. I'm getting bored talking about her. Let's talk about you. How long have you known Coop?"

"Since the Academy," he said, feeling like something wasn't quite right. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

"I guess you two are best friends, right?"

"Yeah. I guess," he said, leaving for a moment to pour a beer for a customer.

When he returned, she had finished her drink.

"Another?" he offered.

"Gimme a shooter," she said, and pushed the empty plastic cup to him. "Recommend something."

"What do you feel like?"

"Something spicy, but still a little sweet," Chang said.

"I know just the thing," Spot said and bent over the cooler.

"So do I," Chang said.

He took the chilled bottle of Goldschlager and showed it to Chang. "This stuff will knock you on your ass."

"That's just what the doctor ordered," she said.

"It's about time someone around here gets a little crazy," Spot said, looking around at the well behaved crowd.

He was just about to pour Chang's drink when she covered the cup with her small hand.

"You don't think I'm drinking alone, do you?" she said.

Spot shrugged his shoulders in surrender. "Doctor's orders," he said and pulled a cup from underneath the bar and poured them both a hefty shot.

"To life and love," she said. "And everything that

happens in the name of."

"Whatever that means," Spot said. "Cheers." The cinnamon liquor tasted like the fireball's he used to buy as a kid at the Seven Eleven.

She slammed her cup on the bar. "Let's go again."

Spot filled the cups. "To the Marine Corp," Spot said. "Urrah. Semper Fi."

"Semper Fi," Chang said, and threw her head back with the drink. She slammed the cup again. "Another," she demanded.

"Another," said Spot. He was impressed with her stamina. Anna always gave him shit about drinking like that. It was refreshing to meet a woman who knew how to socialize. "Now that's drinking," he said.

"Hypercocktaileous Amongus," Susan said.

"What the hell's that?" Spot said.

"The medical term for having a lot to drink," she said and laughed.

"To Hyper...cocktail..."

"Cocktaileous Amongus," she said, and clinked her cup. He downed his faster this time and slammed his cup on the bar first. Hers followed quickly. "You won that one," she said. "One more."

Spot filled the cups. "Your turn to make the toast," he said. Spot stared at her over the top of the cup. It

might have been the alcohol, but he felt like she was looking at him in a way like she wanted him. It was always the case; the more he drank, the better looking he got. Or something like that.

"To new friends," Susan said.

It was the alcohol. He was just getting a little buzzed and always read too much into things, especially things like looks from other women. "To new friends," he said and clicked her cup.

"To good looking, well built new friends," she added.

It was kind of hard for him not to read something into that. His cup was the first back to the bar. He put the cap on the bottle.

"C'mon," she said. "Just one more. Doctor's orders."

"Doctor's orders," he said and opened the bottle.

"What shall we drink to this time?"

"You tell me," Chang said.

Spot looked at her. She wasn't bad looking. She was maybe even a little prettier than Anna. He had never had an Asian woman. He had heard stories from other aviators aboard the ships, but had never experienced one for himself.

"How about," he began without thinking, "To fucking gorgeous women." He tried to catch himself before the words got out, but it was too late. "Shit...I mean fucking gorgeous...not like making love to gorgeous women...although

I'd drink to that....but you know...to really gorgeous women." Geez, he felt like an idiot. He raised his glass, feeling the heat of embarrassment spread throughout his face.

But like a good sport, Susan raised her glass. "To fucking gorgeous women," she said, smiling. Grinning would be more like it.

Spot was still red when he slammed the cup down, barely beating Susan. "Another?" he asked.

She pushed her glass to him for a refill. But he could have sworn he heard her say, "I think you've had enough."

"What?" he said and looked up from the cups. Anna was standing behind Susan. Susan's eyes were as wide as beer pitchers.

"I said I think you've had enough to drink," Anna said, squeezing next to Susan without acknowledging her. She placed a paper bag on the counter. "I brought you something to eat. I thought you might get tired of the bar food."

Spot put away the Goldschlager, moving slowly, thinking that any sudden moves might upset Anna. "Thanks, Honey."

Susan pushed herself away from the bar. "I'd better be going," she said. "Good night, Anna."

"See ya," Spot said.

Anna ignored Susan. "I got my big final tomorrow. I just wanted to stop by and give you this," she said and

pushed the bag to him. "It's pork--the other white meat. I roasted it for you." She opened the bag. "Smell it," she said, using her hand to waft the aroma to him. "I didn't even use an old Hungarian recipe," she said proudly. "It's all American."

Spot inhaled. "Honey, it smells great! I'm starving."

"Well, I'd better get back to studying. I'll call you after the test tomorrow." She leaned over for a kiss.

"Wish luck to me."

"Good luck to you," he said and kissed her. She was the best thing that ever happened to him and he hated himself for acting like this. He didn't know why Anna put up with so much of his shit. If he kept it up, one of these days she going to blow. He set the pork roast under the counter. He would leave early tonight and let one of the girls lock up. It was a cloudless night and he wanted to check out the stars through Coop's telescope. He would grab a six-pack from the bar, chow on pork roast, and watch the stars.

* * *

Spot pulled the Hummer into the white, pristine garage. He loved driving it. He felt like nothing could get in his way that he couldn't run over--a far cry from his old Chevy pick-up. Coop had put a CD changer, a subwoofer, and about ten Infinity speakers throughout the vehicle. The sound was

incredible, and Spot sat in the custom made Ricaro leather seats until Buffett had finished his song. He had taken the long way home from the bar--past the house, down the beach road to Navarre and back. There were so many stars, he couldn't resist.

He juggled the roast, the four beers left from the six-pack and the day's mail as he tried to punch the code into the alarm keypad. Halfway through he stopped. "Shit," he said aloud. He could have sworn he remembered to set it. He unlocked the door and climbed the steps. The house was dark except for the stunningly bright light from the full moon. The huge windows let in so much light that only the nooks and the corners that caught the shadows were dark. As he went for the light, a figure dashed in front of him.

He tried for the light, and in his hurry, dropped the bottles. They thumped against hardwood floor, distracting him just enough for the burglar slip out the sliding glass door and over the deck rail. He dropped the roast and followed hoping to find prints in the sand, but the tide was low and prints were everywhere. Standing at the water's edge, he looked up and down the beach for any sign. Nothing. Still a little nervous, he plodded back to the house.

Inside, nothing was out of place. It wasn't like Coop had anything worth stealing. The telescope was still there

by the door. The chair was still in its spot, and the TV was still hooked up. He checked Coop's office. With the door secure, there was no need to enter. It was Coop's sacred room and even Spot was not allowed in. He checked the rest of the rooms--all in order. All empty. Completely empty.

With nothing stolen and no description, he didn't call the police. If, whoever it was after something and didn't find it, he'd either come back or he wouldn't. If he does, Spot would be ready for him.

He fixed a plate of Anna's roast, and remembering the cat, added a little extra in case she showed up. He set the food, along with the laptop on the other chaise lounge and called for the cat. No response. He made himself comfortable on the one of the deck chairs and punched in the number for the Ophiuchus, the constellation named after Asclepius, the god of medicine, and watched in awe as the telescope moved, locating the constellation. It held over 60,000 positions in its computer memory and Spot hoped to get through at least twelve tonight. If he found one he liked he would download it into Coop's laptop. Coop had paid over \$4000 for the telescope, and this was the first clear night Spot had had since watching the house. He sliced the roast, cracked open a beer and wished Anna was with him. But then if she was, she probably wouldn't let

him finish his six-pack.

Spot squinted into the telescope for an hour, downloading Ophiuchus, Fornax, and Gemini, and a few others until suddenly, the telescope darkened. When he looked up, Dr. Chang was standing in front of the lens. She was holding her sandals in one hand and what looked like Cape Cod in the other. "I thought you might be out here," Susan said. "Mind if I join you?"

"Pull up a chair," was all he could think to say. "What are you drinking?" he said, and had a feeling he was in trouble.

"Cape Cod."

"Thought so," Spot said, clearing her lounge chair of the laptop and empty plate. She was looking at him again. The same way she looked at him in the bar. "Need a refresher?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "I don't have to drive home."

Inside at the bar, he watched her through the glass as he fixed her drink. She was peering through the telescope.

"Can't do it," he said aloud, as if it would help convince him. "Getting married soon," he said as he packed the ice.

"Just can't do it." He measured the vodka and added a little extra. "Not gonna do it." He poured the cranberry juice saying, "Ain't gonna happen." He squeezed the lime into the drink. "Nope," he said, getting a napkin. "I am

going to remain faithful to the woman that loves me."

She was still looking through the telescope when he came outside. "Here we are," he said, thinking how it's not gonna happen, and handed her the drink.

She raised her drink. "To fucking gorgeous men."

Chapter 16

"I'll drink to that," Beckett said and toasted champagne glasses with the Senator. "Can you believe the luck?" The cold champagne flowed down his throat chilling him on the inside while the hot bath and glowing candles warmed him outside. He took another sip.

"Those security cameras don't lie," McAlpin said. "First thing tomorrow morning when that bank opens, you're going to be there with warrants," he said. He took a sip of his champagne. "Could you pass the soap?"

Beckett felt for the soap. "I'll get your back if you want."

"Thanks." The Senator turned around in the big garden tub, making sure not to knock over any candles. The jets had made it extra bubbly--just the way they liked it. "By noon tomorrow," he began as Beckett scrubbed his back, "I'll tell them to hold their silly little hearing. It's not going to bother me one bit--oh, yeah, right there--it itches. That little punk from Florida can dig up whatever

he wants because without her evidence, there's nothing," he said. "I'm in the clear."

"What if she made copies?" Beckett asked. The Senator's wide bottom was wedged between Beckett's legs, smashing them against the tub sides, almost giving him a charley-horse.

"A little lower," the McAlpin said, arching his back. "That's it. Right there." The Senator continued, "Highly unlikely, Beckett. Not enough time."

The pain in Beckett's leg was getting intense. "Could you scoot up just a little?"

The Senator adjusted himself. "How's that?"

"Perfect," he said. "How can you tell if she made copies of the disks?"

"That's easy. The disk will have an access code corresponding to the Julian date and time the file was opened or copied."

"Sure," Beckett said. "But what if she printed the documents and copied them."

"There's thousands of pages, son. I just don't think she would have had the time," he said. "She left the clinic after midnight, and you have footage of her at nine the next morning. Where could she have downloaded, printed, and made copies of the files at that time of the night?"

"Kinkos," Beckett suggested.

The Senator paused in thought for a moment. "We can run tests on what we get tomorrow. If she made copies, we'll know about it. Even if she Xeroxed them, we can tell."

"How?" Beckett asked. He had never heard of anyway you could tell if a document had been copied and he's usually up on these kinds of things.

"It's one of the best kept secrets of the FBI. When the light of the copier passes under the original, it unevenly lightens the original's text. The second half of the page is always lighter; that's when the lamp is its hottest."

"No shit?" Beckett said.

"You can't see it without a microscope, but it's there," the Senator said. "And, there's always a small trace of toner on the original."

"What if one of the members of Prodigy testifies?" Beckett asked.

"That's never going to happen. You see, son. That's the beauty of Operation Prodigy," McAlpin said. "Nobody in Prodigy knows they're in it. If you mention Operation Prodigy to any of them, they won't have a clue as to what the hell you are talking about." The Senator managed to turn in the tub to face Beckett, again careful of the candles. "They are all geniuses, but none of them are smart

enough to figure it out. We made sure of that. And that, son, is why this program has been so successful since I started it forty years ago."

Beckett sipped his drink. It felt too good going down. "You're the genius, Daddy," he said and stroked the Senator's face with his hand. The time on his watch caught his eye. "Shit. I've got to get going."

"What time is it?"

"Almost two," Beckett said and stood up. The water and suds slipped down his legs. "I told Meg I'd be home late. I don't want her to worry. You know how wives can be."

"If I think back, I can," the Senator said. "Give her my love. When I see that lovely wife of yours, I'll apologize for keeping you."

Chapter 17

Dmitri tapped the bell on the front desk of the ancient motel. Behind the desk, a door stood ajar and the sound of talk radio blared from behind it. It was that General again. He couldn't get rid of him. He tapped the bell a second time.

"...it's the Trilateralists that are tearing the country apart. They're the ones behind the black helicopters that we, along with our listeners, have spotted across the United States. Let me ask you this, why is it that the locations that have the most sightings of black helicopters also have the highest number of people that speak foreign languages? Two words: G-seven. I've seen top secret memos about the G-seven's plan to install a microchip in every American baby. This chip would contain all the information the Tricksters need to keep tabs on you. Your social security number, bank account numbers, anything they wanted to know, they could find out..."

Dmitri rang the bell again, twice. When the bell

stopped sounding, the talk show host's voice returned.

"...And you know what's made us weak? I'll tell you what's made us weak, folks. It's the factories. A country that doesn't make anything can't survive. If they would just bring the factories back, instead continuing their crazy NAFTA policy, we could solve America's homeless problem. Right now were spending \$ 1.5 trillion every year on NAFTA. We could take that money and buy brand new \$50,000 homes for the 3 million homeless Americans and give them the keys..."

Dmitri was quickly becoming impatient. He banged the bell over and over, yelling, "Somebody get the hell out here. Let's go. Somebody get the fuck out here now!" A moment later, an old man using an aluminum walker shuffled out from the back room. Dmitri had his badge ready to flash.

"Need a room?" the old man asked.

"Need a room number," Dmitri said.

The old man looked at him funny and said, "Sure. We got plenty of 'em. Take your pick." He turned as if he were going back to his room.

"Where you going, geezer," Dmitri called.

"I don't have time for your games, buster," the man said. "My show's on. Now either you're going to have to wait for the ten second break for station identification or

hang on for the three minute spot at twenty after."

Dmitri flipped open the badge. "Federal agent, sir. I need a room number of one of your guests."

The old man flashed Dmitri a look of disgust. "Got a warrant?"

"No," Dmitri said. "But I can get one."

"You do that," the man said and turned away.

"I'll bet you do a lot of cash business here, don't you," Dmitri called. "I would hate it if I had to involve the IRS in this. They love cash businesses." Sure it was a mean, empty threat, but that was half the fun of playing a Fed.

"Damn Federales," the man called from the back room. "You can all go to hell. They was here last year and audited me. Found nothing. So go to hell."

Dmitri was getting nowhere and knew it. The Americans nowadays, it seemed were more cautious of their government than Ruskias ever were. The difference is that the Americans know the law, and they know what they can get away with. In the Soviet there were no rules. If the government wanted to search your home they could--at any hour of the day for no reason at all. And they didn't need fucking warrants. Today, anyone who ever watched the crap that's on Amerikan TV knows that cops must have warrants. He tried an alternate, more direct approach. "Okay, mister. You win.

I need a room, though. It may take until tomorrow until the warrant gets here."

The old man walked back out to the desk. He stopped briefly to push his hair over his bald scalp. "Got cash? I don't take no plastic. Don't believe in it," he added.

"And I sure as hell ain't giving the government no credit."

"I've got cash," Dmitri said. He raised his wallet to the high counter and flipped through it indiscreetly in sight of the man. Dmitri caught the man staring at the full wallet. "You like what you see, old man?"

The man shuffled closer to the wallet. His face was almost pressed against it, as he leaned over his walker. "I might recall some of the room numbers if I had something to help me remember."

"Like this?" Dmitri said, thumbing through a wad of fifties.

"Yeah," the old man said.

"Sorry," Dmitri said. And before the old man could react, Dmitri struck the man's left cheek. He hit him so hard, the old man fell over his walker and landed halfway on a chair and the floor, his Invacare walker tangled in his legs. "I'm on a tight budget," Dmitri said, and walked around the counter.

He checked the back room. Empty. He searched the desk and found that room 27 was occupied by a Mr. Christopher

Jenkins. The only other room taken was room 26, occupied by a woman. Dmitri took the master key and left the man laying on the floor. The old man looked like he may have been breathing but Dmitri didn't have time to check.

Room 27 was near the end of the right wing of the hotel, close to where he parked. He had parked the van on the right side of the hotel because he had seen a motorcycle parked by the left wing. Cooper Sumner was being very cautious not parking in front of his room.

The door to room 27 was locked, of course, and in the darkness and silence of the empty night, Dmitri Chernyshev listened at the door and heard the low drone of a man mumbling. He silently slipped the key into the door and turned the knob slowly. Surprisingly, the old door was didn't squeak. He focused on the body in the bed.

His time for revenge was here. For six years, he planned for the day he would find Cooper Sumner and kill the bastard. He raised the gun to the bed, but something wasn't right. It was all too anticlimactic. He had always hoped that he could see Coop's eyes when he killed him. Or more importantly, Coop would see his eyes. It wouldn't be true revenge if Cooper didn't know it was Dmitri that had killed him. It's only revenge if, for even one small moment, the target knows why they're being killed.

He stared down the barrel and wondered if he should

give Sumner a fighting chance. "Fuck it," he said, and opened fire.

Chapter 18

Coop awoke from a light sleep to the distinctive sound of a silencer in the night. He reached for his Browning and scrambled to his feet as he screwed the silencer into the barrel. Through the window he saw a white haired man in the doorway of room twenty seven. It had to be Dmitri.

They had taken separate rooms, but Coop stayed in the one registered to Kathryn in the event someone came in the middle of the night and started shooting at her. But he hadn't counted on Dmitri finding him so quickly. Somehow Chang knew exactly where he was going.

Coop brought the gun up, trying to line up a shot through the window, but Dmitri was halfway inside the other room, and the angle of fire was terrible. Feeling completely vulnerable, wearing only his boxers, he silently opened the door and stepped into the dim overhead light. With his back to wall he sidestepped to room twenty seven, his weapon pointed at the open door.

As he approached, he saw the shadow inside by the bed.

It would only be a matter of seconds before Dmitri pulled back the covers and found a thick stack of linen and pillows and a tape recording of Coop's notes. Coop leveled his weapon on Dmitri's back. "Looking for me?" Coop asked.

Dmitri turned around slowly, his hands in the air. "So, once again you've outsmarted me, Cooper," Dmitri said.

"It's not that difficult," Coop said. "I heard you might be in the neighborhood. Still sore about the swim?"

"No," Dmitri said calmly. "It was not the swim." Then he suddenly screamed, "It was the six fucking years in a goddamn filthy prison!" He composed himself, collected his thoughts and politely added, "That's what I'm sore about."

"You know what I can't understand is how you found me so fast," Coop said. "You must've had some help from my camp."

"Nimnoga."

"A little?" Coop said. "I'd say Chang set me up perfectly. To be honest, I'm a little embarrassed that I was burned so easily."

Dmitri smiled. "You're getting soft in your retirement, Cooper. You've let emotions get in the way of your life," he said. "And men like you and me, we shouldn't let emotions in. We can't afford to get mad, or fall in love. Emotions can kill us," Dmitri said. "They are our true enemy." Dmitri dropped his weapon on the bed.

Coop steadied the gun on Dmitri. In front of him was a murderer. But no matter how he tried to execrate Dmitri, together, they shared a bond. The unity of killing. Coop peered down the barrel of his Browning and could see himself. They were mirror images of each other with only a thin, convoluted line separating the two like the line separating the ocean and the sky on a foggy morning.

Long ago, Coop could justify his killings "for the good of the country. For the good of the people." But in the end, he was really killing for his seven figure alimony deposit. Not much different from Dmitri's motives. He hated what he'd become. It was the reason he left the Community. Through his mind's eye, he kept seeing the little Colombian boy orphaned on the hillside. He got four hundred thousand to orphan the kid. Hell, he paid for his house with the cash from the job.

But killing for survival was a different motive. And right now, he and Dmitri shared the same motive. Today, only one of them was going to leave that room alive. And Coop looked down the barrel at his reflection, hating what he saw.

Something in Coop's eyes must have given him away. Dmitri suddenly dove to the bed and grabbed his weapon as he rolled off the edge, managing to squeeze off a shot. It landed in the metal door jamb.

Coop returned fire, hitting Dmitri in the side. Coop fired another round, impacting in Dmitri's chest just before he fell over the edge of the bed. Coop listened for movement, then walked to where Dmitri was laying.

Coop kept the Browning on the Russian and grabbed his recorder. A shadow moved on the wall in front of him, and he spun ready to fire.

"My God! What happened?" Kathryn said, standing in the door way.

He lowered the weapon. "Get your gear. It's check out time."

"Who is he?"

"I'll fill you in later. Let's go." He heard Kathryn's footsteps on the sidewalk as he searched the body. He took the wallet, surprised at the amount of cash. The money was going to come in handy since he was now in the same boat as Kathryn, not able to use any form of traceable transaction. Tracing credit card transactions is no big deal. Rummage through someone's trash, and anyone with a phone, the right account number and a social security number could track anyone else across country. He thumbed through the stack of hundreds then slipped the wallet into his pocket. In less than two minutes, they were on the Harley headed southwest.

Fifty miles later, Kathryn was falling asleep on the

back of the bike, Coop's adrenaline rush had subsided. His heart was ticking at his usual fifty five beats per minute.

The wind was blowing through the empty fields as he rambled away from the approaching Kansas dawn. The headlight cut a path through the light fog, as the sun came up behind him, turning the fields from black to blue to gray to brown.

The sunrise is the coldest part of the day, and for Coop, the most lonely. Dmitri's life ended as uneventfully and as quickly as did the others he had killed. Most of the time it was no dramatic shootout, no lingering confessions as his prey lay dying, and nobody waking up from the dead, grabbing you as you walk away. It was just a simple finality. He tried not to think about Dmitri. Those things are better if put away in some dark corner of his brain. He just hoped he had an empty corner left.

They rode until the sun had warmed the ground, melting the thin layer of frost that spread across the fields. He saw a dirt road ahead and slowed for it. The change in speed awoke Kathryn. Her arms tighten around him, and in a small way made the dawn a little less lonely.

"Where we going?" she yelled over the roar of the bike.

Coop pointed to a old oak grove by a small stream. He pulled off, maneuvered the bike through the trees, and found a place out of sight from the main road.

With the engine off, the silence of the dawn returned. The higher, thin branches of the trees clacked with the slight wind. In the distance, a cow bellowed, and the occasional passing crow cawed.

Chapter 19

Mallory walked up the old cement steps to the Medicine Lodge courthouse just as the sun came above the buildings. He was in time for shift change. It would give him an opportunity to talk to most of the deputies. Hell, he might get to talk to all four of them. What a geedunk, fucking town. Geedunk, with a hard G; he loved that word, geedunk. He picked up at Quantico going through sniper school with the Marines. He also loved his boots and just about everything else about himself. He watched them as they climbed the steps.

Mallory was a fashion-less man. So much so, he was always in style. The only clothes he ever wore were black. Today, like every other day, he wore black jeans, black cowboy boots, a black T-shirt and a long black leather duster. He particularly loved the duster because it looked great with his long blonde hair and it gave him the ability

to conceal anything he wanted beneath it. This morning, going into the police station, he concealed nothing but a Beretta 92F and an authentic FBI badge with his codename, Mallory Washington. All the codenames were the same: Washington. Special Agent last-name-first, Washington. The badge sometimes confused the idiots of the world. "There aren't too many blonde headed Washingtons out there, if you know what I mean," an ignorant sheriff once told him.

Cherryvale had nothing to go on so far. He had talked to the sheriff and the lady that owned the Torch--what a stupid name for a restaurant. Somebody should've torched the shithole a long time ago. She had nothing to offer. She didn't see a thing. And obviously the girl was not going to still be in town so he thought he'd check some nearby cities while the phone company dug up records, and the post office gathered its mail. With any luck someone might have seen her yesterday.

He pushed open the heavy door and walked into the large office. A young deputy was sitting at one of the desks scattered around the room. Some dirtbag was signing the paperwork the deputy gave him. Another deputy sat on his fat ass with his feet on the desk playing one of those computer games. There was no leadership around. No leadership and no discipline. The office to the left looked like it might be the sheriff's, though it was empty. A

hallway from the back wall had a sign warning all visitors must be searched before proceeding--a rule that probably was never enforced. The only kind of excitement they got around here is probably the occasional farmer who has a couple of hits of his homemade liquor, then terrorized the town on his John Deere. Or the Indian who consumes a little too much Peyote and starts doing the rain dance in the downtown fountain. And who the hell's going to visit those people? Bunch of fucking geedunk losers.

When no one in the office looked up, Mallory said politely, "Excuse me, gentleman."

The one with the dirtbag said, "May I help you?"

"Yeah," Mallory said, and showed the skinny deputy the badge. "I need some help. I'm looking for a woman that might've passed through here."

"Filo? Could you help this fellow?"

Filo never looked up from his game. "In a sec. I'm busy. Just sit down."

Earnest looked up at Mallory with an apologetic look on his face and said, "Filo? I think you--"

"I said in a second! Jesus Christ, I'm having my best game ever. Sit down, Goldilocks. I'll be there in a sec."

Mallory strode over without saying a word. And before Filo could look up, Mallory snatched the Game Boy from his pudgy fingers and smashed it three times against the wall so

fast that Filo had no time to respond. Filo's eyes followed the toy as Mallory set it back into his lap.

As Filo's staring at the smashed Game Boy, Mallory kicked the deputy's feet off the desk, spilling him and his chair to the floor.

"What the fuck?" the deputy said, trying to kneel.
"Who the hell are--"

Mallory showed him the I.D. and said, "Get the hell up, you piece of shit." God, he loved this part. He watched as the man stood with great difficulty. Then just as the deputy was almost erect, Mallory pushed him back down. "I said get the hell up."

"What the hell are you doing?" Earnest said from behind.

"Stay out of this, Earnest," Mallory warned. "This is between me and this pile of shit." Filo stood, trying to snap to attention.

"Look, shithead," Mallory began to lecture, "Anyone could have walked in here and done this to you," he said. "I could have been part of a gang to rip off the Happy Seven Food Mart. All--"

"I just done that yesterday," the vagrant blurted.

Mallory shot the dirtbag a look and continued, "And all I had to do was come in here and kick both of your asses and the town would have been mine. Your ass would have been a

piece of cake. But I don't know about Earnest's. He looks pretty scrappy." It was good to have one of them on your side. "You're lucky it was me, a Federal Agent." He looked around the room. "You know what this office represents, shithead?"

Filo shook his head.

"I represents the public....It represents safety....It represents ability....It represents service." He was running out of things to say, and trying not to laugh, so he settled for, "It represents your ability to serve the public safely. Do you understand me?"

"Yes sir."

"Very good," he said. "Now let's start over." He offered his hand and said, "I'm looking for a woman that might have passed through here recently." He handed Filo the photo taken from the security camera.

Filo studied it for a minute and handed it back. "No. I ain't seen her," he apologized. "Can I sit down now?"

Mallory nodded.

"Let me take a look," Earnest said. "I saw a woman yesterday when I's picking him up at the drug store. She was with her fiancé. A real nice guy."

"This her?" Mallory asked, handing him the photo.

Earnest needed only to look for a second. "That's her, all right. Strange one too. She thought I was there to

arrest her. Now I know why."

"What'd she do?" Filo asked.

"Russian spy," Mallory said and pulled a chair up to the desk.

"Why don't you put out an APB," asked Earnest.

"Good idea, Earnest. But it might scare her into hiding," Mallory said. "And we were almost on top of her."

"That's good thinking," Filo said. He didn't say it with enough enthusiasm to be sincere, and was probably just trying to score a few points with Mallory.

"But now we're at a standstill," Mallory said. "We have no idea which way she could have gone," he said, and took out a small note pad. "Did either of you talk to her?"

"I did," Earnest said. "But it was not about where she was going."

The vagrant piped up again. "I heard her," he said. "Sure 'nuff. I heard her. I know where she's headed."

Mallory moved slowly in front of the prisoner and stood, leaning over, placing a palm on each arm of the man's chair, staring face to face with him. Mallory tried not to inhale. The dirtbag needed a shower. "Now why don't you just tell us where that might be, cowboy," he said.

"Tell you what, blondie. I'll make a deal with you," the vagrant offered.

"What kind of deal?" Mallory asked.

"You a federal agent. You can pardon me. Pardon me and I'll tell you."

Mallory turned to Earnest. "What'd he do?"

"Stole from the Happy Seven."

"What'd he steal?"

"Food."

He turned back to the prisoner. "Fair enough. Now where'd they go?"

"You didn't let me finish," the man said. "I want a pardon and a new set of clothes. These stink."

"That they do," Mallory said, backing away. "Fine. You got new clothes. Deputy," he said turning to Earnest, "take him shopping today. Get him some durable clothes." Mallory couldn't take the smell any longer and pulled up a chair across from the prisoner. "Now, tell me--"

"Wait! I still ain't finished. I want a pardon, new clothes and a night in the hotel."

"I suppose you're going to want room service?" Mallory said, beginning to lose his patience.

"It's not a holiday without it," the man said imitating Robin Leach.

"Fine. A pardon, new clothes, and one night at the hotel with room service. Anything else." He would have promised him anything to find the girl. It wasn't as if he was really going to give it to him.

"A bus ticket to Florida."

"Deal. Now where'd she go?"

"Let me see the bus ticket," the man said.

Mallory shot up from his chair, sending it careening into the wall across the room. He leaned over the vagrant and through a clenched jaw said, "Look you little maggot. You want to fuck with blondie? Come on. Try me. Otherwise, tell me what I want to know. Got it?"

"Yes sir," the man said.

"Good," Mallory said. Then for good measure and to make sure he had the prisoner's fullest attention and utmost cooperation, with the whip of his neck, he head-butted the vagrant in the nose. Instantly the blood began flowing.

"Ah, man! What'd you go and do that for?" the dirtbag asked, trying to catch the blood in his hands. "Look at me. I'm bleeding," he said to Earnest.

"To make sure we understand each other," Mallory said.

"Where'd they go?"

"Grand Canyon," he said. He lifted his shirt-tail and blotted his nose.

"Who was she with?" Mallory asked. "And, try direct pressure."

"Some big guy," he said holding his nose, making his voice nasally. "Short brown hair. He was tall. Six-two. Easy one-ninety. But all muscle, you know." The maggot

stopped for a moment. "Filo, get me some tissue."

Filo looked up from his desk to Mallory to see if he had to get it.

"Get him some goddamn tissue, Filo. And get me some coffee too--black. Earnest, coffee?" Mallory offered.

"None."

"Dirtbag?"

"Yeah," the vagrant answered. "With four sugars." The direct pressure seemed to be working. The blood had stopped but he kept pressure on it to be safe. "So as I was saying, they was talking about how somebody's trying to kill her."

"What'd he say?"

"At first he didn't believe her, but then the crazy fool agreed to help her. Like a knight in shiny fucking armor."

"And you're positive they're headed for the Grand Canyon," Mallory asked.

"Positive," the man said releasing pressure from his nose. "Like I said, a knight in shiny fucking armor. They even rode away on an armored horse." He took a sip of coffee and turned to the other deputy. "Hey, Filo, how 'bout a doughnut?"

"A bike?" Mallory asked. "What kind?"

"A real nice one. A Harley Fat Boy. Black and chrome. Fucker was bad."

Mallory picked up a phone and arranged for a chopper to meet him at the canyon, then quickly hung up. He turned to the vagrant. "Very good, Dirtbag. For a drunken geedunk, you did pretty good." He made the sign of the cross on the man, the way a Catholic priest would and said, "Consider yourself pardoned." He left the deputies with a bogus address to send the bills for the clothes and the hotel stay, said adios and got the hell out of that geedunk fucking town.

Chapter 20

The sun through the open door brought Dmitri back from the dream world. He struggled to sit up, but the pain in his chest was overwhelming so he lay there for a moment longer. He wiggled his toes, mildly surprised he could. He tried his fingers, and everything worked like it was supposed to. The Russian fought through the pain in his chest and managed to sit up.

With his body feeling like it was returning to life, he unbuttoned his shirt, gently removed it, then shed the bullet proof vest. He had never worn one before, but had found it in the van along with other gear, and thought he would give it a try. Although it was heavy, he felt it gave him an edge. And today it did. He held it up for inspection. There were three nine-mil rounds almost imbedded in the jacket. He stood and painfully put the shirt back on, then twisted and turned his torso, stretching the sore muscles.

The keys to the van were still under the seat, and

Dmitri sped out of the parking lot heading for the next town toward the Grand Canyon.

Chapter 21

The sun over the gulf poured into the sliding glass door in Cooper's bedroom. The obnoxiously bright sun burned Spot's eyes as he slowly opened them. He had slept so hard, they were caked shut. Sometime during the night someone had crept up on him and forced a rusting piece of rebar through his head about an inch above his ears and were now sliding it back and forth, and moving it all around, as he tried to remember what the hell had happened last night. He squeezed his head, trying to stop the pain.

Spot managed to get to his feet to stop the damn sunlight blasting through the window like some kind of goddamn nuclear flash. He pulled the vertical blinds shut and when he turned around, he noticed two things were not right.

One: Susan Chang lay in his bed, the sheets resting just below her small firm breasts. She was still asleep, a light snore escaping from her delicate nose. And that wouldn't have really been a big deal had it not been for

problem number two: the house smelled like bacon.

It took a minute to register that someone was downstairs in the kitchen cooking breakfast--probably an All American breakfast, as Anna liked to call it. Cheese eggs, bacon, grits and raisin toast. She had taken the idea from Waffle House the only night he had ever seen her drunk. By the end of the night, Anna knew what scattered, smothered, covered, chunked, diced and topped meant, and was yelling it proudly for everyone to hear.

Spot started pacing the room in long strides. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuckin' A. What am I going to do," he said and paced faster. In a moment she was going to burst through the door with a big plate of food, then probably force feed it to him plate and all. Last night slowly came back to him like he was remembering parts of a dream. He remembered talking at first about the stars, then Coop...Jesus Christ, he hoped he didn't tell her anything he shouldn't have. Coop was his best friend and there was no way he would jeopardize him or anything he was doing. He had been told a thousand times not to talk about that night in the helicopter and he didn't think he ever did...except once he told Anna, and maybe last night, he might have mentioned something about it to Susan.

But it was such a great story, it was impossible not to tell. But that was the least of his problems.

Spot tried to recall every part of the conversation,

but the visuals of last night in bed kept creeping in.

And down stairs was Anna.

"Shit. What am I going to do?" He paced across the room, then stopped suddenly and looked at Susan. She was fast asleep. She wasn't going to wake up anytime soon. He would leave her up here, scarf down Anna's All American Breakfast, and fifteen minutes later tell her he's got to get ready for work. He'd leave a note in plain sight telling Susan not to come down if she woke up.

He slipped on some shorts, being extra careful not to wake her. A quick sniff of his hands, his face, and whatever else he could smell, told him he needed to rinse off Susan's perfumes and other fragrances before seeing Anna. But the water running might wake her, or worse, Anna might hear it and consider it an invitation to come up.

Coop kept his toiletries under the sink, and Spot grabbed the first thing he saw without really looking. He sprayed some on and instantly tried to muffle a scream as his skin felt as if it was being scoured from his bones with sandpaper. He held the bottle so that could read it: Raid.

Now walking stiffly, trying desperately to take the pain and keep his skin from moving, Spot left Susan snoring in the big bed. He posted a note where he knew she would find it, shut the door behind him, and went to greet Anna and her breakfast.

Anna was in the kitchen, and Spot tried his best to pretend he was surprised. "What a surprise," he said, stifling a yawn. "How long have you been here? This is such a nice surprise," and hugged her, but not too hard. His chest still burned from the Raid.

"I figured you worked so late last night that you might wake up hungry so I wanted to make you my All American Breakfast," she said. "It's such a beautiful day, I thought we could eat out on the deck." She stirred the cheese into the eggs and said, "You watch the eggs and I'll go set the table outside," she said.

The deck. It was littered with food, glasses and who knew what else. He remembered they did it at least once out there.

"No. No," he said, trying to speak calmly, "I'll set the table. It might need to be hosed off. You know with the birds and all."

"Okay," she said. "But make it nice. I want this to be special. Maybe after breakfast," she said, raising an eyebrow and trying to look very sexy, "we could go upstairs and...you know."

Spot had neither the desire, the energy, nor the room in bed to do...you know. But he had never turned her down before and didn't want to make her suspicious. "That sounds like a great idea," he said walking to the deck. "I just

hope I'm not too full after eating your delicious All American Breakfast."

Outside, the deck looked pretty good--nothing incriminating except for a couple of glasses and the towel they had used to clean up with last night after the first time. A few minutes of work, and the place would be spotless. The glasses were tipped by the wind and wedged against the east railing. Spot bent to pick up the glasses and heard someone calling him.

"Hey there, big fella," Dick Velour said between huffs, wearing his Speedo bikini, and again Sweatin' to the Oldies--volume two this time. The sun glistened on his bald, sweaty head. He pendulous gut was covered with a thick black and gray pelt. A gold medallion swung against his flabby chest in cadence to his vigorous workout, and a cigarette was burning in the ashtray on the table.

"Morning, Dick," Spot said unenthusiastically. He peeked in to keep an eye on Anna in case she wandered upstairs.

"How's things at the bar?" Velour asked.

"Fine." He searched the deck for any more evidence.

"What are you doing with the profits? I got this great vehicle that's bringing in about thirty percent. It's a little risky, but I think you can handle it."

"No thanks," Spot said. "I'm sticking with CDs." Coop

had told him to say CDs. It really grates Velour. "I'm getting a solid four and a quarter."

"Jesus Christ, son. You'll never make it that way," he said shaking his head. "You'll work the rest of your life."

He said it as if that were a crime.

"Well, by the time I donate to the various charities, there's really not much left over." He knew that would really piss Velour off.

Velour took a sip from his bloody mary Spot hadn't seen and said, "Well it looks like you're doing one thing right."

"What's that?"

"It looks like you and the good neighbor Susan Chang had a wild time last night." He said it loud enough for Anna to hear inside. "Wanna see the video?"

"Shhhut up." He looked in on Anna. She saw him and waved. Spot waved and smiled.

Velour turned off the music, picked up his cigarette and his drink, and walked to the rail of his deck. They were standing twenty feet away from each other, and Dick lifted a side of his Speedo, slipped out his penis and started to pee through the spindles.

"Jesus, Dick. I'm standing right here," Spot said, turning his back.

Dick laughed. "Hey, when you gotta go, you gotta go. Besides, the sand'll soak it up," he said. "I didn't

realize Chang was such a wild woman, Spot. But I got tell you that shit is contagious. A lady friend and I were watching you two go to town until she couldn't take it anymore, and we had to have our own little party. I got that video too if you want it."

Spot turned as Dick finished. "Would you shut the hell up?"

"Sorry," Velour said, and began speaking in hushed tones. "You got company?"

"That's only the half of it," Spot said. He picked up the hose and began spraying the deck.

"Hey Spot," Velour called again as finished and shook himself. "Have you noticed all of the cars parked along the street lately?"

Spot stopped spraying. "I remember a Cablemasters truck down the road. Why?"

"I've just seen a lot of government-type sedans on the block lately." He looked at Spot intensely as if he were going to confide in him. "Is Coop up to something that he shouldn't be?"

"Don't think so." Spot shrugged as if his question was no big deal. "Maybe it's someone else. Or maybe it's your imagination."

"Yeah," Velour said and took a deep drag, holding in the smoke. "You're probably right," he said exhaling. He

took a long draw from the bloody mary, turned on the music and continued his exercising.

Spot checked on Anna. She was headed outside. He hid the glasses behind his back. "Hi, hon," he said innocently.

"How is it going out here? I hear a lot of talking and not much work being done."

"Everything is done. I just got to get a towel and wipe off table." He started to slide past her.

"What's wrong with this one," she said, reaching for the soiled towel.

Spot grabbed her just in time. "It's dirty. It's been out here for awhile. I'll get a fresh one," he said and shuffled her inside.

"I'll get one," Anna said. "They're in his bathroom upstairs aren't they?" She ran for the steps as if she were toying with Spot.

"Wait, I'll get it," he said and chased her to the steps, trying to act like he was horsing around with her. "The eggs are almost done," Spot said. "It's time to eat."

"I guess you're right," she said and turned for the kitchen.

Spot kissed the top of her head. "You make the best All American Breakfast," he said and patted her fanny, sending her off to the kitchen. He let out an audible sigh of relief.

So far so good. Everything was going as planned. In a minute, he would eat. In two minutes he would think of an excuse to get Anna to leave. Everything was under control.

"What's all the racket down there? Can't a woman sleep late after an exciting, wonderful night?"

There was a pause, and Spot looked at Anna who was standing over the stove, her mouth open and her eyes tearing.

"Are you making me breakfast?" Susan called from upstairs. "The bacon smells delicious."

Spot and Anna were still locked in a fierce stare, the tears of betrayal streaming down her face. She started screaming something in Hungarian, then threw the pan of cheese and eggs at him. Spot ducked just in time to miss the eggs, but never saw the pan of hot grits coming. The creamy grits covered his chest, singeing his already raw skin, sticking to him like a milder version of napalm.

"Goddamn it!" he yelled. "What'd you go and do that for?"

"You bastard," she yelled. "You bastard fucking."

He was not about to correct her. "I'm sorry, honey," he said, trying to smear the hot grits off him, but only spreading the heat, making it worse. He didn't know what else to say. The whole idea of being married again still scared him. He'd already been cleaned out by one woman.

And though he loved Anna, marriage was something he couldn't commit to just then. "I'm really sorry, Anna."

"I am sorry too," she said, looking around the room as if for something else to throw. She grabbed her purse, said, "The wedding is off. I am going home to Hungary. I have had enough of America. Goodbye!"

"Wait, Anna," Spot called. But it was no use. She slammed the big door. A moment later he heard her car start and speed away.

"I guess my timing was off a little," Susan said. "Sorry, Spot." She stretched to kiss him, being careful not to smear his grits. "I've never had grits like this before," she said, and licked him from his belly button to his left nipple, taking in a huge mouthful of grits.

"Not now, Susan." He pushed her away and said, "Didn't you get my note?"

Before she could answer, she started spitting and gagging, and grabbing her throat. White grits mixed with blood spewed pink from her mouth as she ran to the sink. She turned on the faucet, taking in mouthfuls of water and spitting them out.

"What the hell is wrong?" Spot asked.

She continued rinsing for a few more mouthfuls, then rested her head on the sink ledge. "What kind of cologne are you wearing," she asked quietly and out of breath.

"Cologne?" And then it dawned on him. "Raid."

"Wasp spray?" she asked.

"No. Ant spray. Coop gets sugar ants from time to time. They come up underneath the house." He stroked her head. "You going to be all right."

"Yeah," she said, very tired. "I'll be okay." She slowly stood up. "Why don't you fix us a couple of bloody mary's. I could use one."

She looked around the kitchen. Spot noticed she was still moving a little slow and spitting a lot. "Looks like I ruined your breakfast," she said.

He brought the drinks over and handed her one. "That's okay. I'll fix something later," he said.

"I've got a better idea," she said, sipping the drink. She seemed in better spirits. "Why don't I take you out for breakfast."

It didn't sound like such a great idea to Spot at first. He had a lot to think about. Anna leaving had left his stomach in knots, and the grits on him had turned cold and were beginning to flake off in big chunks, smearing the hardwood floors. And watching Susan puke bloody grits was most unappetizing.

On the other hand, he was not getting married. He was no longer engaged. He had no emotional ties. And he had to eat. "But please," he said. "No grits."

"I promise," Susan said and managed a smile.

"Let me hose myself off," he said.

"C'mon. I'll give you a hand," Susan offered.

Chapter 22

Dorothy wrung her hands as she sat in the cold, white, almost clinical outer office of the local IRS branch while young, zealous, government CPAs behind the thick steel door were kind enough to decide the rest of her life for her. She got tired of the threatening letters and the harassing phone calls and wanted to solve this face to face. However, face to face to them meant through a thick steel door. The only thing she brought with her was a large brown envelope containing Garrett's will.

A chipper young man in circular glasses popped his head out of the steel door. "Mrs. Halston? Why don't you come with me."

Dorothy stood slowly. The cold weather was affecting her knees and knuckles, and sometimes it hurt to stand. She followed the man along the boundaries of an enormous office packed with cubicles. Busy little men and women punched calculators, and made phone calls, and it looked like circular glasses were standard issue. As she was led into

Interview Room 10, she wondered what how thick the line was between interview and interrogation.

"Have a seat there, Mrs. Halston," the kid said and sat down. He left the file closed on the table. "Mrs. Halston, the government has some very absurd rules. Some are absolutely ridiculous."

"I'll agree to that," she said. The man had a warm smile and sparkling eyes behind his glasses.

"I'm sure you will. Anyway," he said, and adjusted his glasses, "One of those rules has to do with the inheritance tax. And that's where our problem lies." He said it as if it truly were his problem too. Dorothy was taken aback at his politeness and his easy manner. She was slowly beginning to like the man.

"Let me explain how it works. Let's say a family has had held property for over a hundred years. We see that with a lot of farmers, you know. They may have bought the spread for \$10,000 originally. And over the years it's been passed on down from generation to generation. Well, this year, the property is now worth over six-hundred-thousand dollars, and when it's passed down to the next generation, the one who receives the land is going to have to pay inheritance taxes--up to fifty-five percent. And who's got that kind of money laying around? So they, more often than not, have to sell the property." He looked across the table

to her directly. "Does that make sense?"

"No," she replied.

"Exactly. They need to adjust the inheritance taxes, along with the capital gains taxes to account for inflation.

So that if you own property you are only taxed on the increase in value after inflation has been subtracted.

Follow me?"

"I think so." It sounded like the same thing General Wright was saying on the radio this morning.

"Otherwise people are going to end up selling what's rightfully theirs just to give the government a huge chunk."

"That's just not right," she said. "How can you do that?"

"It's the law," he said.

"It's not the law," she protested. "It's the tax code." Her abruptness startled even her.

The young man leaned back in his seat. "You're exactly right. And that brings us to your case," he said and opened the envelope. "You see, your late husband Garrett purchased that diner for \$25,000 in 1955. And now, forty one years later, the diner and the land are valued at \$635,000.

\$35,000 over the inheritance tax threshold. I doubt it would have come in that high if the interstate hadn't been laid right in front of your diner." He punched numbers into the calculator while scanning the file, as if double

checking his figures. He adjusted his glasses and said, "And our calculations indicate that the taxes due on it are \$335,500."

"Yes. But I can't pay that," she said. "That's what I came down here for. To tell you that I can't pay it."

"You can't pay your fair share, Mrs. Halston?"

"Sure I can pay my fair share. I just can't pay what the government wants me too."

"But, Mrs. Halston, that is your fair share." He adjusted his glasses again. "We take checks, you know. And if you need to post-date it a few days," he said smiling, "go ahead. I'll hold it just for you. Just don't tell my boss."

"You tell me where I am going to get that kind of money!" she demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders. "You can get an equity loan," he said indifferently. "They're tax deductible," he added and closed her file. "Or you could always sell it."

"I can't sell it," she said indignantly. "It's all I have. It's my life."

"I don't know what else to tell you."

She thought for a moment. She needed to know all her options. "What if I did sell it? Would I have to pay so much in taxes?"

"Let's see," he said and punched on his calculator

again. "You would still have to pay the inheritance taxes, and then you would have to pay gains taxes. So lets say you sold it for its value: \$635,000. You would pay \$335,500 inheritance taxes and then \$219,600 for gains taxes, letting you walk away with about \$80,000."

"So after forty years of my husband sweating over the stove, he gets to keep eighty thousand, and you get over five hundred thousand?"

"\$555,100, to be exact. But, yes."

The man's arrogant aloofness angered her so intensely, she pushed away from the table and stood, and in a very firm, yet polite way, she said, "I'm sure your mother is very disappointed in you, son," and left the room.

* * *

"What'd they say?" Tiffany asked anxiously, pouring a cup of coffee for Dorthy as she walked through the door and out of the cold late morning. Except for Earl, they were the only ones in the diner between the breakfast rush and the lunch crowd.

Dorthy took the coffee. The warmth in her hands was a welcome relief from the weather. The pain in her knuckles slowly subsided. "They said we could work something out and not to worry."

"Whew," Tiffany said, pouring herself a cup and smacking her gum. "That's a relief. I thought we might

have to sell this place."

"I've turned down offers in the past and I am not going to sell now," she protested.

"I hear you, Dorthy," Tiffany said.

"Don't let anyone push you around," Earl said. "And get me another slab of pie."

Dorthy pulled her apron from underneath the counter, as Tiffany cut the pie.

"Don't worry," Tiffany said and put her arm around Dorthy. "You're a genius, right?" She squeezed Dorthy for the answer. "Right?" She squeezed her so close, Dorthy could smell the gum. Trident--original flavor, she thought it was. "Everything's going to work out."

"If I'm such a genius," Dorthy said, "why am I sixty and still working in a diner?"

"It's part of God's big plan, Sugar. He's got a plan for us all. Me included. How do you think I decided to be a nail technician?" Before Dorthy could answer, Tiffany continued. "I was in church and the preacher was going on about God's plan and how we are all destined to fulfill his work. Well, and I don't know why I did this, but I started looking at my nails. And they didn't look too good. And then I started looking at my mama's nails and they didn't look too good either. Well, then I started looking at everybody else's nails in the church that I could see. I

leaned over Dr. Billingsgood and his brand new wife in front of me, and their nails looked bad. I slowly turned, without making a scene mind you, and looked at the florist, Mr. Lightfoot and his friend, Todd,--you know how everybody looks at them anyway--and their nails looked terrible! Suddenly, my whole body shivered, I started feeling faint. I knew I was going to slump down in the pew and cause a huge commotion. Then, just as quickly as it came, it left. And it was then that I realized the Lord had just spoken to me and told me what my role in his master plan was."

"A nail technician?" Dorothy asked.

"A nail technician," Tiffany said. "And, you see, I just think that God has something in store for you more important than being a waitress at a road side diner. After that sermon, I know he's got big plans for you. You're a genius after all."

"I don't know how," Dorothy said and slipped by Tiffany to the dishwasher. She opened up the large door and pulled the rack out.

"Had any more spells lately?" Tiffany asked.

Dorothy placed a handful of saucers on the rack. "I had another one this morning."

"Which kind?" Tiffany asked. "Where you feel alone?"

"No. It's still like someone's after me," she said.

"You haven't had one like that in years," Tiffany said.

"They've been happening a lot more lately," she said, dividing the silverware into the basket.

"My mother used to have the same feelings," Earl said through a mouthful of apple pie. "Every time one of us would get hurt she would feel it," he said. "But if you ask me, I think she just said it to make us feel guilty."

Chapter 23

Coop awoke suddenly from the same Colombian nightmare that haunted him even during his waking hours. His shirt was soaked with sweat under his leather jacket. He zipped his jacket to keep out the chills. Above him swayed the higher branches of the oaks under which they lay. Within arms reach, was Kathryn lying on her side, facing him. She was breathing lightly through her mouth and a little drool slipped from the corner of her soft, thick lips. Coop rolled to his side and watched her sleep. She was very pretty. Smooth, clear skin, thick dark-blond hair. And there was something else he could quite put his finger on that added to her whole beauty. At first it seemed like a hint of innocence, but that would've been lost at the diner. No one comes out of something like that still innocent. It was something else. Something he had never seen, or perhaps, noticed. There was a quality, an aura about her that lured him to her. She lifted one eye and caught him staring.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"I thought I saw a spider on you," Coop said.

She leapt from the sleeping bag and screamed, "A spider? Where?"

"I said I thought I saw a spider."

"There's no spider?" she said timidly and kneeled on the bag. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," he said and lay back down, interlocking his hands behind his head. He looked up into the blue sky, through the limbs wavering in the light breeze. The morning was calm, peaceful, and a little chilly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her doing the same thing. They lay for minutes without saying a word, completely engrossed in the movement of the trees.

Kathryn rolled to her stomach and rested her chin on her fists. She was the first to break the silence. "You don't have any children, do you?" she asked.

"No," Coop said.

"I didn't think so," she said. "You don't look like the type."

"I'm not quite sure how to take that."

"Ever wonder what kind of parent you'd be?" she asked turning her head just slightly.

He rolled up to his side to face her. "Sometimes I think about it," he said. "You?"

"Yeah," she said softly. "I just think I'm going to screw the kid up. I have no idea what I'm supposed to do, or how I'm supposed to act. I never planned on having kids."

"You'll be a great mom," Coop said. "Just do what your mother did. So far you turned out all right."

"Hmm," she snorted. "My mom left when I was seven."

"Then do what your dad did," Coop offered.

"You think it's that easy?" she said.

"Was what your father did easy?"

Kathryn paused. "No. I guess not." She rolled onto her back and gazed up at the trees. There was another long silence as they both watched the sky. But the silence wouldn't last. "Ever just want to disappear?" she said. "Just disappear and leave everything behind. Just escape," she said.

"What the hell do you think I'm doing now?" Coop said.

Kathryn laughed. "I'm not talking about escaping from some girl. I'm talking about starting your entire life over again."

"More Americans die in Haiti than in any other Caribbean country," Coop said.

She turned her head and gave him a look. "Having our own conversation, are we?"

"Uh-uh. Death certificates," he said, "are so easy to

get there. More and more people are going to Haiti to fake their own deaths and collect their insurance. From then on, they no longer exist as themselves, and usually for the first time in their lives, they have no responsibilities and a wad of cash in the bank."

"But how? How do they get a new identity?"

"There's two ways. One semi-legal. The other not so legal."

"What's the legal way."

"Our whole existence is proven by two pieces of paper. Drivers license and Social Security card. Once you get one of those, you can get anything you need."

"What about a passport?"

"If you can get an official one," he said. "They're the best. But if you get a cheap fake, you'll spend a long time explaining it."

"Then?" she asked.

"Then what?" he replied.

"Then what?"

"Then that's it," Coop said. "You're somebody else."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. But what nobody ever tells you is you have to live and survive as that new person. You can't go back and forth between the old and the new or you'll go insane. You can't even go back to where people knew you.

Can't access bank accounts, can't see old friends," he said.

"Not even for a second?"

"You may be able to get into the banks for a short time, but once the bank's been notified, your money's no longer your money."

"What about the friends?"

"They'll be so shocked they'll burn you. For most people it would be the most exciting thing in their life so they'll want to tell everybody. And," Coop said, "they're going to be pissed."

"And they probably wouldn't come to your next funeral," she added.

"Good point," Coop said. "Disappearing is tough to do."

"I don't care," she said. "I'll do whatever it takes to get away from McAlpin's hit squad. That guy at the hotel came too close," she said.

Coop rolled to his back. "We've got to talk about that," he said. "It looks like we're truly partners now."

"What do you mean?"

"That guy at the hotel was after me." He didn't want to give her the full story. She didn't need to know. "We all have our skeletons," he said. "But you shouldn't worry about that guy."

"What do you mean shouldn't? I thought you killed

him."

"I did. But," Coop shrugged, "behind every good man..."

"What? His wife?" She pushed away and rocked up to her haunches. "His wife is after you too? Who the hell are these people?"

Coop thought for a moment and decided to tell her a little about his past. After endangering her, it was only fair. "A long time ago, I worked for the government. Mostly overseas," he added. "This guy, Dmitri, was an arms dealer for the Russian Mafia."

Kathryn sat for a minute as if trying to decipher the information. "So, you're a spy?"

"Not anymore," he said. "I quit a few years ago."

"Why?" she asked.

"I got tired of all the political backstabbing," he said and laughed.

Kathryn didn't get the joke. She scratched the spot on her neck where Coop said he had seen the spider. "No more cold war?"

"Something like that," he said. "I didn't really enjoy the last few years. And now I'm just trying to be a nice guy."

"Do you really think his wife will come after you?"

"They're pretty hell bent," he said. "They followed me

this far."

"Maybe I can save your life," she said. "And we'll be even."

Coop gave a short laugh. "I don't think I'd call that even."

Chapter 24

Dmitri massaged his chest through his shirt as he looked for a gas station. His bruises were turning a dark purple, and if he moved wrong, his back would spasm. The van was far past empty and nothing was in sight. The two lane road was edged by tall hardwoods and fields. The scenery reminded him of the summer he had spent in south Russia when he was a boy, and there were no gas stations there either. He carefully leaned and tuned in a radio station, hoping that would keep his mind off his pain. The only thing he found was the voice of the General.

"...and if you think this is a good thing, people, then think again. Do this for me. Would you? If you take the members of the G7 and you divide the number of letters in their names by lucky number thirteen--from the thirteen apostles at the last supper. Do you know what you get? That's right....666. The sign of the devil. Now tell me that's a good thing. Now I know people have called us crackpots--,"

"I wonder why," Dmitri mutter and flipped off the radio. The One Stop Snack Shack was on the right, and he pulled in.

He filled the tank with over 20 gallons, and as he walked in the store, he realized he hadn't eaten for awhile.

A long haired clerk stood silent, arms crossed, behind the counter as loud music played on a cheap boom box. Other than the clerk and the noise, the store was empty. Dmitri waded through the unopened boxes junk food, deciding what to eat. He settled for a couple of Chick-O-Sticks, a handful of Slim-Jims, two liters of Coke, and a family size bag of Tostitos. He also picked up a tooth brush, toothpaste, and some spray-on deodorant.

"Thirty nine dollars, seventy four cents," the clerk said, as the register drawer ringed open.

Dmitri reached for his wallet. "Shit!," he said and stamped his foot like a child.

"Don't even try it," the clerk said unaffected.

"Fuck you," Dmitri said and pulled his weapon from his back. "You little hippie. And turn that noise off."

"Hey, man," the clerk said, turning off the radio, then raising his arms, "take what you want. It ain't my fucking money." His eyes darted to the parking lot, and Dmitri's followed.

A sheriff was getting out of his car, unaware of what

was going on inside the One Stop Snack Shop. He moved lethargically out of the car, stopping for a moment as if to catch his breath.

"Put your hands down and don't say a word," Dmitri said. "Act normal."

The clerk nodded and stepped back, crossed his arms looking as aloof as he did when Dmitri walked in. Dmitri nodded an approval. The hippie was doing good.

But as the Sheriff opened the door, the clerk looked defiantly at Dmitri and said in a very calm tone, "This prick is trying to rob me, Jimbo."

By the time Dmitri turned and raised his weapon, the sheriff had his gun drawn. From the corner of his eye, Dmitri could see the clerk slowly reach under the counter and pull out a double barrel sawed off shotgun.

He was sure that the cop would be the first of the two to shoot, so he kept the gun on him. The hippie clerk was probably too scared to fire. Then again with these American punks, he couldn't tell.

Dmitri could see the sweat form on the bald cop's head. He glanced to the clerk. Nothing. No emotion. No fear. In a way he respected the hippie's attitude.

Suddenly, a piercing, intermittent shrill broke the silence. Dmitri looked down at his beeper flashing and screaming. With his gun still on the cop, and his eyes

darting back and forth from the cop to the clerk, he pressed the button to read the number. He caught the first few digits and said, "I've got to take this."

Dmitri jerked the trigger sending a round into the cop, then spun and fired again before the hippie could shoot. As the clerk fell back into the Trojans and Tylenol, Dmitri saw the sheriff raise his gun, and planted another two rounds into the bald head, knocking the cop back to the floor. Then the clerk made the mistake of squirming, and Dmitri plugged him with another two.

He gathered the food and the money from the register and headed out the door. Then as an afterthought, he went to the beer cooler and pulled out two six-packs of Heineken.

Outside, the road was empty. No cars passed in either direction, and now that he thought about it, the sheriff's car was the first he had seen all morning on that stretch. So with a slim chance of anyone passing by, and knowing that he wouldn't find one for miles, Dmitri put his groceries in the van and made his call from the pay phones outside the One Stop.

Chapter 25

Beckett and his team of three men arrived at the First Bank of Nashville precisely at 0830 and knocked on the door.

Beckett flashed a badge through the glass door, and the teller fetched the manager. A young man with a frightened look and a cheap suit approached with an overly large collection of keys.

"Thank you," Beckett said as he let his men barge through before him.

"Can I help you," the young man said.

"What's your name?" Beckett asked. The boy looked too young to have keys to a bank.

"Simon. Simon Childers."

"Well, Mr. Childers, My name's Beckett, and I'm here to rob the bank."

"What?" Childers said suddenly, exciting Beckett.

"Just kidding, boy." The boy stared with a confused look as Beckett continued. "Since when do you let in four men with guns before the bank opens?"

"You showed me a badge. I thought that--"

"Is that standard policy?" Beckett demanded. "Or is this something you do on you own from time to time. You know like a hobby."

"No sir. I've never done it before. I just thought--"

"Look, Childers. I'll let this one slide. We'll keep it between you and me. But if I catch you letting in four armed men into your bank, I'm going to have to report it. And you wouldn't want something like that on your permanent record?"

"No sir."

"I didn't think so," Beckett said. "Now, show me to the safe deposit boxes and bring me the master keys," he said as he handed Childers the paperwork. "I've got an warrant to see box 1343."

Childers opened the legal papers and scanned them.

"Mr...?"

"Beckett," he said, hoping the boy didn't notice the unsigned warrant.

"Mr. Beckett," Childers began nervously, almost stuttering. "I'll have to wait for the bank Vice President before I can open this box. Bank rules don't allow a head teller to access individual boxes."

"But, Childers," he began, "this box contains evidence from a serial killer that preyed on young boys. Our

intelligence indicates that the suspect will come by this morning to empty the contents. We must reach it before he does or he could continue to rape and decapitate small boys.

Would you want something like that on your conscience?"

"I can't," Childers said. "I'm just the head teller. I could lose my job."

Beckett shook his head in disappointment and said in a sad tone, "I'm sorry, Childers. I thought I was talking with someone with some authority. I thought you were in charge around here. We'll just wait until someone who can make a decision arrives, no matter how many children will die," he said. "That okay with you?"

Childers face turned sour, and he walked away as Beckett continued. "You know, Childers, there comes a time when a man is asked to make a life changing decision. He has to answer the call one way or the other. Some men decide not to answer and miss out on what could be their destiny. While others may choose not to follow some rules laid down by some corporation a thousand miles away and make a decision that will forever change their life." Beckett took a step closer to Childers and held him at arms length by the shoulders. "Your country is calling, Childers. The little dead boys are calling. And the little boy that's going to be next is calling for you."

Childers' back straightened, his face flushed with

color again, his arms tightened, and he said, "Follow me. But I have to be there as a witness."

"Fair enough," Beckett said and turned to the three men and told them to wait.

"I've never been part of a murder case before," Childers said.

"Your mother would be proud," Beckett said as he was led behind the tellers.

Chapter 26

Beckett entered the Senator's office as a young page was leaving. He noticed the kid's tie was a little off center and needed to be straightened. McAlpin stood behind his desk with his back to the door. He was making some kind of adjustment around his waist. "Evening, Senator," Beckett said.

"I didn't hear Janice buzz you in," he said.

"It's after six. She's gone home," he said as he approached the desk and tossed the manila envelope on top of some pending legislation.

"What's that?" the Senator asked.

"The disk."

"The disk," he asked as he hesitantly held up the envelope.

"Yes, sir. The disk."

"Test results back yet," the Senator asked.

"Yes, sir. No copies have been made."

"And your positive."

"Yes, sir."

McAlpin sat down in his thick, worn chair. "Very good." He seemed upset as he wiped his tired eyes.

"What's wrong, Senator?"

"Nothing we can't handle."

"What?"

"That damn hate monger on the radio has stirred up such a controversy that the Senate is ready to start hearings into the intelligence agencies' recruitment practices."

"You mean...But there's no way they could know. How could they know?"

"I don't know. Unless this General has some hard data. That punk Senator from Florida--the young, idealistic one--is the one causing all the trouble. He doesn't know how to play the game. Sure he's making his constituents happy, but he's pissing off everybody up here."

"I wonder if the General supplied any information to him?" Beckett asked.

"Check it out, Beckett. I don't want this thing to go any farther. I can't chance having him show up at that hearing with some kind of hard evidence," the Senator said.

"Fortunately, there is only one loose end to this little faux pas, and that will be taken care of soon enough." He opened the envelope and peeked inside. "Have we heard from Mallory lately?"

"He's close," Beckett said. "He was headed to the Grand Canyon, but I told him to intercept them at the school. It's only 100 miles from the canyon so I'm sure they'll try for the kid."

"Are we sure her kid is at that one?"

"Positive," Beckett said. "And they're ready for them. The building is secure from the ground up."

"Very good, Beckett. You're becoming quite the leader. I always saw it in you."

Beckett took pride in his work, and when his boss noticed, it warmed him. "Thank you, sir. I also gave Mallory the information on the school. He should be there in the morning."

"Now find out anything you can on this Senator from Florida. Find out if there's anything we can use against him to stop his proceeding with his little witch hunt. Nobody can be so clean that they won't deal, Beckett. Find something, and let's put this thing to bed. This time tomorrow I want to be free of any loose ends and I want life back to normal."

"I'm looking forward to that, Senator."

Chapter 27

"Are we there yet?" Kathryn said over the noise of the engine.

"I was beginning to wonder if you had fallen off back there," Coop said as he leaned into the turn. It had been a while since she stopped squishing him and had learned to relax. They had ridden all night to avoid any traffic or hired killers. And now, on Kathryn's directions, were somewhere in northeast Arizona looking for a town named Sun Dial.

The sun coming up behind them cast long shadows ahead. Coop, feeling a little giddy after riding all night, was playing little games with the wind and the shadows to keep awake. He imagined the shadow of his hand swatting rocks, cans, anything along the road. Kathryn must have figured out what he was doing, because when he waved to his own shadow, hers waved back.

The red-brown earth seemed to pulse, promising life. Since the pre-dawn, the smell of the mesquite fires in the

small villages camouflaged in the hills reminded Coop of the villages in Central America. And from that memory, spurred the memory of the boy standing over the bodies of his parents.

* * *

The school was isolated ten miles outside of Sun Dial. Coop turned off the small highway to an unmarked private road Kathryn had shown him and wound his way down the drive, switch backing through a thick grove of hardwoods and pines. The sharp turns were a common tactic used to prevent aggressors from gathering any speed when approaching a target. The government used this practice on in front of European bases and embassies during the height of terrorism in the mid-eighties. A series of simple cement barriers, like those used in highway construction, placed in the road for vehicles to wind through made it impossible for anyone on a suicide mission to speed past a checkpoint with a van full of dynamite. The switchbacks also made egress difficult. And that concerned Coop.

The small, windy road emptied into a pool of parking spaces. Fifty feet from the parking lot lay the four story tan brick building that sat alone in a field red rock and weeds. A young man stood guard in a small shack just outside the entrance to the school. Coop stopped the bike and balanced it between his legs. Something didn't feel

right. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

If this evil Senator, as Kathryn would have him believe, is after her, he certainly would've made arrangements to intercept them as they came aboard the grounds. The switchback would've been the perfect place. They wouldn't put the children in jeopardy, so they wouldn't try anything inside the school. If they were waiting to attack when they left, they could harm the boy. Something just didn't add up with this whole plan, and Coop was beginning to think Kathryn hadn't been completely truthful with him.

Kathryn swung her leg over the rear tire and dismounted. "You coming in?" she asked as she removed her football helmet.

Coop sat for a moment, surveying the area. "I don't think so," he said. "I'd better stay out here."

Kathryn took a deep breath. "Wish me luck," she said and exhaled. "Five minutes," she said. "I'll be back in five minutes." She handed the helmet to Coop.

"I'll be here," he said and gave her the thumbs up. "Good luck." He watched her walk to the guard shack where the guard waved her on through. The guard picked up the phone and made a call, presumably announcing her arrival.

* * *

Beckett placed the phone back in its cradle on the

Senator's mahogany desk and beamed. "More good news, Senator."

"Who was that?" the Senator asked as he rocked back in his chair, folding the newspaper in front of him. The Washington Post had reported that a Senate Investigation Committee was going to be conducting hearings about Senator McAlpin's involvement in the CIA's agent recruitment practices.

"The guard, sir. She's arrived at the school."

"Where's Mallory?" the Senator asked.

"He's in Sun Dial and should be at the school in ten minutes."

"Is someone with her?"

"Yes," Beckett said.

"Call the Major and tell him to hold them until Mallory gets there."

"Then?" Beckett asked.

"Mallory'll know what to do," the Senator said.

"In ten minutes, this'll be over," Beckett said.

"Don't count on it, son. We still don't know who she traveling with."

"Some schmuck, it looks like." Beckett said. "Some dumb fucking schmuck."

* * *

Coop walked around his bike for the twenty-seventh time

and looked at his watch. She'd been in there seven minutes, and he was getting nervous. The little hairs on the back of his neck had never lied to him before, and today they were tell him something was wrong. Deadly wrong. He wasted no time at the guard shack, he just pushed the boy aside and yanked the phone from the wall.

Inside, the school was decorated like any other school. Paintings of war scenes, recruitment posters, OPSEC and COMSEC warnings covered the gray walls. Signs for the restroom, written in Arabic, Chinese, and Russian, were placed above the doorway to the head. A pimple-faced boy and his tall buddy emerged from the head. They both wore the uniform of the day: dark blue pants and light blue shirts decorated with military insignias. The boys were somewhat surprised to see Coop, but continued their conversation in Arabic. Coop could decipher some parts. The pimply one had done well in his martial arts class earlier, and the tall one was concerned about his calculus exam. The two crossed the hall and ducked into a classroom.

Coop stopped at the hallway intersection. To the left lay an empty hall, to the right was an empty office. He was about to enter the office when he heard a scream and saw a commotion at the end of the hall. He spun in time to see Kathryn being shuffled out of sight. It looked like she was being followed by a group of boys with automatic weapons.

And approaching him were two kids with AR-15s leveled at Coop. Coop raised his hands in surrender.

The two boys had the peach fuzz faces of fourteen year olds and wore the same uniform as the others. By the way they carried their weapons with such determination and familiarity, it was obvious they were very comfortable with the Colts. It was the kind of comfort that can only come from years usage. Coop wondered if they had the same confidence in their own abilities.

As they approached, the pudgy redheaded kid made the mistake of letting his muzzle within arms length of Coop. If the muzzle comes within reach of any prisoner, the weapon becomes fair game. The prisoner has the opportunity to deflect the muzzle toward another guard, hoping the first guard will fire in the confusion, or better yet, with one clean jerk, snatch the weapon entirely from the guard. So that's what Coop did.

Before the chubby redhead could react, Coop snatched the muzzle, grabbed the stock, and using his momentum, rifle whipped Chubby's partner across the jaw. The kid slid against the wall to the floor, and Chubby's eyes grew as big as Howitzer rounds. Coop leveled the weapon on the standing boy, who, now, was raising his hands over his head.

Coop shook his head. "You got too close," he said. "Didn't they teach you not to get too close?"

The boy nodded.

"Ever been a hostage before?" Coop asked.

The boy shook his head.

"I'll go easy on you then." Coop pointed to his jacket.

"See this jacket? It's brand new, and I really don't want to get any blood on it," he said. "So don't try anything."

"Yes sir," the boy's soft voice managed.

"Let's go," Coop said.

They followed the hallway to another intersection. To the right, Coop could hear a man shouting orders. The boy led Coop to a thick double door. Coop cracked the door enough to see through. Inside, Kathryn was surrounded by more fourteen year olds with more AR-15s. Circling the boys was a man in his early fifties. He was shaven bald and sported a small mustache. His muscular arms challenged the seams in his short sleeved uniform shirt. The insignia identified him as a Major. His name tag called him Stearns. His voice was low, but Coop could make out most of what he was saying.

"As soon as you left the clinic, we knew you would come here. Though we didn't expect you quite so soon." He rested his hand on his side arm, what looked to be a Beretta 92F, as if making some kind of passive threat. "We didn't expect you to bring your boyfriend, either," the Major said. He offered her a chair. "You might as well have a seat

until your boyfriend shows up."

"I don't want to sit," Kathryn said.

"I think you'll be more comfortable seated," he said.

"I don't want--"

"Sit the hell down!" he belted.

Coop watched the boys trying their best to look intimidating, but they were too young to grimace. Some actually looked like they were having a movement. And when the Major shouted the order for Kathryn to sit, one of children started to sit down, weapon and all, right where he stood. Coop waited for his chance when the Major circled around the group and had his back to the door.

"Ms. Tillman," the Major began in a calm tone as he paced, "This school is so secure, it's worse than a prison. Sure you can get in, but it's tough as hell to get out," he said his voice raising as he spoke. "You know why?" When she didn't answer he continued louder than before, "Because I'm everywhere. No one gets past me," he said. The Major was coming into position. "I'm always around, staring down the lens of the cameras, haunting the halls like a cold fog. I am security. I am God," he pronounced "All knowing, all seeing, and ever fucking vigilant."

"I just want my boy," she screamed.

Her scream was enough to make the Major completely turn his back on Coop. Coop busted through the doors and grabbed

the Major in a choke hold and pressed the muzzle of the weapon to the hairless head. Coop motioned for a now teary-eyed Chubby to join his classmates.

Children can be trained to kill. Coop had seen it many times. It occurs in Ireland, Israel, South Africa, and all over the United States. Children take a distant stance on killing, as if it really has no effect on them. All they do is pull the trigger. That's all. The bullet does the rest.

Their young consciences seem to bury the killing as if it never happened. That fact makes them more dangerous than adults.

"Bishop! You coward," the Major said unfazed by Coop's hold. "You're not fit to stand with your classmates. Get out of formation and quit your crying, or you'll find yourself washed out and join Ross in the in the guard shack for the rest of your miserable life."

"That's enough," Coop said into the Major's ear.

"Bishop," the Major said, "You have betrayed your brothers."

"That's enough," Coop said louder this time. "Let her go," Coop said to the boys. "I'm not afraid to use this on your Major."

"Don't do it, men," the Major said. He turned his head a bit to direct his speech to Coop. "Are you familiar with the intricacies of firing squads, sir?" When Coop didn't

respond, the Major continued. "In a firing squad, not all weapons have the ability to kill. It's a way for the executioners to deny they had any part in it."

"You're point being, Major?" Coop said.

"My point being, sir, is that we employ the same theory here. Only a few of the rifles have live rounds in them, and Bishop's is not one of them."

Without moving the muzzle from the Major's head, Coop put pressure on the trigger. "Tell you what, Major, I'll give it a try. If you're right, you live, if you're bluffing, you don't."

"I issued the rounds myself."

"How do you know he didn't switch weapons with another kid. You know how boys are always trading things."

"It's against school policy to trade weapons or munitions," he said casually as if he had been talking about trading baseball cards. "You keep the weapon you're issued."

"For your sake, you'd better be right, Major." Coop held his breath and braced for the shot. The click of the firing pin in an empty chamber makes almost no sound. But this time, it seemed to echo through the halls.

Coop tossed the weapon on the floor behind him, releasing his grip on the Major.

Stearns slowly turned to Coop and said, "You see, sir.

It was unloaded."

"Maybe," Coop said. Then as the Major faced him, followed with, "But this one's not." He pointed the Major's own Beretta at the bald, muscular leader of small boys. "Now, tell them to let the girl go, and put their weapons down."

The Major nodded, and the boys lowered the rifles. Kathryn ran to Coop.

"And if I hear even one sound from you boys," Coop said. "I'll pop his ass." He gave Stearns a brisk shove. "Let's go, Major. We have a boy to pick up. We're going on a field trip."

Three classes down, the Major opened the door. A young instructor in uniform was pacing through the rows of uniformed students, all about six years old. The Russian alphabet was displayed over the chalkboard. "Gdia Krasnia Ployshet?" the instructor said.

"Where's Red Square?" the class responded.

"Excellent," the instructor said.

All classified facilities, organizations, and missions have duress codes. A duress code is usually a unique codeword used in a sentence by the person in jeopardy to alert a guard, team member, or someone in authority that all is not right. Someone maybe watching, listening, or holding a gun to the person's back. "Guitar" is one of the

government's favorites and has become another name for duress codes in the agencies. "Turnkey" is another.

"No guitars," Coop whispered into the Major's ear.

"Just say...What's the kid's name?"

"Zachary Montoya," Kathryn replied.

"Just say 'I need Zachary Montoya,'" Coop said.

The Major popped his head in the door and did what he was told. A moment later a small boy with sandy blonde crewcut marched out. He carried his books with him and managed to close the door behind him and snap a sharp salute to the Major.

Kathryn dropped to her knees to look at the child. She held the boy at arms length, looking him up and down, then drew him in for a hug and began crying. "It's you. It's you," she said over and over through the tears.

Still keeping an eye on the Major, Coop lifted the boy's chin and looked into his eyes. He had the same green eyes with the same crying pupils. Kathryn was hugging him so hard, the boy's face was turning blue. Her instincts had once again taken over.

* * *

Mallory slowed the black rented Lincoln for fiftieth time trying to find the secret road leading the goddamn geedunk fucking school. Beckett couldn't draw a map worth shit. The fairy probably didn't even know which way north

was. He'd been searching for twenty minutes now and was about ready to give up and go for a beer.

* * *

A ruckus at the end of the hall distracted Coop. The kids had picked up their weapons and were now charging. In what seemed like an instant, the boys were standing a yard away, the muzzles again on Coop and Kathryn.

Coop still had control of the Major. The arrogant son of a bitch hadn't even tried to get away. It was as though he thought he was still in complete control of the situation, even with his own gun at his head.

"They're trained to shoot the boys who try to leave," the Major said. Coop had to give him credit, the Major was trained well. He was amazingly calm, and that's tough when someone is smashing the barrel of a gun in your head.

"You may not care about yourself, Tillman," Stearns said. "But I know you care about him. If you give up now, the boy will be fine. He has no idea what's going on. It was all just a drill, we'll say. He'll never know."

Coop looked to Kathryn. She didn't know what to do. He had to make the call. "Major," Coop whispered, still pressing the gun into Stearns's head. "You made one mistake."

"I doubt that. These boys are highly trained. They know exactly what to do."

"You said it yourself, you are security. Like a cold fog, Major."

"You're goddamn right," he said. "Ever fucking vigilant."

"But without you, there is no security." The Major didn't respond as if he knew where Coop was leading. Coop locked his arm around the Major's neck, applied just enough pressure against his larynx, and lowered the gun to his back. "Once you're gone these lost boys are just that; lost boys who've got no one to tell them what to do, or how to do it." The Major struggled under Coop's strength, but Coop held tight. He could feel Stearns's Adam's apple collapse as he flexed his biceps. Just as Stearns ran out air and went limp, Coop angled the weapon and fired. The Major slipped from Coop's grip and slid to the floor, resting on his back.

"C'mon!" he yelled at the boys. "Who's next? You, son?" he yelled to the biggest one. The faces went from their attempt at grimace to expressionless and slack. It looked like they were still trying to figure out what had just happened.

The door the classroom sprang open, and the young instructor stood confused. Coop put the gun on him, "Lay down, buddy. On the ground. Spread eagle." The teacher hesitated. "Don't be a hero," Coop said. "I hate heroes."

They always screw things up." The instructor did as he was told.

Coop turned to the boys again, looking another in the eye. "How about you? Want to join the Major?" Then to the rest he said, "This is the real deal, kids. A real world incident. I don't want to hurt any of you. We're just going to take this boy and go. That's all. So put the weapons down, and we'll be on our way." After a what seemed like ten minutes of silence, the biggest boy lay down his weapon, then the others followed one by one. "That's good, men. Very good."

The exit was about a hundred yards behind them. Coop grabbed Kathryn and the boy, and backed down the hall, keeping an eye on the kids just in case.

Once around the corner, they ran like hell, with Coop practically dragging Kathryn and the boy. As they approached the guard house, the guard was braced, ready for their arrival. But Coop kept walking, pointing the Major's gun at the guard. "It's not worth it," Coop said. "In ten seconds you can be alive, or you could be a stain on the concrete. You make the call."

"I can't let you pass," the guard said, holding the shotgun on them. Coop could hear the quiver in his voice and wished he would drop the gun. "The Major would have my ass," the guard said.

"I wouldn't worry about the Major anymore," Coop said.
"He'll never know."

"You killed Stearns?" he said.

"He was in my way," Coop explained. "Just like you.
Now move."

"You killed the Major?" the guard said again. "You
killed the fucking Major? Major Security? Major God?
Major Ever Fucking Vigilant?"

"I see you got the same speech." Coop said, and by the
guard's tone, knew he wasn't going to shoot.

"Every day, practically," he said, shaking his head.
"Every goddamn day of my miserable life."

Coop let him savor the moment of good news. Then,
"Well?"

"Oh, yeah," the guard said. "Sorry." He lowered the
gun for them to pass. "Get the hell out of here. This
place will be swarming with people before you know it."

Coop straddled the bike and started it. He picked up
the little boy and set him near the tank as Kathryn snuggled
close behind Coop. She reached around Coop's waist to hold
the boy, and Coop didn't mind a bit.

As they turned and passed the school, the guard was
walking across the parking lot away from the school, away
from the Major. Away.

All that lay between the three and a clean escape were

the switchbacks. Coop couldn't move any faster than ten miles an hour and still take the turns. Going straight meant crashing through trees, rocks, and any type of man-made device meant to discourage passage. He had to stick to the single lane road. If those boys carried live rounds, there was no doubt the shoulders of the roads were mined. He stole a glance to the road's edge, and an exposed metal object caught his eye confirming his suspicions.

But the hairs on his neck were laying down again, his heart was slowing, and his grip on the throttle was relaxing. Kathryn gave him a tight hug, then patted him on the shoulder as she tried to say something over the rumble of the engine.

Coop cocked his head toward her, looking away from the road for a second. "What?" he said and cupped his ear.

Kathryn said something he still couldn't hear and when Coop looked forward again, his reflexes slammed on the brakes. The three on the Harley stood face to face with a 3000 pound Lincoln.

Coop waited as Kathryn sat silently. She was doing good. She was remaining calm under pressure. Of course she had no idea the place was mined. Coop pushed the bike back hoping to get some room, but the Lincoln inched closer.

Only one way in and one way out. One way in and one way out. No room to turn around. No where to run. One way

in and one way out.

Coop yelled for his passengers to hold on, up-clicked twice, and as he let the clutch out sharply, the three lunged forward as the bike took off backwards.

Just as Coop thought, the Lincoln tried to follow, leaving the exit open. So Coop jammed the bike into first, lifting the front tire inches off the ground. He yanked the throttle back, and ducked and danced with the car as it attempted to block him. Then just as Coop thought he had the opening to the drive, the Lincoln jumped in front of him, and Coop's front tire bounced off the Lincoln's front tire. Coop had barely enough time to catch Zack from flying over the handlebars.

With the bike and car at a standstill, Coop waited, watching for movement inside the car. The car was completely blocking the only way out. On the other side of the car's hood, lay the switchbacks and open road. And every square inch of the land off the lot was mined, leaving the only route of escape through the car.

Coop lifted Zack from his seat on the gas tank and tucked him between Kathryn and him. He pulled Kathryn's hands across his stomach as tight as he could, locking the boy between the two. He hit the throttles twice, up clicked twice and released the clutch. The force threw the combined weight of Kathryn and Zack into him, straining his arms. As

the bike raced backward, gaining speed, Coop knew this was his only hope. He was either going to flip the bike, spilling all three onto the ground, or not be able to maintain the elevation of the front wheel. It was something he'd never tried before, and hoped it would work. When the bike reached a speed of twenty five miles an hour, Coop had to test his theory.

He slammed on the rear brake, jammed the gear pedal down, forcing the bike into first, causing the inertia to lift the front wheel off the ground. He gave the big bike enough gas to keep the bike up, riding the wheelie thirty yards to the car, aiming for its front tire as the site of impact.

Behind him Kathryn screamed, and Zack held tight. Coop needed as much speed as he could get to make it work. He shifted into second, fighting to keep the wheel up, and the bike at a forty five degree angle.

As he raced toward the car on one wheel, he tensed his arms, bracing himself for the impact and the weight of his passengers against him. At thirty miles an hour, the 170 pounds behind him were going to feel like over a thousand if his idea didn't work.

The bike punched into the car at just the right angle, just at the right place. The frame, under the engine, caught the upper edge of the car's side, the back tire

bounced off the car's front tire, sending the rear end up, leveling the bike on the hood, and all but stopping the momentum. Coop stiffened under the lurching weight behind him as he fought to control their landing. When the front tire hit, he felt the Kathryn's face against his shoulders, and the boy smashing into his lower back. As the back tire hit the ground, he shifted into first. And when he felt Kathryn's grip tighten again, and knew his cargo was safe. He negotiated the winding drive, and found the open highway.

In the distance he heard an explosion, presumably as the Lincoln tried to navigate the exit too fast.

Chapter 28

"Okay," Tiffany said. "Here's one. Take the total amount of the checks today and divide it by the total number of customers today."

"Piece of cake," Dorothy said. "Five dollars, thirty four cents."

"All right, smarty pants. Try this. Add the total number of checks, multiply it by the day of your birthday, then divide it by my age, then give me the...what's that where you divide the number in half and you get--"

"Two?" Dorothy asked.

"Duh...no. It's something else,"

"Square root?"

"That's it. Divide it by my age and give me the square root."

"Fourteen point three one five."

"My God, dear Jesus," Tiffany said. "How do you do that?"

Dorothy shrugged. "Don't know," she said. "Just can."

She was setting a BLT down in front of Lester, the trucker that come in from Sydney every other week, when she heard Tiffany. "Uh oh. Look who it is."

The thin, little man from the government came in adjusting his round glasses, smiling. Two bigger men--which wasn't really saying much--followed behind him.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Halston," he said.

"It was," she replied.

"Remember me?" he said, full of cheer, in want of her money.

"Yes. I remember you," she said void of any emotion. "You're the little boy from the government."

"Yes mam," he said. "I hope you don't mind, but we've come to take another look at the place." He handed her a folded packet of papers.

"What's this?" she asked.

He held up a finger to stifle her, then nodded to his men. One took out a clipboard, the other a calculator and off they went, walking around the diner writing and calculating. "That gives us permission to look around and to take a few notes."

"Notes for what?"

"Notes to help us decide whether we want to sell the place or just demolish it."

"What?" She said.

"We might be able to make more if were to hold a public auction of the fixtures. You know, the sum of the parts is greater than the whole."

"Then demolish it? But why?"

"Why not?" he said. "It'll be easier to sell the land without the diner. A developer could put up a nice hotel here. Maybe even a Cracker Barrel. I love Cracker Barrel."

"The hell with Cracker Barrel. You have no right to my land. I'm trying to raise the money. I've got some time left."

"Of course you do," he said. "And you'll be able to raise a third of a million dollars in a month. I'm sure of it."

She didn't know whether it was his tone or his audacity that set her off. "Now you look here, you little squirt," she said and vaulted over the counter, landing toe to toe with the boy. She was about two inches taller than he. All the diner noise stopped. Everyone was listening. "You take your papers, take your goons, and get the hell out of my diner. And if you don't stop harassing me," she said.

"You'll what?" he said smugly, taunting her.

"Just get the hell out," she said, trying to regain her composure. "Get out now."

"Fine," he said, nodding to his men. "But we'll be back. You can count on that."

"Thanks for the warning," she said, opening the glass door for them. "Next time bring a warrant if you want to come on this property or I'll call Sheriff Wiggins on you for trespassing."

"Don't you worry, Dorothy," he called. "We wouldn't dare do anything against the law."

The cowbells thunked as she pulled the door shut. She retied her apron. It had come loose when she went over the counter.

"Honey, I never seen you move like that before," Tiffany said. "You were like Wonder Woman back there."

Dorothy arched her back, trying to stretch the muscles. "I won't be tomorrow. My arthritis is going to be bothering me for days," she said and began refilling Earl's coffee. "I wish this cold weather would go away, and warm sunshine would fill my life."

"You and me both, sister," Tiffany said. "By the way," she said, arranging parsley on a plate. "Did you see his nails? They were awful."

Chapter 29

"What the hell happened to Mallory?" the Senator yelled, leaning across the mahogany desk, slinging saliva across the room, his knuckles turning white under his load as he screamed. "I thought you told me he was going to intercept them at the school? You told me he was going to intercept them at the school. Didn't you?"

"Yes sir," Beckett said from the leather wingback. He was almost out of spitting range of the old man, but the manila envelope he held in his lap was quickly spotting from the Senator's sloppy tirade. Lately, with the hearings a day away, and the woman still loose, the tongue-lashings had become more commonplace and, more often than not, Beckett felt as if he should be packing an umbrella during his meetings with the Senator. "They must have driven all night," he offered. "Stearns said they got there just as the first bell sounded. The Major tried to hold them, but the guy she's with pulled a gun."

"Any idea who he is?"

Beckett opened his spit spotted envelope. "We took these from the security cameras at the school." He leaned forward in the chair and placed the envelope on the desk. "This is the tricky part, sir. Lab says--,"

"Tricky part? I'm tired of tricky parts." McAlpin rubbed his eyes with his fists. "Where's Mallory now?"

"Headed to the Grand Canyon," Beckett said.

"They still have the kid?"

"Not sure. We think they do," Beckett said adjusting himself in the chair.

"I'm beginning to feel she's not in this alone. She's got to have a support network." The Senator thought for a minute. "And that's fine. Because she can't hide forever. She'll show up one day, and I don't care when it is, I'll be waiting for her. If we don't get to her, and she fucks anything up, she'll always have to look over her shoulder."

Beckett leaned forward in his seat and spoke in a soft tone, trying to sound a little more confident than he was. "Sir, we've recovered everything she's taken. The only damage she can do now is testify about what she stole. And that's all hearsay and speculation," Beckett said and leaned back. "Don't worry. We're going to find her and the kid."

Beckett leaned forward again and pushed the envelope closer to McAlpin. "But I still think you need to see this."

"What the hell is this?" he said as if it were wasting

his time. He stretched over his belly and opened the envelope.

Beckett let him stare at the picture for a moment before saying anything. "That's the guy she's traveling with. He's the one that pulled the gun on the Stearns. It's a little fuzzy, but they were able to I.D. him. The guy's name is--,"

"Cooper Sumner," McAlpin said.

"You know him?"

"Yes," the Senator said and casually, and, perhaps out of frustration, flipped the envelope on the desk.

"Says here he was a government employee up until a couple of years ago. It gives no reason why he left."

"He lost his edge," the Senator said. "He went weak."

The Senator leaned back in his chair, crossed his hands across his broad width and said, "Well, at least that's what I heard."

Beckett picked up the envelope and began reading the docier. "It says in here somewhere," he began, searching for an entry. "Here it is. It was one of his last missions. He snapped and murdered a whole family." He fingered down to the last page. "Last reported as homeless, drifting somewhere along the Gulf Coast, in and out of rehab centers." Beckett shook his head. "What a fucking loser."

"Oh, I don't think Mr. Sumner is a loser," McAlpin

said. "Where'd you get that information?"

"Pulled of the agency's computer," Beckett said.

"Use any special codeword?"

"No. Just my password."

The Senator said, "That's what I thought. That's just the IAA file."

"The IAA file?" Beckett asked. "Never heard of it."

"Not even you know everything, Beckett," the Senator said. "The IAA file, known as the If Anyone Asks files. is actually, the Intelligence Agents Attrition file. That's what we tell other people. It's a way for the agencies to handle inquiries about former agents from other branches of the government or from other agencies," the Senator said. "At first, of course, we vehemently deny that the person ever worked for the agency. Then, we'll finally concede and show them the person's file. The little ditty at the end is meant to discourage contact."

"Who'd want this loser anyway," Beckett said.

"It's all a bunch of bullshit." The Senator picked up the photo again and stared at it. "Coop was one of the best we ever had. He was blessed," he said. "I guess his conscience got to him. He lives in a huge house on the beach and from what I understand, just asked a girl to marry him."

"How sweet," Beckett said.

"So what do we do about him?"

"Sadly," the Senator said, "the same thing you're going to do with the girl. And you'd better do it quick. That little punk Senator from Florida is all over my ass with these hearings. He says he's got enough evidence to end it in one day, or drag it on as long as he wants."

"It sounds like, sir, he thinks he can either give you a quick death or a slow painful one." Beckett leaned back into his chair. "But either way, there's death."

"We're not going down easy, Beckett. I'll tell you that. Not easy at all. I'll drag these fucking hearings out for goddamn years if I have to. Without that girl, they don't have shit."

"Goddamn right, sir," Beckett said and stood, ready to leave. He picked up the files and stuck them in his briefcase.

"Hold on, Beckett," the Senator said. "One more thing." The Senator stood, facing Beckett and in a grave tone, said, "When Mallory calls in, don't give him Sumner's name."

"Why's that?" Beckett asked.

"Just don't," the Senator said.

"Sure, Senator," Beckett said and turned to leave.

"And, Beckett, there's something else you need to know about Sumner."

Chapter 30

It was 102 miles of gray asphalt and red hills, and little Zachary was loving life. He kept turning around grinning at Coop. The boy was missing one of his lower front teeth, and Coop wondered if the tooth fairy had ever visited him at the school.

It was a story that he had never grown up with and he doubted Zachary had either. He had only heard of it a few months ago at Spot's. They were all sitting around the bar, and someone mentioned the tooth fairy.

"Tooth fairy? What the hell's a tooth fairy?" Coop said.

"Bull shit," Spot said in amazement. "You've never heard of the tooth fairy? Everyone's heard of the tooth fairy."

"Even me," Anna chimed.

"What does this tooth fairy do?" Coop asked.

"He sneaks--" Spot began.

"She sneaks, honey," Anna said.

"I believe it's a he, Anna. All tooth fairies are he's. It's a fact." Spot uncapped Coop's next beer.

"Anyway, where was I? Oh yeah. He sneaks into your room late at night--"

"If a tooth fairy is going to slip into my room," Coop said, "I'd rather it be a she." Coop took a sip of the new beer. "So they sneak into your room and...,"

"To take your teeth," Anna said.

"Why the hell would I want anyone taking my teeth?"

"Jesus, man. Where did you grow up? Mars?" Spot shook his head and wiped the counter under Coop's beer, then got him a coaster. "He doesn't take all your teeth," Spot said. "Just the ones you lost."

"In return, he leaves you money," Anna said.

"How much?" Coop asked.

"When I was a kid, it was usually a quarter a tooth. But with inflation and all, I'm sure they're over a buck each by now." Spot poured himself a beer. "It probably goes up right along with the minimum wage," he added.

* * *

Now, with the broken white line blinking underneath him, Coop tried to imagine Major Stearns sneaking in late at night and swapping a bloody tooth for a buck or two. He was beginning to realize that he might have a little more in common with Zachary than he originally thought. Though he

had enjoyed his childhood, it wasn't until he went into the Naval Academy that Coop realized that he had grown up under a different set of rules, values, and beliefs than the rest of America he was trained to protect.

In front of him, Zachary kept turning and beaming. Turning and beaming a big one-missing-tooth smile. Coop had given Zachary his helmet, and now with the big helmet bobbing on his little blonde head, Coop could really see the resemblance of his two passengers. One, a Chief's fan, the other a Harley man. And both with the black pupils dripping on their jade irises. They were mother and child, and now it was his job to protect them both. Maybe it was seeing the tears in Kathryn's eyes back at the school, seeing her son for the first time. Maybe it was that his feelings for Kathryn had been growing for the past few days. Whatever it was, it made him reach behind him and pat Kathryn on the leg in a loving, affectionate way. He was on his most important mission ever and he was not going let them down.

Coop looked down at Zachary. He wasn't beaming anymore. He was grabbing his crotch, mouthing something. Coop leaned down to hear.

"Latrine," the boy said. "I've got to go." It was the first words Coop had heard the boy say.

Coop nodded. Up ahead stood an huge barrel cactus, its thick arms pointing down as if it was shrugging its

shoulders. A road turned off just after it, and Coop followed it. It led them up a the side of a small mountain.

They had plenty time for a short detour, so he followed the road four miles until it abruptly ended at the top of a mountain. Coop kicked the stand down and turned off the engine. The silence was overwhelming. The slight wind was only sound. In front lay the ridges and valleys of red, brown, purple. It was a part of America he had never seen before and it was inspiring.

"Pit stop," Coop said, and lifted the boy to the ground, whispering, "Watch out for snakes," into his little ear. Zachary ran to the nearest rock and began. Coop felt Kathryn swing her leg over the bike and caught her just as she started after the boy.

"But he might need me," she said in protest.

"I think he'll do fine," Coop said. "He's managed for five years already."

Still, they both couldn't help but watch protectively as Zachary relieved himself. When he finished and turned around, Coop and Kathryn averted their eyes like they had never looked. The boy meandered back to the bike eyeing the rocks and the bushes, as if hoping something would pop out.

"Is there a ladies room?" Kathryn asked.

"Right there," Coop said, pointing to a boulder large enough to offer total privacy. But let me check it out

first. They're could be--"

"I'll be fine," she said bravely and briskly walked to the rock. "I've managed too, you know," she called as she rounded the corner. "And for a lot longer than five years."

"But they're might be--," he tried, but stopped when he saw her step slowly methodically backwards, away from the rock. "Snakes," he said. He jumped off the bike and ran toward her, looking for a stick. As he neared her, he could hear the rattle.

"Stop. You'll scare it," she said. "I don't want you to scare it."

"I'm not going to scare it," he said and approached closer. It was at least a seven foot rattler.

"It's going to bite me," she said in a panic.

"Can you blame him?" Coop asked under his breath, creeping closer, slowly, watching the snake's eyes. If Kathryn moved a fraction of an inch, the snake would strike. He had to preoccupy her. "How would you feel if you were catching some rays in your favorite chair, and somebody came up and wanted to pee all over you?"

But Kathryn moved just enough to make the snake lunge, and Coop snatched her from the strike zone. She landed in his arms, and Coop held tight. Their faces were inches apart. Their eyes close. She had two drops of pupil in her left eye and three in her right. Her soft, moist lips at

the perfect angle for the perfect kiss. He imagined her mouth on his, and wondered if she was thinking the same.

"Jesus," she said pulling away. "You almost ripped my arm off. I don't think you realize how strong you are."

He released his grip. "Sorry," he said. "But it sure beats a bite in the ass."

She walked back to the bike where Zachary was waiting quietly, watching them.

"How you doing, Zack?" Coop said.

"Fine, sir."

"Are you having fun?"

"Yes sir," he checked his watch. "But it's almost time for flash cards. I have to practice my Russian."

"What time does that start?" Coop asked.

"Fourteen thirty," the boy replied.

Coop leaned to Kathryn's ear and whispered, "That's two thirty."

She playfully smacked his chest, "I know," she said.

"Zack, I can help you with that. What do you say we take a breather from the road, and practice sentences pa ruskie?"

"Da," said the boy.

"Hadasho," said Coop.

* * *

"...it's a deal made with body bags. America is

selling all its technology to the Asian counties," General Wright said. "The same countries that put hundreds of thousands of America fighting men in body bags over the years. If you don't believe me friends, perhaps you'll believe today's guest, Dr. William J. Huffington, an engineer who was recently laid off by one of the big greedy techno-companies when he threatened to blow the whistle on the shenanigans going on in the pacific rim. "Tell me, Dr. Huffington, what clued you in that we were selling computer parts to Vietnam?"

"Well, General. I hate to say this--but I've got nothing to loose--it's much deeper than that."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. For years, the American government has been subsidizing the commie Vietnamese government. And with NAFTA and GATT, they've been sending America jobs overseas to the rice fields of that country. So now hard working, tax paying people in Middle America have lost their jobs to the same people that killed their fathers, sons, and uncles. It's just not right, General."

"They called us crackpots, but look whose shaking their head in disgust now. And we'll be back."

An ad for pocket watches came on, and Dmitri flipped the dial off. This radio-asshole was growing on him, and Dmitri had an impulse to pull over at the nearest phone and

call the show and give him some real news. He'd start with the joint training exercises in Central America with American troops during the seventies when there was a plan between the Soviets and America to take over Africa. From Libya to Liberia was going to belong to America, along with all of South Africa. The Soviets were going to have the remainder, except for Kenya which would have been a joint venture amusement park/nature ride, and that's what the black helicopters were for: to shuffle people to the different parts of the park.

That's what he would tell that radio-asshole. He would tell him that and then laugh for miles. It would sure break up the boredom. The trip was so fucking boring, he was looking for anything along the road to entertain him. The only thing he saw the least bit entertaining was a couple of miles back he had seen a cactus with its arm down, like it was shrugging his shoulders. He remembered laughing at that. Laughing at that more than the asshole on the radio. He was a paranoid idiot. But it was fun listening to him. It broke up the monotony of the fucking trip to the Grand Canyon. God, Amerika sucks.

* * *

Kathryn watched the two men from a distance as Coop practiced language lessons with the boy. Initially she was hesitant about continuing any programs from the school, but

since Coop knew the language, this would give her more time to figure out how to tell her son the truth. Coop and Zachary were laughing and playing the way boys do. She tried to understand what they were saying but it was mostly in Russian. Whatever it was, it had Zachary laughing almost to the point of tears.

Coop was doing great with her son. He had a special way with people and it came through with her son. It was as if as soon as you met him, you feel as though he's been your friend for life. It seems he knows everything about you, but no matter how long you talk, you still don't have a clue about him. It was a certain charm he had, and she had been taken by it. She had done everything she could to not pull away when they're faces were inches apart. She wanted to feel his scratchy face with the day's growth, to kiss his smiling chin, feel his arms around her. But she had to wait. Until her son was safe, she wasn't going to add any more figures into the equation.

It had been an incredible act for him to help her, and she felt guilty for involving him the way she had. But looking back, there was no way she could have done this without him. Even with the help of Jonas: all the maps, the timetables, the help at the bank, the information from the clinic, it would have been impossible without Coop. Had she been alone, she knew she would have panicked. But Coop came

through for her, and for that she was thankful. She wondered if the pat on her leg was of any significance, or if he was just checking on his golf club.

Though she had planned for this moment for months, she was dreading the next few minutes. She had everything she wanted to say in her head, but somehow she knew it was going to come out wrong. But she had to begin. "Hey Coop," she called. "Think I could have a minute with Zachary?"

Coop looked up from a rock. "I got some work I can do on the bike," he said. "Call me if you need me." He sent the boy to his mother and headed to the bike.

"Coop!" Kathryn called. She couldn't do this alone either. As Coop turned again, Kathryn said, "Could you just sit by. I could use some moral support."

Coop smiled, the whiteness of his teeth barely emerging from his darkened image. The sun looked as if it was resting on his right shoulder, half-shadowing his chiseled face. The other half glistened with the reflection of the sun on sweat and stubble. He stood before her, towering over her, and Kathryn felt the familiar shudders again. The same shudders she had when he saved her at the restaurant, when he held her after saving her from the snake, and when he patted her on the leg.

"You'll do fine," Coop said. "But if you'd feel better, I'll stay."

"Please," she said and touched his hand. "Zachary," she called and cleared off a place on the rock across from her. "Come here and sit down. There's something we need to talk about."

"Yes mam," he said and sat down, his back erect, his heels together. "What would you like to talk about?" he said in the most polite tone. It was almost too polite.

"I've been planning for this day for quite some time," she said. "You see, that school you go to is for children that don't have parents. Right?"

"Yes, mam."

"All your friends don't have a mommy and a daddy. Right?" she said and wished she could start over.

"Yes, mam. Neither do I. My parents were killed in a car crash on the way to the hospital the day I was born, and nobody would adopt me."

He said it so matter of fact that listening to him made her tear up again. He was the little boy all alone. She tried to hold back, but couldn't. She wiped a tear before she could continued. "Honey," she said. "That's not true. You were taken from your mother when you were born."

He looked at her puzzled. "Why didn't she look for me?" the boy asked.

"Honey," she began. "She's was told you were gone."

"Dead?" he asked.

"Yes," she said as a tear found the corner of her eye. She grabbed his small pale hands. "Zachary," she said and tried to swallow. "I'm your mother." She waited for a response, and it came after a moment of small child contemplation.

"How do you know?" he asked.

That one threw her. "Because I've tried to find you. Ever since I knew you were all right."

"How do I know?" the boy asked.

"Look at my eyes," she said. "What do you see?"

Zachary leaned in. "You have tears like I do," he said smiling. "The other kids always made fun of me because of my eyes," he said. "Did they make fun of you?"

"When I was your age, yes they did," she said wiping another tear. "I have them, my father has them and so did his mother."

Zachary looked into Cooper's eyes as if to see if his were crying, and said, "Are you my father?"

"No," he said. "But your such a big strong boy, any father would be proud to have you as a son." Kathryn mouthed a silent thanks to him.

"Where is my father?" Zachary asked.

That was another tough one. She had lost contact with Zack's father, a man she had only known for a short time. It would be easy for her to say he died so there was some

finality, but she didn't want to start out her relationship with her son with a lie. But she also didn't know how to explain the mistakes adults make to a six year old. There was no chance the father was ever going to play a role in Zack's life. She had heard he was married, had four kids, a house and a dog. And it would be completely unfair to open Zack to the possibility such rejection if the boy pressed to see his father. Her parenting books my frown upon lying to children, but in this case, it was her only choice. "He passed away about two years ago."

Zack looked to Coop, then back to Kathryn. "Do I have to go back to school?"

"Not that one," she said. "But eventually, another one."

"I don't like my school. Major Stearns is mean."

She pulled him close for a hug. "Don't you worry about that, buddy. You never have to see him again." She held him tight, not letting go. "There is something else," she said. "There are some people who are going to be after us.

So I have to leave you with someone safe. Someone who will take care of you for a few days," she said. "Cooper and I have to throw the people off course. We don't want them following you. But as soon as I get back, from then on, it's going you and me."

"What about him?" he said, pointing to Coop. "Is he

coming back with you?"

"Coop has been very helpful in finding you," she said, dodging the question, as well as her feelings. "We owe a lot to him," she said and looked over to Coop, lobbing the ball into his court.

"I like him," Zachary said. "One hadasho gabareech par ruskie."

Coop smiled. "You speak Russian well too, Zachary." He mussed the boy's tow-head. "I'll be around to help for a little while," he said. "Then we'll see," Coop diverted his eyes to Kathryn, lobbing the ball right back.

"I think it's time we get back on the road," Kathryn said.

"You're right," Coop said standing. "We've got a lot of ground to cover. And I've got to find a phone."

"We're burning daylight," the boy said, looking to Coop for approval.

"We sure are, Harley man," Coop said and mussed the boy's head again. "But this time, keep your mouth closed and you won't get so many bugs in it. And don't forget to wave at all the other bikers. Even the imports."

"Yes, sir," the boy said.

* * *

"Fucking geedunk state. Nothing here but goddamn cactus, sand, and...", Mallory looked at the landscape,

hoping to find something to liven up his trip to the Grand Canyon. "More goddamn cactus and sand." He eyed the speedometer. He was topping a hundred. Though the mine had only blown out the left rear tire, the car only had one of those geedunk small spares. And the fucking geedunk spare detracted from the Lincoln's elegance, grace, and power.

The sign said he had eighty miles to the Grand Canyon so he popped in a Tony Bennett CD and sang along. Hearing himself sing always put him at ease. He eyed the corner of the rearview from time to time as he belted out the big notes, one time almost drifting off the side of the road.

Chapter 31

Coop used the small blade of his Swiss Army knife to scrape the road dirt trapped beneath his nails as he waited for his call to go through. They had only been on the road an hour when he had found a gas station, and now Kathryn and Zachary were using the bathroom again, as he waited for Spot to pick up the phone.

"Lo," Spot grumbled into the phone.

"Wake up you lazy bastard," Coop said. It felt good to talk to someone from home.

"Coop? That you? I thought you had fallen off the edge of the canyon, man. Where've you been?"

"I fill you in later. Things are getting a bit hectic. I need you to do me a favor. There's an aluminum case upstairs in my office. Send it to me."

"Ft. Knox is locked, Coop. I can't get in there."

"Punch 62345 into the keypad. Send it to the Mail Boxes Etc in Grand Canyon. Tell them to hold it for me. Use my Fed Ex number and overnight it."

"Roger that," Spot replied.

"Now," Coop said, able to relax somewhat. "How's the cat?"

"Sorry, man. She hasn't turned up yet."

"Have you been putting food out?"

There was a pause on the other end. "Well, yeah. I guess."

"What do you mean, you guess? Either you have or you haven't. Which is it?"

"I put some out the first week, but she never came around. I told you that."

"Have you put any out since?"

"No."

"Jesus, Spot," he said. "I'll get Anna to take care of it."

There was another pause, a little longer than the first. "That's going to be kind of hard, Coop," Spot said.

"She caught me with Susan Chang. Anna was so mad she threw grits on me and stormed out the door. I think she went home to Hungary. Nobody's seen her since." His voice dropped to almost a whisper. "Man, I miss her so bad. I don't know what to do."

"Hang in there, Spot. She'll turn up."

"I hope so. But if she doesn't, I'm going to do exactly what you did."

"What's that?" Coop asked.

"Swear off girls. From now on, man, just like you, I'm swearing off girls."

He looked over to Kathryn walking back to the bike with her son. She gave him a wave and a wink, almost as if she were listening to the conversation, trying to torment him.

"I said that?" Coop asked. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. At the bar. Just before you took off."

"I'm having a hard time remembering that," Coop said.

"Look, I'd better go."

"I'll send the package out today," Spot said. "Don't worry. It'll be there."

"Thanks," Coop said. And just as he hung up the phone, "Spot?"

"Yeah?"

He watched Kathryn, kneeling, talking to Zachary eye to eye. With her hair fixed, and in the flattering light of setting sun, she looked like a cross between a supermodel and a supermom. "Did I swear them off forever?" Coop asked.

"Forever," Spot replied.

"Look. In the future, don't let me make anymore life changing decisions after more than six beers."

"Don't worry, man. I didn't take you seriously," Spot said.

Coop hung up the phone and walked back to his bike.

Kathryn straightened as he approached.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"My cat's starving to death, and Spot's fiancé left him. Other than that, everything's fine."

"Spot? That's an odd name. How'd he get it?"

Coop looked at the boy then to Kathryn. "I'll tell you later." He looked at the setting sun. "You need to make your call so we can get outta here."

"We're burning daylight," Zachary said.

"I'll just be a minute," she said, leaning down to kiss the boy's cheek. She walked to the phone, and Coop for the first time noticed her walk away. She had slim, well shaped hips, and he wondered what her calves looked like. Calves make the legs. A perfect set of calves could...He felt a tug on his jacket and looked down.

"Yes?" he said.

"Where are we going from here?" the boy asked.

"Your mom is getting directions," he said, running an open hand against the back of the boy's head where his military cut was the shortest, feeling the bristles ping against his palm. It was one of the best parts of a crewcut. "How are you feeling about all this?" Coop said.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"This adjustment."

The boy shuffled his feet. "All right, I guess. I

think it will be fun to have a mom. None of my other friends do," the boy said. "Do you?"

Coop shook his head.

"Where's your mom?"

"I never had one."

"You can borrow mine," he said as if it were done every day.

"Thanks," Coop said. He might just take the kid up on his offer.

"What about your dad?"

Coop shrugged.

"I don't have a dad either. I have a mother, but not a father. What do fathers do?" Zachary asked.

Coop watched Kathryn on the phone. She was writing direction on a piece of paper, and intermittently shaking the ink to the bottom of the pen. "Fathers throw the ball with you. They teach you to run faster. They help you build things."

"Like a coach?"

"Yes. But much more. They also influence how you grow up, and how you treat others. They teach you discipline, respect, and honor."

"I learned all that in school."

"I'm sure you did. But it's different coming from a father. Fathers will help you shape your life, shape who

you are."

The boy was silent, off in thought for a few moments, then said, "I wish I had a father."

"I know how you feel," Coop said. Coop looked up and saw Kathryn coming back from the phone, kicking up small tufts of sand as she walked--skipped, actually. She was smiling. "What are you so happy about?" Coop said.

"It's all set. We should be there in an hour."

"Where?"

She handed him her chicken scratch directions and said, "I don't have a clue. Maybe you can figure it out."

* * *

She was right. It took just over an hour to get to the drop off. A light blue van waited at the intersection in the middle of the desert. There were no cars, no buildings, no phones. Just a van. And now a motorcycle.

Coop stopped the bike 100 yards from the van and left the engine idling. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he said over his shoulder.

She nodded. "These people helped me get this far. I can't turn back now. It's the only safe thing to do."

"Can't you go with them?" Coop said.

"Not yet," she said, as Coop turned off the bike, leaving the headlight shining in the falling evening. Coop lifted Zachary down, and felt Kathryn get off.

"I have to lead them away from Zack. They'll follow us," she said, "thinking we still have him. And I'll catch up with Zack in a few days." She grabbed her son's small hand. "It's time to go, Zack," she said. "Say goodbye to Coop."

"Goodbye, sir," he said, shaking his hand free from his mom's grip and offering it to Coop.

"Goodbye, Zachary," he said taking the hand. The boy's firm handshake showed promise.

"I wish I had a father just like you," Zachary said.

He had no idea what to say, but the boy waited for a response. Finally, Coop said, "And I wish I had a son just like you." Coop leaned over and hugged him.

Coop watched as his Chief's fan and Harley man strode the dirt road to the van. Kathryn knelt, gave the boy a long hug, then stood. The sliding door of the van opened, and the boy turned around. He looked at the van, then to his mother, then to van, then jumped into his mother's arms. Kathryn held tight. Finally the mother let go, and the boy climbed into the van and waved goodbye.

The door slid shut, the engine started, and the van slipped past him on the left, leaving a small trail of dust in the red glare of the taillights. Kathryn stood where she left her son, watching the van turn onto the main road. Coop swung his leg over the bike and walked to her.

She watched through tears, as the van wound through the desert roads, fading in the darkness. Coop wrapped his arms around her, and Kathryn responded, holding tightly, crying into his chest. He stroked her soft hair. "Everything is going to be all right," he said.

"I know," she said between sniffles. "I just can't help it. I don't know whether I'm sad or happy. I can't believe it's really happened, and that I've gone five years without him."

"You've got a lifetime ahead of you now."

"I know, but I feel like I've missed so much," she said.

"You have," he said. "You missed dirty diapers and three a.m. feedings. You missed the terrible two's. You missed signing him up years in advanced for some pretentious preschool."

She managed a snuffle-laugh. "Very funny," she said, looking up at him, still in his arms, this time not trying to pull away. Her lips were inches from his.

In the light from the bike, he could see the splash of black in her eyes, the delicate lines in her face, the fullness of her lips. She felt right against him as if she were an a vital appendage or external organ he had been missing. They fit together like a puzzle. Every other woman he had been with had been either too tall, too short,

too bony. Kathryn was the right size, right shape, right mind. But he remembered the promise Spot was so kind to remind him of--a six beer promise. But six beer promises don't count.

Coop cradled her face in his hands. Her cheeks were wet from the tears. He lifted her chin slightly, leaned and met her lips. She responded delicately at first, then fell into her passion. Gabrielle had never kissed him so fully and so intensely. He hadn't been kissed like that in...Hell, he'd never been kissed like that. The motions had been there before, but he'd never had the tingling down the spine, the sensation shooting off in a hundred directions, following some forgotten nerve pathways that led to parts of him that had, until that moment, never been stimulated.

A coyote howled nearby, and Kathryn stiffened, breaking off the kiss. "What was that?"

Coop still leaning, his eyes still halfway closed, said, "A coyote." He pulled her back into his arms. "Now, where were we?"

She spoke in a playfully romantic voice. "I think we were about to--," The coyote howled again, and Kathryn broke free. "It sounds so close."

"Oh they're far away," Coop tried. "Far far away. The sound carries out here in the desert. Didn't you know

that?"

"No. I didn't," she said just as the coyote howled again. This time another joined him in his serenade to the moon. "There's two of them," she shrieked, frightened as if she had just seen a couple of Cujos circling. "Can we go?" she asked. "I'm getting a little scared."

"They're just scavengers. Like buzzards with four legs. They're not going to bother you."

"I don't care," she said flatly. "They're scaring me. They sound like they're everywhere."

He took her by the hand and led her through the imaginary packs of wild dogs to the bike. "C'mon," he said. "It's been a long day. We've got another hour to go before we stop for the night."

"Are there going to be coyotes?"

"I hope not," he said and started the bike. He didn't want any interruptions.

* * *

Coop found a coyote free campsite just where the man at the gas station ten miles back told him he would.

"Are there coyotes at this place?" Coop had asked when had gone inside to pay for the gas.

"There's thousands of them," the man had said. "They're everywhere. Hell, you can't walk ten feet without seeing coyote around here."

"But she," Coop began to explain, pointing over his shoulder to Kathryn outside at the bike, "she gets a little nervous."

"Hell, they ain't gonna bother nobody. They eat the dead stuff. Like roadkill. Cats, dogs, stuff like that," he said and looked past Coop as if something caught his eye.

The bell over the door clanged and the man continued, "I'm telling you, mister, there ain't no coyotes 'round here. I don't care what you think you heard. They ain't no coyotes!

Been living here for seventy two years and never seen no coyotes. They been dead for over a hundred years. See that picture over there on the wall? That's my grandfather. Those is coyotes he killed. The last five left in these parts."

"Then what's all that howling?" Kathryn said.

"Howling?" the man asked as a coyote just outside the back door wailed. "What howling?" The man thought for a minute, then said, "You must mean the when the wind blows through the mesquite trees. It makes an awful howling sound, like the coyotes used to make."

"Mesquite trees?" Kathryn asked.

"You know. Like what they cook food over," the man said. "Everybody cooks with Mesquite 'round here. Have you ever had a thick steak cook slowly over a Mesquite fire?"

"Once, I think," Kathryn said.

"It's the only way to cook," he said.

"So there's no coyotes?" she asked.

"None," he said.

"At all?" she asked.

"Coyote gone," the man said. "Bye bye." He reached behind the counter into the long cooler and took out three Cokes. "Soda pop?" the man offered. They all took one, and the man said, "So you kids on your honeymoon?"

"We're not married," Kathryn said.

"Not married? Living in sin, then?" he said sipping his Coke.

"No," Coop said.

"Boyfriend-girlfriend?" the man asked.

"Nope," Kathryn said.

"That's odd," the old guy said. "You two look like you're together."

Coop didn't quite know how to respond. Kathryn wasn't saying anything either.

"Not like this other couple in here earlier," he continued. "Ohhh, she was yelling at him something fierce, and he came in mumbling something foreign."

"Foreign?" Coop asked. "What do you mean?"

"You know, like from another country."

"I know that. I mean what did it sound like. Were they Japanese, Chinese, Russian?"

"He wasn't a jap, or chinaman. He looked...you know foreign. Like from Europe."

"What about her?"

"I don't know. She did most of her yelling from the van. I didn't see her much." The man shifted his stance and raised an eyebrow. "Why all the interest in these people?"

"You brought them up," Coop retorted.

"Sure I did. But you's the one asking all the questions. Now what's going on?"

Coop looked him straight in the eye and said, "You fought in the big war didn't you?"

"Sure did."

"You're a patriot. Right?"

"Damn right," he said.

"I guess I can trust you then." Coop looked around the room to see if any unauthorized personnel were listening in.

"They're communists, sir," he said in a very serious tone.

"And we've been sent by the federal government to track them down. Do you know where they were headed."

"No. They didn't say."

"What'd they buy?" Coop said.

"Let's see," he said, looking around the store. "Gas. A couple of soda pops. A bag of Cheetos--baked, not fried. And a throw away camera."

"And you never saw the girl?"

"No. She stayed in the van. Didn't even get out to pee," he said, then looked to Kathryn. "Sorry, mam."

"Thank you, sir," Coop said. "Again, you've done your country proud."

Now in the coyote-free camp site, Coop lay next to Kathryn, propped up on an elbow. A zillion stars looked down upon them, reminding Coop of the bioluminescence in the night waters of the gulf. The wind through the mesquite eventually stopped, and there was only the silence of the sage rustling. The air was more relaxed. Passion had given way to reflection.

"Did that sound like your guy?"

"Dmitri?" he said. "It's him."

"But I thought you--"

"He must've been wearing a vest," Coop said.

"Was that guy talking about his wife?"

"Chang," he said. "Turns out, I've been set up. She's been watching me for about six months. They've known exactly where I've been and exactly where I'm going. Only Chang and Spot knew that."

"Do you think they know where we are now?"

"No. They couldn't find us here," he said. "We took so many back roads to get here and I made sure no one was following us."

"What about the cops?"

"Why would the cops be after us?"

"You killed the Major."

"I didn't kill him," Coop said. "I just cut off his air until he passed out. When I felt him go limp, I fired the gun into the wall just to scare the kids."

Kathryn lay on her back far enough away, but not too far. Coop felt her stray foot against his. Hotels had become a luxurious risk they couldn't afford to take. A thick ground-cloth and a blanket of stars were all they had, and she didn't seem to mind. She hadn't complained once, and he liked that.

"So the Major's alive?"

"He's fine," Coop said and moved a little closer to her. "Are you going to tell me why they had your son?"

She rolled up to an elbow to face him. "You have to trust me. I can't tell you now," she said, looking through him. "Maybe in a year or two. But not now."

This was not the way he usually worked. But something inside told him she needed his kind of help on her terms. So far, they'd only withdrawn her boy from school. And since the Major was the aggressor, Coop was justified in pulling the weapon. There was one question that lingered in Coop's mind, but she wouldn't tell him how the boy came to be at the school. Over all the years, during the many

missions, he had learned that trust is an honor bestowed upon someone. Most times trust is earned, but sometimes, like a battlefield commission, trust is thrust upon person.

Coop knew who to trust and how to trust. He trusted Kathryn and he trusted Kathryn's reasons for not telling him everything. His instincts told him he was right. And his instincts had kept him alive for thirty five years. Now, however, his instincts were screaming at him about Dmitri.

"So," Kathryn said, scooting closer to him. "You know Dmitri's wife?"

"Dr. Susan Chang," he said. It still didn't seem to make sense. But it had to be her.

"Are you positive?" she asked.

"It all adds up." he said. "Spot's the only one who knew where I was heading. And Chang was always asking for updates about my trip. Hell, she even got me to send her a postcard."

"Were you two..?"

Coop laughed and said, "I'm not as easy as I look, you know."

"You're not?" she said, inching even closer. "That's a shame." She reached up for his face, sliding her hand against his chin. "I like the way you chin smiles. It always makes you look happy."

"I've had reason to be lately," he said.

"Lately?" she said, her finger running the outline of his face. "How so?"

"I'm enjoying the trip," he said in soft voice. "You know, the scenery, the attractions." He found her hip and pulled her closer.

"Me too," she said. "Especially the attractions," she said and leaned to meet his lips.

Chapter 32

Beckett sat in the wing chair looking at his watch. He had been sitting there for three hours listening to the Senator ramble on about the hearings. Beckett had never seen him this nervous before. The hearings started tomorrow at nine, and McAlpin, had to listen to accusations levied against him by General Wright and Senator Varela on issues concerning Operation Prodigy.

"What the hell did you find out on that punk Senator?"

"Nothing, sir. Guy's a fucking Boy Scout."

"For Christ sake, Beckett, the man's got to have some kind of dirt," the Senator said. "Couldn't you find somebody who's seen him do drugs or something?"

Beckett looked the rug and shook his head. He noticed a small hole in the rug where the Senator had tried to fix an errant thread. "No sir. Nothing."

"What about that damn talk show host. I'll bet he's got something up his sleeve. I know it," the Senator said.

"What could he have?" Beckett said. "We've got the

files she stole from the clinic. The girl's not going to make it--not with Mallory on the job. And aside from someone from the project strolling down the aisle, claiming they were part of it, we're safe. They can't implicate you on hearsay," Beckett said standing, trying to get the blood flowing to his bottom. "They don't have a chance in hell," he said.

"General Wright knows a lot more than he's letting on, son," McAlpin said, his hands in prayer, his chins resting on his thumbs. "I can feel it. And I think that fine gentleman from Florida knows it. That's why he's pushing for a full senate hearing."

"It's not going to happen, Senator. This thing will be over and done with in a week, and everything will be back to normal."

"It better be, Beckett. Because if I go down, you know whose coming along for the ride."

Chapter 33

The morning sun peeked at the horizon as if trying to decide to rise or sleep in. The dim light was enough to wake up Cooper, and as his eyes slowly opened, he could see the last few stars to the west. The Pleiades were nowhere in sight. Kathryn lay against him, her knee resting on his hip, her head cradled in his arm. The sleeping bag he had put over her had been tossed aside in her restless sleep. As he slipped away from her, he pulled the bag back onto her bare shoulders.

He fished around the daypack for a clean underwear and fresh jeans, and opened the bottle of water. After dabbing deodorant, brushing his teeth, and washing his face, he slipped on a clean shirt. It smelled clean anyway.

He dried his face, lowered the towel from his eyes and turned around to where he had been sleeping. Twenty feet past the ground cloth, twenty feet from where Kathryn lay curled up under the sleeping bag, was the edge of the earth.

The sun rose above the rim, calling the long, deep

shadows home from the west side of the canyon. In the darkness, he had no idea how close they were to the rim of the Canyon. The man at the store said they would be close, but Coop had no idea he had meant this close. Coop walked over to the edge and looked down.

"I never realized how breathtaking this was," Kathryn said. Coop hadn't heard her approach. She was wearing one of his shirts. She wrapped her arms around him as he turned to her. "Makes you wish you had a bigger vocabulary just so you could describe it."

He leaned in for a good morning kiss. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Contented," she said smiling. "How about you?"

He laughed and said, "I wish I had a bigger vocabulary to describe it." He went to the bike and took a Diet Coke from the bag of supplies he had bought the night before from the old man, and offered it to her. "I know it's not coffee, but it might do for awhile."

"It'll do fine," she said.

"There's also some bottled water if you want to wash up." He unfastened the golf club, and dug a bag of balls from his day pack. He took a few practice swings with the Calloway Titanium Big Bertha driver.

"Is that why you so desperately had to come to the Grand Canyon?"

"Every man's got to have a dream," he said and pushed a tee into the dirt. "The Mayan warriors used to take a crooked stick and climb to the top of their pyramids and hit rocks to drive away the evil spirits."

"Is that what you're trying to do?"

Coop shrugged. "Maybe."

"I'm not one of your spirits, am I?" she asked.

"Not yet," he said and placed a ball on the tee, thought for a second, then tossed the ball to her. "Here. That one's you. If you make the transition to the evil spirit level, I'll ask for it back." Coop set another Titleist on the tee.

"Which one is that?" she asked.

"We'll call him Dmitri," he said. "And we're going to knock the shit out of him." Coop brought the club back, keeping his left arm straight, then made contact with the ball, launching Dmitri into the air a thousand yards. Coop watched as long as he could keep his eye on it. It rose for about twelve seconds, then started its descent into the canyon below, falling another twenty seconds before it drifted out of sight. He set up another. "You want to try one?" he asked. "It's very therapeutic."

"No thanks. All my problems have been solved."

The first of the sight-seeing helicopters approached as he angled the next one to the right, falling short behind a

boulder the size of a car.

"The helicopter distracted you," Kathryn said. "Try it again."

When the chopper passed, Coop set Gabrielle on the tee and sent her into the stratosphere, giving it a record hang time of 45 seconds before she flew out of sight.

"Get the binoculars," Kathryn shouted. "I think it landed on the other side."

Coop hit almost a dozen more before stopping. He felt he was holding her from her son, so he left the last three balls for another time. He noticed she was already dressed and had their little campsite packed. "I'll get the bike ready and we'll get out of here," he said. "We've got another long day ahead."

"Hit the rest of your balls," she said. "This is what you came here for."

"You sure?"

"Positive," she replied.

Coop wasted no time setting up another ball. A helicopter was touring the middle of the canyon. "Watch this," he said and swung, driving the ball across the canyon toward the helicopter. They watched as ball fell out of range. "Think I hit them?"

"You nailed it, Coop. I'm surprised they're not bailing out." She said it as if she were pretending to be

his biggest fan. Coop didn't mind her tone.

He placed another ball on the tee. "Except for yours, this is the last one."

"Last evil spirit or last ball?" she asked.

"Last ball," he said. "Far too many spirits for one morning."

"Better make it a good one," Kathryn said. "Send it across."

Coop reared back, swung and hit the ball harder than any of the others. No doubt about it; this one was going to the other side. It was the best he had ever hit a ball. It felt so right, as if it could sail into Mexico. But just as he found it and focused on the white ball, it dropped. It just dropped straight down as if something was pulling it to the floor below, or as if a strong wind came from above was pushing it down, defying all laws of physics.

Then a muffled sound came from the edge of the canyon, and before it register with Coop, a helicopter lifted above the rim. A man with long blonde hair stepped out onto the rail and began spraying the ground with automatic weapon fire.

Coop dove onto Kathryn, knocking her to the ground. He dragged her to the other side of the bike, letting go of her hand long enough to snatch his daypack. He grabbed her and darted behind a boulder and began firing. But Kathryn lost

her grip and fell by the bike.

Coop first went for the shooter to shake him up, and when the guy ducked inside the chopper, he took aim at the pilot and squeezed off five rounds. Kathryn still lay prone by the bike, eyes closed, hands over her ears.

"Jesus, Kathryn," Coop yelled, as he changed clips. "Not behind the bike!"

"I'm not moving," she yelled back.

"Get the hell away from the bike!" he said and darted out, snatched her and drug her to the safety of the rock, and continued firing. "Never take cover behind a Harley," he said. "Never."

He had only brought four clips and was on his second one when he caught the shooter in the arm. The blonde ducked into chopper again, and Coop fired off four quick rounds into the glass in front of the pilot. One of them must have struck because the helicopter began to auto rotate. Coop instinctively pulled Kathryn from the ground and almost threw her on the bike. The Harley started without problem, and they escaped just as the helicopter spun to the ground. A few seconds later, the explosion almost knocked them off the bike.

* * *

"Fucking geedunk Bell helicopters," Mallory said, pushing himself off the ground, the wreckage in flames

behind him. He found his weapon just at the edge of the wreckage. The pilot lay in a heap ten yards away. "Hey, you alive?" Mallory called. "Hey, Steve fucking Canyon," he said walking over, feeling his own flesh wound. It was at the base of the deltoid and would heal in a few days. Fortunately, it was his left arm, so drinking a beer wouldn't be hampered. He had been shot before, and this one was no big deal. "I'm talking to you," he said to the lump of pilot. He nudged him with his foot but there was no response. "Fucking geedunk local pilot," he said. "Serves you right. You can't even take a hit, you fucking geedunk mother fucker." He rolled him over, and just to the left of center of the pilot's forehead was a hole. "Nice shot," Mallory said. "I like this guy, whoever the hell he is."

He policed the site the best he could for any evidence linking him to the wreckage and got his bearings. He was ten miles east from the geedunk's helo pad, and it was a nice morning for a run, so he shouldered his weapon and lighted out for the cool air conditioned comfort of his rented Lincoln.

As he ran, he went over everything that had just happened. The girl's face he knew. But the guy's he wasn't sure. It was as if he had seen him before but couldn't remember where. He was out of context. And he was too far away to I.D.. Something about him was familiar, he just

couldn't put his finger on it. He searched his memory, closing his eyes from time to time to concentrate. Closing his eyes until he tripped and fell to the ground.

"Geedunk fucking rock," he said the melon size boulder as he picked himself up.

* * *

Coop cruised through the strip mall parking lot, checking the front and back before going into the Mailboxes Etc. It was still early, and he doubted his package had arrived. But he checked anyway.

"Not here," the teenage clerk said.

"What about Fed Ex? They delivered anything yet?"

"Yeah. Everything's here."

"Shit," Coop said, pounding the counter. "I told him to send it Fed Ex. Not UPS."

"What a dipshit," the clerk said. "UPS doesn't get here until two. Sometimes later. Nobody sends anything overnight UPS unless they want it in a week."

"I'll come back for it," Coop said.

"You do that," the clerk said.

Kathryn was still sitting on the bike when he returned. "Think it's safe to eat?" she asked.

Coop looked around the parking lot, pretending not to see the diner directly in front of him with the big neon sign advertising breakfast 24 hours a day. He was starving

but there was no time for food. No time for waitresses. No time for crowds. "I don't see one," he said. "Better move on." And he got back on the bike.

"What about that place right over there," she said.

"Where?"

"There," she said, pointing frantically.

The persuasive smell of bacon wafted toward him on the light breeze. Maybe he shouldn't be so hasty. After all, he did have to wait for the package. And he bet if they sat in the back, by an exit door, they'd be safe. And his stomach was growling to be fed.

They placed their orders with the big-haired waitress, and over coffee he said, "I think I know that guy back there."

"Who is he?" she said, stirring in two sugars.

"I don't know. I could have sworn I've seen him somewhere before. But he was so far away, I just couldn't tell."

"Concentrate. You'll figure it out." She clinked her spoon against her mug. "Do you think he made it?"

"Doubt it," he said. "He may have survived the landing, but he couldn't have survived the explosion."

"Do you think they'll send out someone else?" she asked.

In a low, apologetic tone, he said, "Yeah. I'm sure

they will."

"Is it ever going to stop?" she whispered.

"I don't know," he said. "Not until one of you are dead."

"What do you mean?"

"It probably won't stop until either you, or whoever is sending these guys after you, is dead."

She stirred her coffee again. It must help her relax because she stirred it for five minutes. Stirring and clinking. Stirring and clinking. "So those are my options?" she asked.

"So far." Coop said and sipped his coffee.

Chapter 34

The Senator from Wyoming called the hearing to order as Beckett took his seat behind the Senator McAlpin. The room was packed with reporters, all there to meek out what little story there would be, hoping to take the tiny sound bites and turn them into tomorrow's headlines. Varela, the squinty eyed Senator from Florida, was four seats to the McAlpin's right.

"I would like to thank you all for coming this morning. It is now ten o'clock and time to begin the hearings," Senator Cranelly said. "In question today are General Wright's and Senator Varela's allegations of recruitment practices by the Intelligence Community, along with numerous infringements upon the constitution as well as their respective charters. It will be our task, gentleman, to decide if any investigation into recruitment practices is necessary and if so, to execute those investigations."

"Excuse me, Senator," McAlpin said.

"The floor recognizes the fine gentleman from North

Carolina," Cranelly said.

"What proof do we have that this fine gentleman from Arizona is being forthright with this body of legislators? If, after all, he presents only hearsay and fabrication, what measures do we have to challenge him?"

Cranelly at the podium said, "You bring up an important point, sir." He addressed the committee. "Gentleman, this is not a trial. It is our responsibility to decide if there is enough evidence to determine to proceed further into these allegations. If, after hearing all the testimony, we decide more inquiry is warranted, we will proceed. Heaven help any man who come here today bearing false witness." Cranelly summoned the first witness.

General Wright took his seat at the long table before the committee. He was a burly man and looked younger than his voice made him sound. His knuckles were wide, his forearms thick.

"General Wright," Varela began after being recognized by Cranelly. "You were in the military. Correct?"

"Yes sir. I served in the Special Forces during Viet Nam, Grenada, the Gulf War, and just about every little skirmish in between."

"You've been decorated numerous times. Correct?"

"Purple Heart. Silver Star."

"And the Congressional Medal of Honor. Correct?"

Beckett squirmed in his seat. Varela was making out Wright to be some kind of hero.

"Yes sir," the General said.

"Now, during your career you had an opportunity to work with several branches of the intelligence communities. Correct?"

"Yes sir. I've worked with the CIA, NSA, DIA, FBI, OSI, NSI, and on some occasions with The Roamers."

"And please tell us just what is a Roamer."

"A Roamer is an operative who is well versed in all aspects of all the intelligence branches. They are not a part of any organized agency, but in effect are part of all of them."

"How does one become a Roamer," the Senator asked.

"They are selected at birth. Usually taken from from single mothers, preferably college graduates with higher than normal IQs."

"How do they acquire the babies? Adopt them?"

"No sir. They are taken from the mothers at birth. The mothers are told that the baby was stillborn."

"Do you have any names of these children? Or their mothers?"

"No sir. Not at this time," Wright said.

Beckett leaned into McAlpin's ear. "Goddamn right he doesn't."

"Then why are we all here today?" McAlpin said to the body. "This hearing is a complete waste of tax payers hard earned money. Jesus Christ, for what it cost us to meet here today, we could have built a home for a welfare mother, paid for her to move in, and bought her a year's worth of groceries."

"Senator McAlpin," Cranelly said removing his glasses and rubbing his tired eyes. "Please try to contain yourself. As a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, you need to respect the fortitude of General Wright in wanting to pursue this matter."

"I just think that it's ludicrous that a retired General can walk in here, demand a committee meeting and have diarrhea of the mouth, spewing nothing but lies and hate, just as he does on his radio show." He looked to the General and said, "What's wrong with polluting the minds of everyday America, General? Is that not enough? You now have to pollute my mind and the minds of my esteemed colleagues? Tell me, General, when will we get to hear about the black helicopters, the UFOs, or Operation Garden Plot?"

"What I say is the truth," the General responded. "And you should know, sir."

"What do you mean I should know?" McAlpin said.

Beckett leaned into McAlpin's ear again and suggested

that he calm down.

"You should know sir, because you have been the head of this project since its inception. Operation Prodigy, you call it."

"That's nonsense," the Senator blurted. "What proof do you have?"

"Sir, I have overwhelming proof. Sir, I have proof that you personally own several clinics across America, mostly located in rural towns, that engage in the practice of kidnaping infants. I will also show proof, sir, that the number of stillborn babies to single mothers is twelve times higher in your clinics than the national average. I also have an eyewitness that can identify the staff at one of your clinics taking parting in a baby snatching operation. And if that's not enough, sir, I'll soon have a list of every child that entered the program, along with the name of his biological mother, and her last known address." The General cleared his throat in the silence of the room and added, "I've got you by the gonadal clef, sir. And you're going to be squirming to get away."

Beckett thought the room would erupt, but no one said a word. No gasping, no groaning. Nothing. Just silence. "He's bluffing, sir," he whispered. "We've intercepted all of that." He poured his boss a tall glass of water from the stainless pitcher, and took his seat behind the Senator just

as Varela spoke.

"You say you have an eyewitness," Varela said.

"Correct?"

"Yes sir. A physician from their clinic in Tennessee."

"May we talk to him," Varela said and called Dr. Langston to the table.

The young black physician stood in the rear of the room and walked down to the table and took his seat next to Wright. He stated his name for the record.

"Dr. Langston," Varela began. "You have personal account of the alleged kidnaping from the clinic where you work?"

"Used to work, sir," the doctor said.

Beckett leaned and whispered, "'Cause I had his black ass fired, sir."

"That's my boy," the Senator whispered back.

"You were fired. Correct?" the Florida Senator said.

"Yes. I was fired after I broke up a fight between a patient and the head nurse, Nurse Mothersole."

"Tell the committee of highly regarded body of legislative members just what happened."

"A young woman was trying to leave when Mothersole went berserk. She tackled the woman and started beating her. I had to pull her off."

McAlpin spoke. "But wasn't the, quote, patient

actually stealing narcotics from the clinic? Isn't that why Nurse Mothersole tried to stop her?"

"I don't know that she was stealing narcotics. We never called the police. We never filed with the DEA. We never followed any of the required procedures."

"Why not?" Varela asked.

"We were told not to," he said. "Nurse Mothersole said she would handle everything."

"So then you were terminated. Correct?"

"Correct," Langston said.

Chapter 35

Coop kept a periodic eye on the TV on the far wall while he inhaled his breakfast. The coffee was strong, the bacon crisp, and the eggs just wet enough. Some kind of hearings were being shown on CSPAN, and Coop thought he recognized one of the Senators, but didn't give it much thought. It seemed to be his day for faint remembrances.

"I've got to mail all those tapes I've been making," he said. "They're starting to pile up."

"How is the book coming along?" she said.

"I don't know," he said. "I've got some thoughts recorded." He took in shovelful of eggs."

"It's a good thing you weren't hungry," she said, pushing her plate toward him.

"You going to eat that?" he said, setting his sights on her biscuits. As he was about to take one, a blonde figure caught his eye. He was at the front door looking around the dining room as if he was searching for a table. "Don't turn around," Coop said without moving his lips. The man was

dressed all in black and looked like he had just run a marathon. His head was soaked with sweat, his face was dirty, and blood soaked through his shirt at his shoulder. His clothes were covered in dust.

"When I say to, crawl under the table." Coop waited for the man to look the other way. "Now," he whispered, and she did as she was told just as the man looked over. Coop stacked her plate on his, dumped her coffee in his, setting her cup on the seat next to him. He straightened the table making it look like only he sat there.

The man began to walk toward Coop, and Coop slipped the Browning from behind his waist. He lay it in his lap under a napkin, finger guarding the trigger. The exit door and the men's room were behind him. If he had to shoot, it would be an easy escape. But he was tired, he wanted to stay around for one more cup of coffee and maybe another order of bacon. He just didn't feel like leaving yet.

As the man approached, Coop tried to recall where he had seen him. He had a face that millions of people have. Nothing distinguishing, no strong features except for his long hair. He was in good shape, and though not as tall as Coop, he was a bit broader. The man's boot heels knocked against the hardwood floor, growing louder and louder as he neared, still scanning the room, paying particular attention to the couples having breakfast.

Coop waited for him to make the first move. Chances were good that he may not even be recognized. Still, Coop braced himself, ready to fire if forced to. The man kept walking. He was three tables away. Now two. When he got to Coop's, Coop was eating with his left hand, right hand in his lap.

Suddenly, the man slid into Coop's booth, smelling like a mix between the desert and B.O., and keeping his hands palm down on the table in plain sight as if posing no threat. "You know, I just ran ten miles through the desert," he said. "You know why? Some geedunk sharpshooter felt it necessary to shoot my chopper out of the sky. Any idea why someone would want to do that?" When Coop didn't respond, the man continued. "I kind of got an idea, but I'm not sure how it all fits together. Maybe you can help me out, Coop."

Geedunk was a word he hadn't heard since Liberia. A sniper Coop had partnered with on a mission had used that word every chance he had. It was always geedunk this. Geedunk that. But it couldn't be the same guy. And even if it was, happy reunions aside, he was still trying to kill them. Coop held the weapon steady. "How do you know me?" Coop said.

"Africa. You carried my ass out of a tower and across ten miles of the shittiest country I had ever been shot in."

Coop remembered the scene. He had been assigned to break in a FNG on a live mission. It was his first FNG, and the FNG's first live mission. The guy ended up taking a round in the neck, and Coop had to carry him down the stairs of a clock tower, and out of the city, to the evac site ten miles away. Liberia was nine years ago, and he hadn't seen, nor heard from the FNG since. The guy was wounded so badly, Coop just figured the guy died. He tried to recall his name.

"Mallory," Mallory said as if he knew what Coop was thinking. "And your Cooper Sumner."

"That's right," Coop said unemotionally. Mallory was a trained murder. There was no trusting him. His loyalty was as strong as his paycheck.

"What are you? Like her personal bodyguard?" he said nodding to Kathryn. Her head popped up next to Coop, her eyes level with the table. "If that's the case, mam," Mallory said, "then you've got the best."

"Why the demotion?" Coop said ignoring Kathryn. "What's she done?"

"Not sure. But she angered some pretty high people. I was sent after her when a couple of jerk-offs couldn't pull their dicks out to pee. Somebody shot the hell out of them. And I'm guessing it was you."

"Who sent them?"

Mallory smiled apologetically and said, "You know I can't tell you that, Coop. I still have my integrity."

"Is it necessary that she be demoted?"

"I don't think it's a national interest thing if that's what you're asking. I think it's more personal. She stole something from a prominent member of our Community and he feels she should pay."

"What'd she steal?"

"Don't know. It could be nudy pictures of the guy who sent me for all I know. I'm just doing what I'm told."

"You know I can't let you do it," Coop said. "I've got you sighted, so if you even start to blink, sixteen rounds will find you so fast you won't have time to finish that blink."

"Look, man," Mallory said, not moving his mouth.

"You've got me wrong. We can work something out."

"What are you talking about?" Coop said.

"I'll tell her she left the country or something. I'll say I couldn't find her."

"Why?"

"I wouldn't be here without you, man. You saved my life. I owe a hell of a lot more to you than them."

Coop knew sincerity was difficult to spot in people like himself and Mallory. They've all been trained to lie so effectively you never can tell until it's too late.

Though he hardly ever used it, the ability to deceive was something that came easy to Coop and, most likely for Mallory. "I don't know that I can trust you, Mallory. But right now, I'm not in the mood to kill anyone today. Of course that could all change very suddenly."

"You're not kidding," Mallory said. "I remember a time when you were the man. You had the reputation of a fucking killing machine. Reckless Disregard for Human Life was your mantra, man. I think they must've sewed that in your underwear as a kid. You were the meanest, quickest, most durable geedunk mother fucker in the Community."

"That was a long time ago, Mallory." He wished Kathryn hadn't heard any of it. It doesn't make for the best of impressions.

"You see, you and I are just alike. Born of the same loins. Raised in the same cave. We both know what it's like to watch a friend die in your arms. Hold it," he said.

"On second thought, you may not. No one ever died when you were on a mission. Did they? No, man, you were blessed. I lost five on one geedunk job. Five geedunk mother fuckers.

One job. That's probably the only difference between you and me. You're blessed, and, oh yeah, I'm still getting paid. You're just a volunteer assassin, helping this lovely lady, this fair damsel in distress. That's the only difference."

Mallory was right. There wasn't a hell of a big difference between the two. Mallory was a killer. And Coop could admit he was too. But the machine had been dormant a long time--a long time until this trip. Then the sound of the first burst of the Uzi back at the diner jump started the machine, and everything fell into place. Heart like a piston pumping, senses keen, brain on a new level of thought process, muscles tighter, reflexes faster. But this time, there was something there that had never been: emotion. And it was a welcomed sign.

Coop pulled the gun from his lap and lay it on the table as a visible threat to Mallory.

Mallory saw the weapon. "Man, don't point that thing at me."

But Coop left the gun trained on Mallory. "So what are you proposing, Mallory? Why shouldn't I maximally demote you now?"

"Why should you? You go your way. I go mine. I tell my employer I finished the job. Life is good."

"What about this little thing called integrity you mentioned earlier?"

"Integrity is something you have when no one is pointing a gun at you," he said.

"Maybe he's telling the truth," Kathryn said.

"I don't think so," Coop replied.

"What if he is? You can't kill him."

Coop didn't need anyone telling him not to kill the guy. His mind was made up. Mallory couldn't be trusted. But Kathryn kept on. "What if he can help us? What if he can help me get out of the country?" She was so naive.

In the half second that Coop turned to tell Kathryn to shut up, he took his eye off Mallory. And in that half second, Mallory swung across the table, connecting with Coop's jaw. The impact knocked his head back and to the side. Mallory snatched the gun, twisting the weapon from Coop's hand.

"Whatever I say now is the truth," Mallory said, alternately pointing the gun at them. "And because no one has a gun to my head, there's no reason to question my integrity." He kept the gun aimed at Kathryn.

Coop and Mallory locked stares, and Coop felt helpless. His options were to toss the table toward Mallory, overpower him, and take the gun. Toss the table, grab Kathryn and run out the back. He didn't think Mallory would cap Kathryn in the diner, but you couldn't predict what a guy like Mallory would do. Tossing the table was going to have to work.

Coop placed his hands on the table's edge, ready to heave, when Mallory did something Coop didn't expect. Mallory, the emotionless killer, suddenly flipped the weapon

so that he was holding it by the barrel, offering it to Coop.

"You see, Coop," he said. "I may be a killer, but I'm also loyal. Nine years ago you saved my life and now I am returning the favor. I consider us even. My debt's paid."

Coop secured the weapon, appraising Mallory and his dust covered clothes, looking for any other guns.

"Here," Mallory said, reaching behind him. "Take this one too." He offered Coop his Glock 17.

Coop took the second gun and said, "I don't know whether to buy you a beer, or shoot you dead."

"I'd prefer the beer," Mallory said.

"And the girl goes?" Coop asked.

"Free as a bird," he said. "I'll say I did it, but she's got to promise to leave the country and never set foot on U.S. soil again."

"I promise," she blurted.

"These people are serious," Mallory said. "I'll give you a couple of days to get things wrapped up before I head back," Mallory said. "Now, how about that beer. I know it's early, but I just ran ten miles through a geedunk fucking desert and I'm thirsty as hell."

There was 24 hour pool hall a few doors down from the shipping store, though it called itself as billiards parlor trying to capture the new breed of upscale pool players. A

fresh faced twenty something girl behind the bar looked as if she had just come on duty. She still smelled of strong perfume, and her clothes were still pressed. "You guys look thirsty?" she said.

Coop ordered a bourbon for Kathryn and a beer for them, and Mallory said he would rack 'em up.

"So I guess you two can relax now," Mallory said, after sinking the four ball. He rotated his bloody shoulder from time to time, loosening it up.

"Yeah," Coop said, thinking about Dmitri, not wanting to give any details to Mallory. He didn't have a need to know. It wasn't his fight.

"Some Russians are after Coop," Kathryn said. "They've already tried to kill him twice." She meant well. "They still might be around."

"Russians? No shit?" he said, just missing the six ball in the corner. He took a hit from his beer. "I thought you retired."

"I did," Coop said, scanning the table for a shot.

"Geedunk fucking, grudge holding, ruskies," he said. "Man, I hate them. I once took out four from seven hundred yards. I think I had the third round off before the first one struck. Fuckin' A, it was cool."

Coop sunk the eleven ball. "That's quite an accomplishment," he said, wishing Mallory would shut up.

Kathryn didn't need to hear that kind of talk. And Mallory should know better.

"What are they on your ass for, anyway?"

"I put him away years ago and he's escaped."

"I hate those kind. They're like weeds. You never know where they're going to pop up. You just got to clip 'em when they do." Mallory chalked his cue, as if he knew Coop would miss the shot. "I can help, you know. I've got a couple of days I can stick around."

Coop made the shot. "No thanks. It's not your fight. You've done enough already." He lined up the next shot. "After this beer, we're hitting the road. I've got to get her out of here."

"I've got to learn my Spanish," she said.

"Kathryn," Coop said, setting down the cue stick. "When you're forced to leave a country, that usually means that people are after you. Right?"

"Right," she said.

"Then don't give them any clues about what language your going to learn. It'll make their life so much easier if they can eliminate three quarters of the world."

"That's right, man. But in your case I don't think it's going to matter, 'cause I will have already killed you."

Coop stopped in mid shot. "Shut the hell up, Mallory,"

Coop said. "Don't say shit like that."

"Sorry," Mallory said. "That didn't come out the way I meant it. Sometimes I speak before I think."

Coop finished his beer and checked his watch. It was only eleven. He had three more hours before the damn package arrived, but thought he would check anyway. It was time for him and Kathryn to get on the road.

"Kathryn, we need to move on. We'll take one last check on the box, then get out of here."

"You want me to wait while you go check?"

"No. Better come with," Coop said.

"She can stay with me," Mallory said.

"I'll be fine," she said.

If Mallory was going to kill her, he would have done it by now, and the store was only three doors down. "Are you sure?" he asked her.

"I'll show her some of my trick shots," Mallory said.

It was a quick run three doors down. "My package here yet?" Coop asked the clerk. He knew Mallory would have to have something set up long before Coop left in order to whisk her away so fast. Those things take planning. He turned and could still see the black Lincoln.

"Let me check," the clerk said. He scanned the list on his clipboard. "Hmmm. What time did I say UPS gets here?"

"One to two," Coop said. Mallory wouldn't kill her in

the pool hall in plain sight of any witnesses.

"And what time is it now?" the kid asked.

Coop reached over the counter, grabbed the guy by his shirt, and pulled him close. "I don't have time for this. Is it here or isn't it?" He shoved him back, but not too hard. He didn't want to break the kid.

"It's not here," the clerk said, his voice a few octaves higher.

Coop bolted out the door, running hard for the pool hall. He burst through the door, his eyes taking a few moments to adjust to the darkness. He couldn't focus. He couldn't see shit. Everything was black, except for the dim light above the green tables.

"Was it there?" he heard Kathryn ask.

"No," he said, trying not to show how relieved he was that she was all right, and at the same time amazed how stupid he had been. Over the trip, he had grown use to having her around. And tomorrow he had to leave her. He would never see her again. He would only have her smell to remember her by, the look in her eyes when she saw her son for the first time, the lingering kisses as the coyotes howled, and the way she wrapped herself around him on the bike. It was all going to end tomorrow. "I think it's time we go," Coop said. He offered his hand to Mallory, giving back the Glock, then thanked him and wished him luck.

"No problem, man. It's the least I could do for a legend," Mallory said. He hugged Kathryn and whispered a goodbye in her ear. "Good luck, Kathryn," he said as he broke from the hug, giving her some kind of conspiratorial look.

Outside on the bike, the Chief's fan had her helmet on and Coop was fastening his when she said, "Let's try one more time. Maybe it's there."

"I just checked," he said.

"You never know," she said.

He pulled the bike in front of the mail room. A different clerk was behind the desk. "Yes sir. It's right here. It came in first thing this morning," the clerk said. Coop didn't feel like arguing. He just signed for the box, strapped it on the bike. He turned out of the parking lot, leaving the Mallory in the pool hall, as he found the road south.

Chapter 36

Tomorrow she would be out of his life forever, and Coop justified the attraction as just two people caught in a traumatic situation. He kept telling himself they were only two people brought together by a crisis, and his feelings would pass in a couple of days. But he was having a hard time buying into his theory. For whatever reason, he didn't want to leave her just yet. She was officially out of danger. His job was done. It was time to celebrate. A nice, long, slow celebration. The next town was seven miles away, and he had seen a billboard for a steakhouse. They'd have a nice long dinner and leave bright and early the next morning, or maybe sometime around noon.

The Wagon Train steakhouse was dimly lit and decorated with antique wagon wheels and had an "authentic" covered wagon out front. They were seated at an outside table next to little pond where geese paddled in line honking for scraps.

"Are you sure we should do this?" Kathryn said.

"You're in the clear. Why not? Tomorrow you'll be delivered safe and sound."

"What about you? What are you going to do?"

He wanted to say he'd go with her and help her get set up in her new country, but said, "I'll move on. Maybe head up to Washington state. I've never been up the Pacific Coast Highway." But alone on the road was not where he wanted to be. He wanted to be with her. "Maybe I'll just head back to Florida."

"What about," she began, then leaned over and whispered, "the Russians?"

He whispered back, "I'm sure I'll run into them eventually."

"What are you going to do about them?"

"I don't know," he said. But he knew. He just didn't want to tell her. "I think I'll let them buy us dinner to start with," he said taking Dmitri's wallet out of his jacket. "I hear the filet's very good here." He thumbed through the bills. The waitress came. It was a cold Dos Equis for Coop and a bourbon for Kathryn. "Any ideas where you're going to live?" Coop asked. "You've got the whole world at your fingertips."

When the waitress left, Kathryn said, "I haven't given it much thought."

"Well if you do decide, don't tell me. I don't want to

give in to any urge to find you."

She looked at him, scrunching her face, and he realized what he had just said. "You'd look for me?" she asked as if that was the sweetest thing anyone could do.

This moment had to be handled delicately. Although he wanted to give just a hint of how he felt, he didn't want to seem too eager. "Hell, yeah!" he said.

Her face softened as she began to speak. "Coop," she said as tears gathered in her eyes. "I feel like tomorrow's my last day on this earth. I'm leaving everything I've ever thought was important behind for a life with my son. I have no idea where I'm going to live, what I'm going to do, or what kind of mother I'm going to be."

"You're going to be a great mother," he said.

"I'm not sure how."

"Just do what your mother did. You turned out okay."

"My mom left when I was seven."

"Then do what your dad did," Coop said. "He raised a wonderful human being. Not to mention gorgeous, intelligent--"

"Seriously, Coop. This is all so new to me. Nothing I've ever done is as important as raising my son...My son...," she said as if savoring the words. "It sounds so different, but, in a way, so comfortable."

"See," he said. "You're already off to a good start."

Kathryn stirred her bourbon with the tiny straw and drifted off into another world. Coop could only assume she was thinking about life ahead. He knew the the thoughts well. It wasn't that long ago he gave up everything he had ever known, cutting the umbilical cord that had kept him alive for so many years. It was the hardest single thing he'd done until now. Saying goodbye was something he didn't do well. Coop felt the gap between them widen. Last night on the lip of the canyon, she was a different woman. A woman who wanted him. A woman who laughed, or at least smiled at his jokes. A woman that made him feel ten times better than he ever had. But tonight she was putting the distance between them, a distance as wide as the canyon where they had made love. And though he hated it, he knew it was the right thing to do. So he played along, not wanting to put her in an awkward situation.

He would soon get over her the way he had...Gabrielle. It was an old recipe of distance, time, and women. Distance was the main ingredient. There would be plenty of vacationing school teachers ready to lose the thick glasses and the tight ponytails for a vacation romp, hundreds of tan college girls home for the summer, and even a few local non-committing cuties eager to aid in his therapy.

The band came back on stage and began a slow country song. Kathryn reached across the table for his hand, her

long fingers aglow in the soft candle light. "Dance?"

Maybe the gap wasn't so wide, he thought as he led her to the dance floor.

As the Six Shooters strummed through the number, Coop held her close against him, feeling her breasts against his ribs, her head against his chest. "I'm really going to miss you, Kathryn," he said softly, not quite sure if he wanted her to hear.

She looked up from his chest, her face streaked with tears. One last droplet lingered in her left eye. "We still have one night left," she said. "Let's not think about tomorrow." But tomorrow was going to be there in a couple of hours, and it was all he could think about.

"What if I kidnap you and Zack and take you to Florida?" he said, smiling at her smile.

She tip-toed to kiss him. "I think that's the best plan you've come up with so far, mister." But he knew she was playing. It wouldn't be safe.

"Watch out," he said. "One day I just might do it." He saw the waitress set the steaks and fresh drinks on the table, but waited for the song to end. He didn't want to pull away from her just yet. The next song was another slow one, and since he didn't think it should go to waste, he waited for it to finish. Finally, fifteen minutes later, after the third slow dance, the Six Shooters livened it up,

clearing the dance floor. Coop led Kathryn back to the table for a final meal of cold steaks and warm beers. Conversation was mundane at best, mostly rehashing events that occurred along their journey. Though he tried to enthusiastically participate, his heart wasn't in it. He wanted to talk about tomorrow, next week, or five years from now, but she wanted to talk about yesterday, last week, five years ago.

Chapter 37

The next morning Coop nudged her awake. "I'm going to get some coffee," he said. Kathryn rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. She didn't say "Good Morning," "How'd you sleep," or anything but, "We'd better hit the road."

"We'll leave as soon as you're ready."

"How far we got today?" she said.

"Another six, maybe seven hours," he said.

"We could be there by twelve?"

"Or one," he said. It was obvious she was in a hurry to get on with her life, and understandably so. "I'll be back in a sec," he said and kissed her on the forehead. The time for goodbye was approaching too quickly. A brief thought of demoting the Senator passed through Coop's head, but he discarded it as soon as it registered. Even if he did kill the Senator, she would still be on the run. The CIA was filled with zealots willing to do anything to honor the memory of their leader. The dilemma with assassinations had nothing to do with the value human life, but more so

over the concern of who would replace the fallen leader. Most times, the new man, being so enraged at the hit, tended to be more dangerous than his predecessor, and had to be taken out as well, setting up an endless stream of demotions. Nowadays, suicides, drug overdoses, heart attacks, infections, and any other type of bioengineered hits were the methods of choice. And most were accomplished not by some American spook, but by someone very close to the target--long time friends or family were the most efficient. Even if he could make it look completely innocent, demoting the Senator would be personal. And no matter how long Coop had been out the business, he knew enough not to let it get personal. Besides, it probably wasn't a very nice thing to do.

Coop meandered through the parking lot, his mind adrift on losing Kathryn. He was in a sleepy thought of her, paying no attention to what was going on around him, having no idea of his situational awareness. Dmitri wasn't fully awake either.

They bumped into each other as they passed in the parking lot. Dmitri's donuts fell, and the two coffees he was carrying spilled over Coop before either knew who they had just run into.

When he realized what was going on, Coop reached behind him for his Browning. Dmitri did the same. But Coop's

wasn't there. It sitting on the night stand.

Dmitri waved the gun in Coop's face. "What a nice little coincidence," Dmitri said. "Stepping out for breakfast, Cooper?" He looked past Coop, toward the van. "Look what I found, darling."

Coop heard a van door open behind him and turned to see a figure of a woman in the van. She threw Dmitri a plastic tie wrap, and he secured Coop's hands.

"Get in," Dmitri said, poking the barrel into Coop's ribs. "Not wearing a vest, are you?" he said and turned to his wife. "Keep the gun on him. Don't kill him, though. I don't want you to spoil my morning."

Coop stepped in and sat against a panel of computers, receivers, and tape recorders. A bulkhead behind the seats kept him separated from the front. He scanned the inside for anything he could use as a weapon. The van jerked, and Dmitri pulled into the road heading into the desert hills.

"So, Coop," the woman began. The bulkhead blocked his view of the woman. She, no doubt, could see him through the half-inch holes in the metal wall. She held the weapon on him through the holes. "Have you enjoyed your trip?" Her voice gave her away.

"You tell me. You're the one that's been living very carelessly through me, Anna."

"But now it looks like you're the one who been

careless, Coop," she said. "You should not have involved yourself with the woman. You got emotional. You got weak. Very very careless," she said, and lit a cigarette. "But we would have found you anyway."

"Why did you chase me all the way? That was pretty stupid. Why didn't you try something before I left. Or wait until I got home."

"You left so suddenly," Dmitri said. "We had no way of knowing Gabrielle was going to dump you."

"Besides," Anna said, "We have to be in Rio in two days. We couldn't wait any longer."

"You're going to disappoint a lot of people," he said to Anna. "What am I going to tell everyone at the beach?"

"I don't think you'll be saying much, Coop," Anna replied.

"If you're going to say something, say your prayers," Dmitri added.

"Anna, I heard you were KGB?" Coop said.

"That's right," she said.

"What happened?" Coop asked, but followed with, "No. Don't tell me. I think I've got it figured out. Now that the cold war has ended, you've resorted to stealing secrets from the capitalist industrialists, then selling them to the highest Russian bidder. But your reputation went bad when you stole the plans to "The Clapper," and the "The Chia

Pet," he said. "Am I close?"

"You were always a funny man, Coop."

"Then why all this? Why come after me?"

"I wish I could offer something perhaps a bit more dramatic," Dmitri said. "But it is a very simple, yet classic motive: revenge."

"We had everything before you came along," Anna said. "Not good like in America, but as good as it could get in the Soviet Union. But you ruined it," Anna said.

"But why use Spot?" Coop asked. "Why not me? You could've gotten a lot closer, Anna. Does it bother you at all that Spot really loves you?" he asked, knowing she really didn't care. He wasn't even sure why he asked.

"The man's an idiot," she said. "That's why he was so perfect. At first I wanted you, Cooper. But you would have seen right through me like a mirror."

"A window," Coop said. "Seen through me like a window."

"Yes. You're right. A window. Besides, I don't find you as nearly repulsing as your friend Spot," she said.

"And I promised Dmitri there would be no...funny business."

Coop laughed. Anna had led him to an opening. "No funny business?" he said. "Dmitri, is that what she told you? Jesus, the way Spot tells it you two were like fucking rabbits. Some days going from the time you woke up until

the time you finally passed out, exhausted from screwing each others brains out. Shit, from what Spot said, he set a new record, eleven times in in one day!" He faked another laugh. "Eleven fucking times. I don't know what you call that in Russia, but in America, that's funny business. That's a shitload of funny business, Dmitri. That's more fucking funny business that most people do in a month."

"It won't work, Cooper," Dmitri said. "I know what you are doing. Give it away," he said.

"Give it up," both Coop and Anna said at the same time.

"Whatever," Dmitri said.

"That's good," Coop said. "Don't get emotional, Dmitri. You'll be able to think better that way." Coop looked out the window, planning his next move. He was trained to handle any situation, but he wasn't prepared for what passed by him on the two lane highway, heading toward the hotel. His heart and stomach jumped in his throat as he saw Mallory passed by in the black Lincoln. Mallory had lied, and Coop had been taken in by him. His emotions had crept up on him like a killer in the night, taking the woman he loved. His emotions had let him trust Mallory. His emotions had let him wander through the parking lot. He was thinking about Kathryn when he ran into Dmitri. For a short second, he had lost his situational awareness, and jeopardized Kathryn. Had it not been for his emotions, he

would not have been in this van. Had it not been for his emotions, though, Kathryn would've died at the diner in Kansas.

Coop had to get control of the van, turn it around and get back and stop Mallory. With his hands tied behind him, the van empty of weapons, and no way to jump Dmitri, emotions may be his only weapon.

"I've seen the videos, Dmitri. You've got yourself one wild woman," Coop said. "I've only seen a woman who can do that thing with her legs once. And she was a Polish gymnast. How do you do that, Anna? Were you a Polish gymnast?"

"Good try, Cooper," Dmitri said and started in on Anna in Russian thinking that Coop couldn't understand. "What thing with the legs? That thing you do for me? He'd better be lying, Anna. You only do that for me."

"Of course he's lying, sweetheart," Anna replied in Russian.

"No I'm not," Coop said in English. "I've got proof. Spot likes his woman clean shaven," Coop said. "And I'm not just talking legs."

Dmitri scowled at Anna as she looked out the window, purposely avoiding eye contact.

"But then what about you, Dmitri. I find it hard to believe you remained true to dear Anna while you showering

with all the other lonely men in prison. How long before you became somebody's little petrukh?" Coop said. "They say that shit'll make your hair turn gray." Coop chuckled.

"I guess they were right." Coop must have struck a nerve with Dmitri. Before Coop could react, Dmitri grabbed the gun from Anna and squeezed off a wild round. The bullet glanced off Coop's arm, ripping the outer layer of skin.

Still in a fury, Dmitri pulled the van off the main road, and down a dirt road that seemed to lead to nowhere.

The van stopped, Dmitri jumped out mad as hell, and opened the door. "Get out," he said, holding the gun on Coop. Coop did as he was told. Anna stepped from the van.

"Hold this," he said, giving his weapon to Anna. "If he tries anything, shoot him. Shoot him in the fucking head."

Dmitri blindfolded Coop. They were going to kill him right there at the side of the road. He had to get the gun from Anna. With the blindfold on, he expected only one shot to the head. But Dmitri stepped back, and with a carefully placed kick between Coop's legs, crumpled him. As Coop dropped to his knees, Dmitri's foot met Coop's mouth, knocking a few teeth loose. He struggled to stand.

"It wouldn't be any fun to just shoot you, you pervert," Dmitri said.

"I bet you kept a clean cell for your moosh," Coop said and took another kick in the face before he could react. He

could taste the sand on the leather boot.

Slowly, through the blindfold, Coop began to make out the shadow images of the two. Anna was standing next to the passenger door to his left, and Dmitri was in front of him. Dmitri had slowed his pace, and Coop had to get him riled again. He tried to recall some of his martial arts kicks he hadn't used in awhile. "Did he make you wear a dress, Dmitri? Crotch less panties, maybe? Did he make you wear lipstick when you went down on him? You know, the way Spot made Anna." That should work.

Dmitri stepped back into Coop's reach, and Coop made his move. He crouched slightly to spring, then shot up in the air, round housing Dmitri in the jaw. He felt something crack, either his heel or Dmitri's jaw. He couldn't tell which. As he landed, he pushed off, spun, and head butted Anna against the window, the force turning her toward the van.

Since Dmitri had no weapon, he wasn't a priority, so Coop focused on Anna. He was pressing against her, crushing her against the door, using all the strength in his legs and back, not allowing her to move. He could hear the gunmetal thunk against the door and felt nothing poking into his gut. The weapon was wedged between her and the door.

He head butted her again, and the window shattered. She was still fighting. He rammed her again, this time

straining his neck muscles, forcing her head through the broken window. He braced for Dmitri's return as he pressed, his muscles burning all the way down to his calves. She shuddered, and Coop pressed harder. With the air out of her and her circulation cut off, she passed out.

Coop stepped back, expecting her to fall into an unconscious heap at his feet, but she didn't. She just hanged there, losing her grip on the weapon. He heard it drop to the sand and covered it with his feet, standing poised for Dmitri's attack, searching through the blindfold for any approaching shadows. He waited for a few seconds, wondering what had happened to Dmitri, then dropped to the ground. He slid his body through this tied wrists, so that his hands were in front of him and removed the blindfold.

The desert sun burned his eyes as they adjusted to the light. When everything came into focus, he saw Anna hanging against the blood soaked door, the underside of her chin caught on a jutting piece of window glass, her arms at her side, her knees bent, her eyes wide and covered in blood. He turned to find Dmitri on his back in the brush, his neck broken, his head turned all the way around, his face in the sand.

Chapter 38

When he pulled into the hotel lot, Coop couldn't find the Lincoln. He threw the van into park and darted to the room. He stood at the door, afraid of what lay on the other side. He counted to himself and when he got to three he busted through.

Kathryn was on the bed, legs crossed watching CNN. "Where you've been?" she said. He could tell she was startled. "Oh my God," she said. "What happened?"

"Dmitri," he said, shutting the door behind him, relieved, but still confused she was all right. He collapsed on the bed. His weapon lay on the nightstand where he had left it. Anna's blood had soaked through his shirt and now crinkled on his skin. "Do I have clean shirt," he asked.

"I'll get your bag," she said.

Coop looked around. She had made the beds, arranged the toiletries at the sink, and probably cleaned the bathroom and vacuumed the floor. He chose not to mention

Mallory. Either it wasn't him in the Lincoln, or he was just passing through. There was no need to upset Kathryn.

When she returned, he dug through the clothes and pulled out a faded dark green T-shirt. A nice happy color.

A nice, happy, blood-free tee. "C'mon," he said, sliding the shirt over his head. "Zack's waiting for you."

She smiled with obvious anticipation, and said, "We're burning daylight."

* * *

They had been on the road for three hours and had three more to go, and except for the roar of the 1300ccs, there was silence. No yelling over the engine, no joking, no taps on the shoulder, and no stops to pee. She wasn't even holding on very tight. It was like she was just ready for their adventure to end. As if she'd had enough and was ready to move on to the next chapter.

But he thought of going straight to Mexico and taking her with him. Or hanging a left on I10 and heading back to Florida. They would send for Zachary as soon as they got to the beach. They could stay with him for as long as they wanted. Hell, he had the room. He may just need a little more furniture.

She'd love Spot's, the sugar white beaches, the boardwalk. Zachary would love the telescope, snorkeling for flounder at dusk, riding in the Hummer. He'd teach Kathryn

to dive. They'd explore the Pete Tide, the Advocet, The Russian Freighter. But he also knew it was the end, and in the end he was just dreaming.

So a little after one in the afternoon, he took the last turn into the mall parking lot crowded with shoppers. It must've been a Saturday to have been so busy this time of day. Coop pulled in front of Macy's and cut the engine. She released her hold on him and got off the bike. This was it. He dismounted and began to unstrap the bags.

"You want me to carry this in for you?" he asked.

"That's okay," she said. "I can manage."

He looked around the parking lot if the words he wanted to say were hidden somewhere amongst the minivans and Jeeps.

This was always the most difficult part for him; verbalizing what he felt, and not sounding like an idiot.

"Kathryn," he began, "I--"

As if she knew what he was going to say, she pressed her fingers to his lips to hush him. "You have to go now," she said. "And I have to go now." She kissed him on the cheek. "I could have never done this without you. And for that I will always be thankful." She kissed him once more, then said, "Thank you for everything, Coop. I'll never forget you."

But he couldn't go. He wanted grab her by the shoulders and tell her he loved her. He wanted her to come

with him. He wanted to say something. But he didn't. If she didn't leave the country, she'd end up watching suspicious cars pass in front of the house, wondering who was approaching on the bike path, and being cautious of the tourist asking for directions--living her life as he lives his. All he could do now was wish her luck, kiss her goodbye, and get out of her life.

"This is it Coop," she said.

He wanted the moment to linger. "Not yet," he said. "I've got something for you." Coop dug an manilla envelope out of his daypack and handed it to her.

"What is this?" she asked as she slid a finger under the flap.

"It'll help you get where you're going," Coop said.

Kathryn lifted the envelope and dumped the contents into her hand. She stared at the passport in amazement. "How?" she asked, her eyes wide, tearing as they had done at the school. She flipped through the passport, then ran her finger over the laminated inside cover. "It's perfect," she said. "How did you do this? Where'd you get the picture?"

"I figured you wouldn't be needing you drivers license anymore," he said.

"When did you have a chance to do this?"

"Last night when you were asleep. It was the package I picked up. I have a little kit," he said with a slight

shrug. "There's also a birth certificate," Coop said. "It's folded in the back. You were born in Richmond, Virginia." He pointed to the signature block. "See, it's even signed by Deanne Huxtable, State Registrar," he said proudly. "These are official. You won't have problem getting anywhere."

In her soft voice she said, "Coop, I don't know how to thank you. I'm not sure that I ever could."

"Just think of me from time to time." This was getting tough. Coop looked at his watch. "Geeze. Would you look at the time," he said. He didn't care what time it was, but he couldn't stand there any longer without telling her how much he loved her. "I'd better head out," he said.

"You're burning daylight," she replied with a faint smile.

He kissed her on the cheek and said goodbye. Coop straddled the bike and started it up, joining in with noise of the passing cars. She was still standing there, waiting, watching him leave. He gave a little wave and throttled off, leaving her standing on the sidewalk. He felt like turning around, but couldn't. He got her this far, and she could take care of herself the rest of the way. The trip was over. He had done what he was supposed to do: deliver her safe and sound. His job was finished.

He glanced in the mirror and he could still see her

standing and waving, as if she was waiting for him to turn around. Coop didn't want her to get away. He had to tell her how he felt. So, fighting his better judgement, Coop turned the bike around. He was over a hundred yards away and could still see Kathryn standing on the curb. She hadn't moved.

But something at the end of the lot caught his eye, and in the distance, he saw the black Lincoln. It only took a split second for it to register. He had to beat Mallory to Kathryn. Coop gunned the throttle, aiming his bike at the Lincoln.

He was closing in on fifty miles per hour when Mallory slowed in front of Kathryn. And even over the noise of the engine, Coop could hear the automatic weapon fire.

Kathryn's knees buckled and she fell to the ground. Coop held tight to the throttle, aiming the bike, focusing on nothing but the car. He had only one chance to stop Mallory. He steered the bike into the path of the Lincoln.

At ten yard's from the car, he lay the bike down, and rolled into the curb about the same time the bike slid into the Lincoln, exploding just as the car climbed over the bike. Coop watched as the black Lincoln jumped three feet off the ground, then, flaming from the undercarriage, limped through the lot, around the corner, and out of sight.

He gathered himself and ran to Kathryn, cradling her

head as she lay bloodsoaked, hot, and coughing. He yelled for someone in the growing crowd to call 911. "Everything is going to be all right," he said. "I'm here." She didn't respond. "Don't leave me, Kathryn," he said. "You're going to be all right."

She was still breathing, but barely. She tried to speak but the blood in her mouth held her words. She reached into the pocket of her jacket and clutched something in her hands. She pushed her hand to his. Coop opened her hand and the golf ball he had given her fell out.

"No!" Coop cried. "You can't!"

Coop felt a firm tap on his shoulder and turned around. "Let her go, son," a man said. "I'll take her from here. You've done all you can do."

"Who are you?" he said sharply, pulling the Browning from his waist, pointing it at the man. Coop looked beyond the man and saw the ambulance.

"I'm the paramedic," he said.

He turned back to her. "Kathryn," Coop said, "you can't leave me now. I love you. I love you, Kathryn. I won't let you go." For the first time since he was a child he began weeping.

The EMT knelt beside Coop and felt for her pulse. He held on for a second or two, then released her delicate wrist. "She's gone, sir," he said. "Let her go."

Coop held her for a moment more until the man pried her away from him. The other EMT brought out stretcher, lifted her and swept her away into the ambulance. Coop struggled to stand, his knees weak, and followed the man to the door only to have it shut in his face.

"I have to see her," he demanded, pounding on the door. "You can't just take her without me," he said. "I love her. And I think she loved me," he said.

The door opened, and the EMT stuck his head out. "I'm sure she did, sir."

Chapter 39

"You know she did," Spot said, pouring himself a beer. It was noon, and Spot's Exotic Animals and Gulf Side Watering Hole was slowly filling with the suntanned crowd, downing beer and Bushwhackers, getting in one last celebration before the weekend ended.

"I guess I'll never know," Coop said. It was good to be back home. He had stayed in Arizona for her funeral, standing outside the circle of family members, wondering who everyone was. The man giving the eulogy was someone he recognized, first by his voice, then by the round, reddish face he had seen on CSPAN a few days before. General Wright had stood over her casket expressing how Kathryn had died a hero, died a mother.

"I guess it's just the two of us, again," Spot said, yanking Coop back into the conversation.

"Thanks, Spot," he said and finished his beer. "I think I'll head home. I've got all those tapes to listen to if I'm ever going to write this book." He lay five dollars

on the bar and pushed away.

Coop was almost out the door when Spot called him back. His voice was low, subdued. "Coop," he said, then cleared his throat. "I just wanted to thank you for being honest with me about Anna. I know coming here and telling me what happened was probably one of the most difficult things you could do. A lesser man would have lied and made up some bullshit story, and I would've never known any different," Spot said. "I would've always been waiting for her to return, always wondering where she was. I knew she loved me," he said. "I could tell."

"That was the last thing she said before she boarded the plane back to Moscow, 'Tell Spot I really really love him,'" Coop said. So maybe he wasn't perfectly honest with him. But why go into the details? The results would be the same, she was never coming back. And this way Spot could move on feeling good about himself and what he'd had with Anna.

"She said 'really really' right?"

"Really really," Coop said. "Then she said, 'Tell him I love him from the heart of my bottom,' but I think she meant it the other way."

"See. I told you she loved me. I knew she did. Oh well," he said, and sipped his beer. "Her loss."

"Her loss," Coop agreed.

Coop dipped and darted, pedalling his way through the packed parking lot, down the Keenan Memorial bike path, then up the short white driveway, and into his garage. He leaned the bike against the wall in front of the Hummer. The garage looked empty without the Harley.

He hadn't been looking forward to listening to the tapes but if he was going to write the book, he had no choice. He still had no idea what to write, but at least this way, perhaps on a Bombay inspired night, he may come up a plan. And he had a feeling there would be plenty of those nights ahead.

Spot had left the house in decent shape, except for a few stray grits that had cemented themselves to the kitchen wall. All the furniture was in place; the chair was in front of the TV. Coop poured three fingers of the Bombay Sapphire, added three semi-circle formations of ice his refrigerator called 'cubes' and squeezed a quarter of a lime into the glass.

He flipped through the multitude of religious channels, the plethora of shopping channels, stopping when he saw a familiar face. General Wright was testifying again for the Senate Intelligence committee. He left the sound off and sipped his drink.

The envelope of tapes lay in his lap, he started to open it when he heard a crash outside the sliding glass door

and jumped up to investigate. He tugged on the cord to the verticle blinds, and opened the door. One of Spot's empties had fallen over in the breeze.

Slippery Dick Velour was on his deck in his same black Speedo Sweating to the Oldies, Volume 3, between smoke breaks. "Hey Coop," he called. "Where've you been? You missed some excitement around," he said and lit another Marlboro.

"I heard a little about it," Coop said turning away.

"Oh yeah," he said. "Federal Agents and everything. They had search warrants, battering rams, everything."

"Really," Coop said and picked up a couple more of Spot's empties. "Whose house?"

"Mine. Can you believe it? Apparently a couple of agents disappeared from out front while they were investigating me."

Coop straightened. "Why you?"

"I'm making so much damn money, they think it should be against the law," he said. "You should climb aboard. I've got an opening for another investor. I can get you a sixty to two hundred percent return on your investment. The minimum it takes to get--"

Coop stopped listening when he felt the movement around his ankles, the slow, vibrating figure-eights welcoming him home. He took the cat inside and shut the door behind him.

"I was wondering what happened to you," he said and rubbed the cat between the ears. He put a handful of Friskies in a bowl and set the cat down.

The tapes had lain on the counter for a few days. Then finally, after several trips for more ice, stopping a few times to rearrange the furniture, and checking on the cat over and over, Coop had ran out of excuses and opened the envelope. The tapes spilled into his lap, all numbered, with dates, locations, and times. He sifted through the pile and started picking out dates that he wanted to relive.

The good days, like the under the trees, or when he first met her, or that night on the canyon rim.

One tape mixed in with all the others wasn't labeled and had a key taped to the back of the case. Coop popped it in and heard Kathryn's voice.

"Hi Coop, it's Kathryn. Surprise! I know that you had a lot of questions during our time together and I told you that I would answer them all. Right now, I'm laying under the stars at the Coyote Free campground, and you're asleep.

Somehow, though, I expect that the wind through the mesquite is not wind at all, but in fact, Coyotes howling in the distance. But with you here, I feel like nothing can hurt me.

"Unfortunately, because you are listening to this tape, I am not available--I guess that would be a nice way of

putting it--to answer your questions in detail. So I'll start from the beginning. But first, one thing, okay, maybe two. First: Thank you for helping me. It would have ended totally different had you not come along. I don't know what else to say. Second: You have to know that I love you, Coop. I never told you, but I love you more than I could have ever imagined loving anyone. It's all so overwhelming. I am forever going to love and miss you.

"Now the answers to your questions. As you know, Zachary is my son. Five years ago, I gave birth to him in a small hospital in Tennessee. I could have sworn I heard him cry when I delivered him, but they told me he was stillborn. They gave me so much medication, they told I must have been imagining it. For years I would feel a pull, or a tug at my dress and would look down and no one was there.

"Then a month ago, a man named Jonas contacted me. You know him as General Wright. At first I thought he was nuts. The guy can come across a little confusing sometimes. But as I talked to him, it all began to make sense. Sick, demented sense. The program is called Operation Prodigy and has been run by one man; Senator McAlpin. In the fifties, he was with the CIA, and was put in charge of recruiting for a special group of agents. No one asked him how he was going to do it. He had total authority and no accountability.

"He thought it was too difficult to train agents out of college, so he started sooner. A lot sooner. My baby, along with hundreds of others over the past thirty or forty years, had been kidnapped by him and sent to schools like Zachary attended and trained to be a new breed of agents.

"Yeah, I know. It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But it's true. I have the proof. And that's where I need your help. Take the key, go to Nashville, get the files in the safe deposit box at the First Tennessee Savings and Loan and take them to Jonas at the hearings. They are copies of files and disks I stole from one of McAlpin's clinics. The originals I put in another bank, hoping McAlpin would find them and not come after me. I guess I was wrong.

"Did you know there are tests to show if you made copies of a document? Jonas told how to get around that. Anyway, you must get them to him. He's supposed to testify soon, if he hasn't started already. The files contain all the names of the agents that were ever involved in the program, along with their mother's name and her last known address. Take these files to Jonas and stop this from continuing. It's up to you, Coop.

"I'd better go. I love you, Coop. By the way, you were wonderful tonight. I miss you already.

"Oh I almost forgot...this tape will self destruct in five seconds...I've always wanted to say that.

"I love you."

He clicked off the tape, sat for a moment in the silence the house. General Wright's name was in the blue box at the bottom of the screen, and Coop turned up the volume.

"No sir," the General said. "We have no more witnesses to call."

"Then I'm going to have to agree with the fine statesman from the great state of North Carolina," Senator Cranelly said. "There is not enough evidence to even suggest any wrong doing on the part of Senator McAlpin."

"But sir, I can get you a list of names. It's just going to take a day or two. My contact has since died after securing the list and I am having trouble locating that list."

"And I suppose I killed her," McAlpin said to Wright.

"We will adjourn for the day, and reconvene tomorrow at nine. I'll decide then whether to proceed or not," Cranelly said. He looked to the Senator from Florida. "Senator Varela, all you have accomplished thus far is to manage to taint the name and character of one of our wisest statesmen.

Senator McAlpin has been selflessly serving this great country of ours since before you were born, sir. And because of your paranoia-induced witch hunts, you have caused the gentle man much pain and suffering. Perhaps you

should not listen so much to the government's-gonna-gitcha-if-you-don't-watch-out theories of General Wright.

"And General Wright, perhaps you should stop spreading such hate and discontent. People want to believe that the person they elect to serve them is on their side. And most do. I've heard your show and it feeds of the insecurities of those scared, silly, ignorant listeners that tune you in day after day after day. As a broadcaster, you have responsibility for what you say. It's time you took that responsibility seriously." Cranelly pounded the gavel, ending the session.

Coop flipped off the set, grabbed his suit from the closet. He threw in a few pairs of jeans and put the cat outside with a bowl of food. As an afterthought, he stuck his laptop in his daypack, and left for the airport.

Two hours later he was on a flight to Nashville, the safe deposit key in his pocket. Four hours later he was inside the First Tennessee Savings and Loan, and an hour after emptying the safe deposit box, he was on the phone to Special Agent Banister. He agreed to help analyze the information, so Coop could present his findings if there were any.

The flight landed just after dark, and Dan was waiting at the gate. He'd lost a lot of weight and was still coughing. He was pallor, and his hair was thinning.

After a couple of handshakes and some catching up, Dan said, "So what's the big mystery?"

"I'll tell you when we get to the hotel. I'm at the Stouffers in Crystal City," Coop said. "Let's stop and pick up a some beer. This could take awhile."

"How long is a while?"

"What do you care? Consider it a date," Coop said. "You haven't had one of those in awhile."

The room was adequate, but had no sizable work space. So Coop ordered a six foot folding table and while he waited for it to arrive, cracked them both a beer and told Dan about his trip, about Kathryn, Zachary, and General Wright.

"Oh, geeze, not this?" Dan said. "Don't tell me you believe this crap."

"I wouldn't have a month ago," Coop said.

When the table arrived, they spread out the papers on the table, opened another beer, and Dan began scanning the pages, while Coop popped files in and out of his laptop.

"Just what are we looking for," Dan asked.

"Anything that links Senator McAlpin to this list of people."

"Who are these people?"

"It is supposed to be a list of children that were kidnapped at birth and turned into agents for the CIA."

"This list goes back to the fifties, Coop. The first

entry is in fifty four." Dan flipped through the pages. "It's divided up by years, then followed by a list of names."

"One of the names is supposed to be the kid's name. The other, the mother's name with last known address."

"So I got a list of names?" Dan said. "What the hell am I supposed to do with them?"

"I'm not sure," Coop said. "Read them or something. I've got financials on this disk. It follows the routing of--"

"Coop," Dan said solemnly.

"Hold on. I'm just about to--,"

"Coop," Dan said firmly. "You need to see this."

Chapter 40

Coop and Dan arrived at the hearings just as the Cranelly struck the gavel. The crowd had thinned out, leaving only a handful of reporters in the gallery. The Senators all looked bored. All but McAlpin. He was smiling.

"Do you have your list of phantoms, General Wright," Cranelly asked.

"No sir," the General said.

"Then I have no other option than to end these hearings. You've cost the tax payers quite a bit of money, General. And I think you owe--"

Coop cleared his throat. "I have that list, Senator," Coop called from the back of the room. McAlpin's smile dropped as his assistant whispered in his ear.

"And who are you, sir?" Cranelly asked.

"Cooper Sumner, Senator."

"And how are you connected to this hearing?"

"I am the one holding the ace, Senator."

"And how might that be?" Senator McAlpin said.

"I present you the list of names of all the children that were taken from their loving mothers and put in special schools, later becoming agents for the Central Intelligence Agency. These children were taught how to speak several languages perfectly. They were taught military strategy by the time they were eight, how to escape and evade by ten, how to kill a man by twelve. Hell, they knew how to infiltrate foreign governments by age fifteen."

"That's absurd," Cranelly said and waved for security. A marine guard approached Cooper, but didn't stop Coop from continuing.

"As the children became high school age, some were sent overseas to various Soviet Bloc countries as well as China and North Korea to be, quote, adopted, by local families-- U.S. sympathizers working for the CIA. The students excelled in school, and upon graduation, were recruited for the military academies. There, our children, over time, became moles at the highest levels of Communist government."

"Are you finished, Mr. Sumner?" McAlpin asked.

"Not quite, sir," Coop said. "Some of the boys stayed here in the U.S. to finish their education. From there they went on to sniper school in Quantico, Jump school at Ft. Bragg, Scuba school in Panama City, Survival School at Eglin and Fairchild. The ones that made it went on to the

different Military Academies then into the service of the CIA, NSA, DIA, ISA, or a combination of all agencies, forever loyal to Mother America."

"So am I to believe we raised a bunch of educated assassins, Mr. Sumner?"

"No sir," Coop replied. "Some boys didn't fit the profile. They became office workers, generic government employees, hairdressers, whatever. Some never made it into college."

"Come now, Mr. Sumner," Cranely began. "If that's the case, then why haven't any of these men come forward to testify against Senator McAlpin?"

"Senator, these men have no idea they're in this program. They all think they were orphaned. That's why this program has been so successful for over forty years."

"I still find it hard to believe, sir, that none of these men are aware of their roles."

"Senator, if I can find one man to step forward, will that proof be enough to investigate further?"

The Senator thought for a moment. "I should think so," the Senator said. "Thus far we only have hearsay. Nothing concrete."

Coop stepped forward and handed the list to Cranely. "Senator, I would like you to read the list of names on page four."

"Very well," Cranelly said.

"This is ludicrous," McAlpin screamed jumping up from his seat, slamming his fist on the table. "Absolutely ludicrous." McAlpin pushed his way through the other Senators to the end of the row. "I will not sit by and--"

"And what?" Cranelly asked. "As a member of this committee you will adhere to the decorum. Now please, sit back down." He looked back to Coop. "Page four?"

"Yes sir."

"This is bullshit!" McAlpin yelled, his face turning red. "The man's a liar. He's got no proof. We can't listen to him."

"Senator McAlpin!" Cranelly yelled. "You're way out of control. Get a hold of yourself," Cranelly said and turned to Coop. "The list starts with Brunson, Frank L.. Mother's name: Francis Pickett, address 103 West Montgomery Road, Saginaw, Michigan, deceased. Next, Guillaume, Robert M.. Mother's name: Julie Bennett, address 13432 Prairie Terrace Drive, Souix Falls, South Dakota, deceased." The Senator stopped reading and looked over his glasses at Coop. "Are you sure you want me to continue, Mr. Sumner?"

"Please, Senator," Coop said.

"Are you sure?"

"It's all a bunch of lies!" McAlpin screamed. "There's no proof," he said as he charged Cranelly. "No fucking

proof!"

Cranelly nodded toward the Marine guard, and the guard moved to contain McAlpin.

When there was silence, Cranelly asked again. "Are you sure you want me to continue, Mr. Sumner?"

"Positive."

"Very well," Cranelly said and began reading. "Sumner, Cooper M.. Mother's name: Dorthy Halston--."

What little press there was began gasping and hooting so loud, the Senator had to stop reading. It didn't matter. Coop knew what the rest said.

"I was one of those boys, sir. One of those boys who was taken away from his mother and raised by the government. Like the rest of the children, my mother was a single, college educated woman, with no family to speak of. My mother, after having checked into the clinic was over medicated during the delivery and was later told I had died during birth.

"Dr. Vlatnikov, a former Russian Minister of Health, was the attending physician, and was being blackmailed by McAlpin with the threat of being returned to Russia. Returning to Moscow meant certain death for the doctor, so he did what he was told. He kept quiet until confessing his involvement the night he died. Fortunately, he confessed to the right man. None of this would have ever surfaced had it

not been for General Wright."

"And what exactly was your role with the government?" Cranelly asked.

"I, sir, have gone black to--"

"Explain gone black?" Cranelly asked.

"Worked and lived under illegal concealment to infiltrate such organizations as the Russian Mafia, the KGB, a few radical Islamic groups, and a couple of Nazi wannabes. Hell, I've even been placed in the FBI just to gain intel on their counter espionage missions."

"So you were a spy."

"I've also performed sanctions--maximum demotions. My last official hit was the drug lord and former CIA advisor Senor Menendez."

"I thought we outlawed assassinations with the executive order," Cranelly said.

"That order only pertained to heads of state," Coop said. "Not terrorists and enemies of the state."

Senator Cranelly looked over his glasses to McAlpin, standing at the end of the long table. The man's face had turned from red to a pale blue. "Senator McAlpin? Care to respond?"

McAlpin blotted the sweat from his forehead and turned to Beckett for reassurance. In a very confident voice he began. "Sacrifices must be made," he said. "These things I

did, I did for everyone here. The Russians were so far ahead of us in the Cold War, the freedom fighters we trained in Afghanistan had turned against us and had begun blowing up our embassies, and the organized crime families in Russia were building up an arsenal to take over when their country's capitalism experiment failed. And, gentlemen, during the height of the Cold War, I was tasked with changing the way we conduct the business of spying. I doubt that any of you fine gentlemen, and esteemed colleagues could have come close to making the kind of decisions I made. Does a leader risk the lives of a thousand men to save one? Hell, no," he said. "Sacrifices must be made. And I was the one who had to decide who to sacrifice.

"I sacrificed these orphans, gentlemen, so that the children you love could live free. I sacrificed illegitimate children who would have likely ended up on the welfare roles with their mamas, digging for food from dumpsters." McAlpin opened his arms as if in a plea. "That's all they were; just a bunch of illegitimate children. We did the world good."

The whole room sat silently in disbelief as the Senator continued his tirade. When he finished, he sat on the edge of the table ready to field questions like any other press conference. But everyone seemed too bewildered to ask questions, or to even speak, and the Senator searched the

room for a sympathetic face. He had misread his audience, everyone was still in shock at his confession. The Senator suddenly realized he was alone in his beliefs and no matter how he tried to explain his motives, his words would fall on deaf ears. Even Beckett wouldn't look him in the eye.

Cranely motioned for the guard. "By law I have to detain you, Senator," Cranely said. The guard reached for McAlpin's hands, but didn't reach them fast enough.

McAlpin drew his handgun, and with one shot, took down the Marine guard. Coop dove to the ground, tipping over a table in time for it to intercept the round intended for him. From his position, Coop saw the desperate look on Beckett's face as the Senator lowered the weapon on him. Beckett made a move to dodge it, but the round caught him in the left eye.

The Senator faced the crowd, put the gun to his mouth and said, "Sacrifices must be made, gentlemen." There was a long pause before the fourth and final shot rang out; a pause long enough for everyone on the ground to look up and see the Senator put his lips around the barrel and pull the trigger.

Chapter 41

Dorothy ambled over with the coffee pot and poured Tiffany a cup, then one for herself. The weather was finally warming, and her arthritis was coming along much better. The lunch crowd had died down and only three people were left eating.

"Nice to have the tax man off your back, I'll bet." Tiffany said. "It's been two months since that stranger was here."

Dorothy nodded.

"Are you sure it was that guy you remembered?"

"I'm positive," Dorothy said. "I remember him plain as day. He reminded me so much of Winston."

"Your first husband?"

"That's right," she said. "I was just pouring out the stale coffee and the fella walks in and sits down. Since he was the only one in here, we chit-chatted for a while as he ate. Said his name's Cooper, he lives in Florida and was just passing through on his way to a family reunion. He

must have been hungry because he stayed for over four hours and ate three plates of bacon. Then as he pays his check, that tax man walks in and starts running his mouth."

"What did his nails look like?"

"I don't remember, Tiffany. I didn't look. He had the biggest blue eyes, though. You would've loved them. They reminded me of Winston's. Anyway, he says he's taken enough of my time, gives me a hug, and leaves. Three days later, I got a notice saying I was free and clear of all my taxes."

"Are you sure it was him? Maybe they made a mistake?"

"Don't think so," Dorthy said.

"Was he married? Maybe he's still around."

"He seemed like a loner, Tiff. He didn't carry much baggage."

"Well, I guess now you're a rich woman, Dorthy. No more tax problems."

"I don't think so," she said. "But a lot of other people seem to. All I got is this job that pays \$300 a week, and some stupid bank in Grand Cayman keeps sending me junk mail."

"Where's Grand Cayman?"

"South of Cuba," Dorthy said and picked up the latest letter from the bank and tossed it into the drawer with the others. "I've got \$500 dollars in my passbook, and everybody wants to give me a gold card."

Tiffany dug the out the envelope and opened it. "Maybe you've accumulated some interest," she said and scanned the statement. She stopped scanning and set the paper down. "I'll say you've gained some interest. About one and a half million worth of interest."

"What are you going on about, girl." Dorothy snatched the statement from Tiffany's hand. "Let me see that."

Tiffany started screaming, dancing around the diner. "You're a millionaire, Dorothy. An absolute millionaire."

Dorothy looked over the statement. This had to be a mistake. "I'm calling the bank," she said. "Something must be wrong." She dialed the 800 number on the statement, and when customer service answered, Dorothy said, "I'd like to check on an account please." She gave the account number and some security information.

"Dorothy," the woman on the line said. "We've been waiting to hear from you. Didn't you get any of the letters we sent."

"I thought it was junk mail," Dorothy said. "I've never done business with you in my life."

"You're right, ma'am. This account was open by someone who wishes to remain anonymous. The funds are in an single account with rights of survivorship."

"Any idea who it is?"

"There is a note here in the comments section that says

'Tell Dorthy she's a woman any son would be proud to have as a mother.'" There was a long silence. Dorthy didn't know what to say. The tears welled up in her eyes, and she recalled that she hadn't had any of her spells since she had seen the stranger from Florida in her diner. She broke down on the phone, dropping to her knees sobbing, wondering if there was any way her baby had lived.

Chapter 42

It was now February and the lull of the winter months were a relaxing welcome for the locals. Coop had finished the book and it was still riding high on the New York Times Best Seller's list. An L.A. production company had even expressed an interest in making it a movie. But with all the attention surrounding the book, Coop managed to keep holed up in his house for the most part, venturing out only when he couldn't stand being alone. Today was one of those days.

The winds were calm, and the beach was quiet. Gone were the tourists, the college crowd, the families with screaming children. Now it was the islander's turn to have some fun. The places weren't packed and didn't have that vacation attitude, but that's what made it more intimate. It was a deep breath the island took every year before getting ready for the spring.

Coop followed his regular path past the solar powered Hippy Hut, past the Miami Vice house, past Chung King

Palace, then down the bike path to Spot's Exotic Animals and Gulfside Watering Hole.

"You're looking rather dapper today," Spot said, reaching a beer out of the cooler. "I haven't seen you dressed up in a while."

He had worn his favorite khakis and thick navy blue cotton sweater over a white tee shirt. "I've got an appointment," Coop said. "I'm meeting a woman."

"Well it's about time. I haven't seen you with a woman since you got back from your trip. I was beginning to get worried that maybe you really had given up women."

"It's not that kind of meeting," Coop said. "It's business. Besides, I've haven't had time for anyone since then." He also had no desire to meet anyone. His life was working out fine. He had a best seller, a new Harley, and he had taken care of his mother.

He still thought about going back to South Dakota and telling his mother the truth. She had lived her life without knowing she had a child, and had accepted it. It seemed a cruel and selfish idea to force his desire for family on her. If he did tell her, Coop would always wonder if it was his need for family, someone to love him, that would pull him to tell her, or would it be the selfless desire to share the truth. He doubted the latter. The woman he loved was gone forever, and his mother, someone he

had dreamed and wondered about his entire life, was unapproachable. He looked across the bar and realized the only relationship he had in his life was with Spot.

"What's so funny?" Spot asked.

"Nothing," Coop said. "Why?"

"You were laughing," Spot said.

"I hadn't noticed."

The door creaked open, pouring in the sunlight. Coop turned to see a familiar face. "Ah, the mysterious Dr. Chang," Coop said.

"Hi guys." She was smiling, wearing a faded red sweatshirt and khaki shorts. Her short hair was tucked behind her ears.

Spot's life had improved over the last year. It came to light why Chang had acted as if she had seduced Coop, and why she was kissing Dmitri at Spot's bar. Of course she finally had to spell it out for him before Spot understood she had been trying to make him jealous. She had admitted her attraction to him since day one, and for some reason, never trusted Anna. She called it women's intuition. Spot and Chang had had been together since the Grits Incident, as they called it.

"How are my two favorite nonproductive members of society?" she asked and tiptoed over the bar for a kiss from Spot.

"Living up to your expectations," Coop said. "He's pouring and I'm drinking."

"Then pour me one," she said. "I want to do my part."

"Have you heard anything from the movie people?" Susan asked, as she settled onto a stool, watching Spot make her drink.

"I'm supposed to meet with one today. She's passing through and wanted to 'talk film,' as she says." He sipped his beer. "It's probably just another whacko."

"Could this be her?" Spot said, nodding toward the door. Coop and Susan turned on their stools. She was a young woman. Much younger than she had sounded on the phone.

"She's a pretty good looking whacko," Spot said.

"I'm here to meet Mr. Cooper Sumner," the woman said to Spot. She had a deep, husky, three pack a day voice that didn't match her delicate, smooth face.

"I'm Coop."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Sumner. I'm Evelyn Warden of the Warden Productions. We spoke on the phone." She stuck her hand out, erect, formal, too polite. She wore thick, dark sunglasses that swallowed her most of her face. She didn't remove them in the dim light. It was probably a "Hollywood thing." Coop introduced her to his friends.

"Ahh, the mysterious Dr. Chang," the woman said.

Susan looked at Coop puzzled.

"You're in the book," Coop admitted.

"What about me?" Spot said. "Guess which one I am."

"You, without a doubt, are Spot."

"Beer?" Coop asked, though he knew she probably wanted a wine spritzer or a bottled water.

"Bourbon, please," she said. "Clean."

Spot obliged, and the two found a seat away from the bar. "So you want to make the book into a movie?" Coop asked, not really sure how these conversations are suppose to begin. She had a familiar face, like a face he had seen on TV. He had been watching a little too much the past eight months. Her red hair was the color of Ginger's from Gilligan's Island. He still had no idea why he left the damn TV plugged in.

"Yes," she said. "And I'm most interested in the relationship between you and the woman...Katelyn? That was her name, right?"

"Kathryn," he said.

"Whatever," she said and sipped her drink. "Forgive me, Mr. Sumner, but it all seems so quaint. So neat," she said. "How could this all be true?"

There was something about her he didn't like. Actually, except for her choice of drink, there wasn't really anything he did like. She had no right to question

or ridicule how he felt about Kathryn. "What's your point, mam?"

"My point is, did you fall in love with this Kathryn person because it was all so...convenient and tidy? Or did you truly have feelings for her. Audiences can detect that you know." She said it in such a snotty way, he didn't want to continue the conversation and he sure as hell didn't want this snob turning his book into a movie.

"They were, and still are, quite genuine, Ms. Warden," he said, trying to be calm. Coop didn't want to open wounds long closed by distance and time. And he sure as hell didn't have to justify anything to this woman. If this was the way it was going to be, he didn't want any part of it. "I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing, Ms. Warden, but if you'll excuse me," he said and stood.

"I think it will work out fine, Coop," she said, losing the husky voice. It was voice he hadn't heard in over a year.

Coop looked down at the woman and slowly found his seat. She had removed her dark glasses, and his eyes settled on her black pupils dripping into her green iris. Her hair had been colored, and restyled. Her face was tan, her lips red and full. She had even gained a little weight. He didn't speak.

"It's me," she whispered. "Kathryn."

He felt like his blood sugar dropped a hundred points. "But how?" was all he could manage to say.

"Mallory. It was all his idea. He said I needed to have funeral. He helped me out."

"But..." Nothing had ever left him this speechless in his life. Across from the table was the only woman he truly ever loved and he didn't know how to tell her. He would remain cool and collected, and let her make the first move.

"I haven't stopped thinking about you since that day," he said instead. "Why didn't you tell me? You could have trusted me."

"You're not pissed, are you?" she said and smiled.

Coop remembered their discussion under the swaying oaks. "No," he said. "But don't expect me to be at your next funeral."

"I'm sorry," Kathryn said. "But Mallory said we shouldn't tell anyone. He said you didn't have a need to know. I hated to do it, but I had no idea you felt that way. You should have said something sooner."

"I wanted to say something in the beginning. But couldn't." He had to restrain himself from leaning across the table to kiss her.

"I wanted to come back sooner, but I kept remembering what you said about not going back and forth from the new life to the old. Finally I just had to do it," Kathryn

said, as she reached across the table for his hand. "I missed you so much. You're all I could think about."

"I know how you feel," Coop said. Not a day went by that he didn't wish she were with him.

"Zachary and I have a little place on the beach in Belize. It's beautiful. Every morning we walk along the shore and look for shells. He's learning how to snorkel. He even brought home a fish the other day."

"Sounds like you turned out to be a wonderful mother," Coop said.

"It's so strange, Coop. I can't imagine not being with him. I never realized how empty my life was," she said.

"I told you you'd do fine," he said.

"I'm still missing one thing, Coop."

"What's that?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Why don't you come down and stay for awhile. We can take things day by day. Zack is always asking about you."

"What about you?"

"Me?" she asked.

"You," Coop said. "Are you always asking about me?"

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't," she said.

Coop stood, lay five dollars on the table, and reached for her hand. It fit in his like it was formed especially

for it. "Spot," he said, tossing his house keys to him.
"I've got to go out of town for awhile. Do me a favor?
This time, feed the cat."