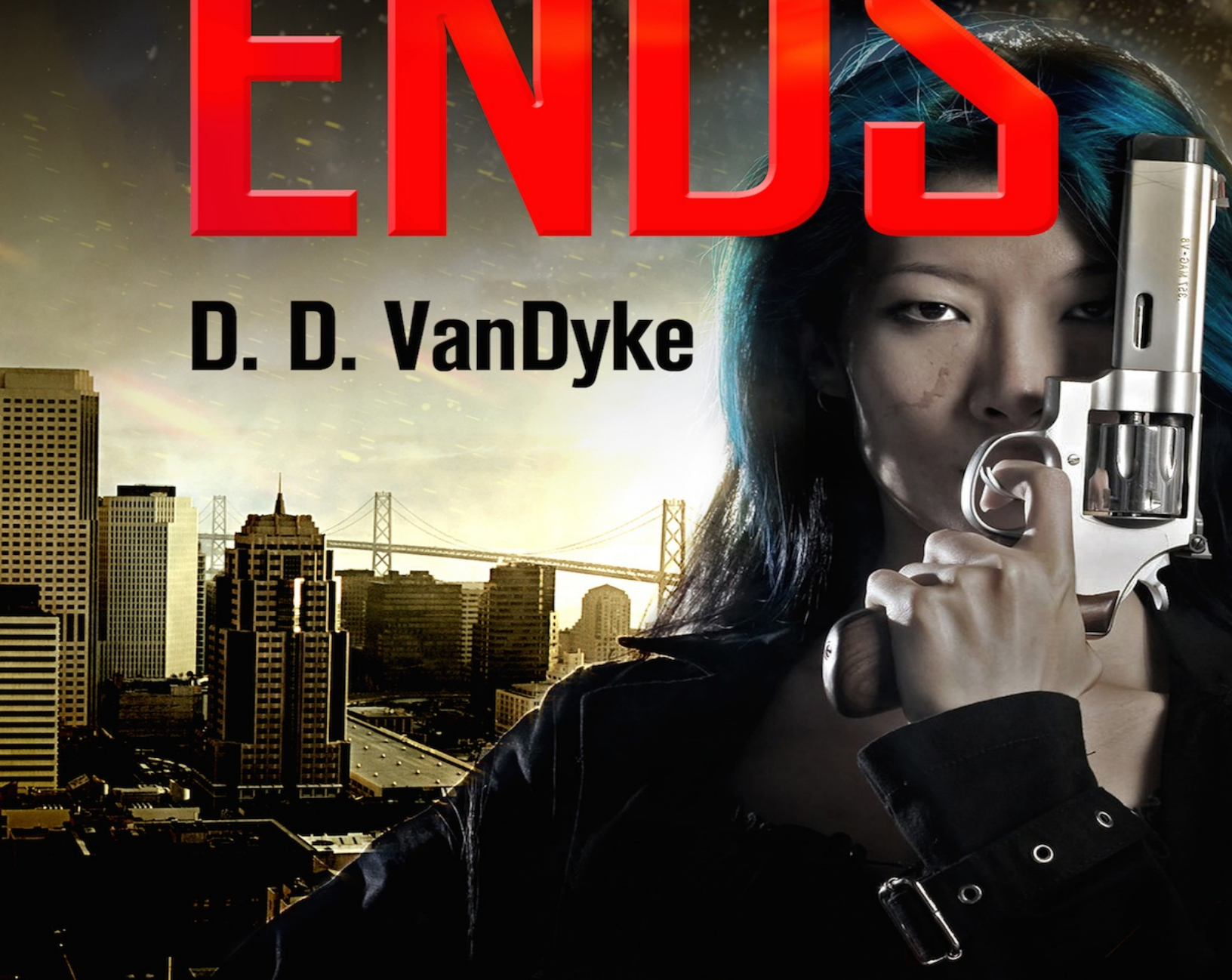


A CALIFORNIA CORWIN P. I. MYSTERY

LOOSE ENDS

D. D. VanDyke



Loose Ends

A California Corwin P.I. Mystery

By

D. D. VanDyke

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Chapter 1

July, 2005: San Francisco

I'm scribbling these case files down in hopes they'll be useful for another woman in my position, another former cop who's had to kiss the love of her life goodbye and settle for another.

I'm not talking about some guy. I'm talking about the Force, the Thin Blue Line, the fraternity of police I've been barred from.

Being on the outside looking in does have its compensations, because now I'm my own boss. I have an agency, California Investigations, named for yours truly, California G. Corwin. My leftover hippie mother stuck the moniker on me, though it's really not so bad because I go by Cal. I've always been a tomboy anyway.

With a clear docket and hope for a new case this Monday, I reached down to flip the drop box open, the one inside my Mission District office off of Valencia. The sounds and smells of San Francisco streets faded behind me as the door swung shut and latched automatically, a feature that said a lot about the neighborhood.

Glancing at the Golden Gate Bridge themed clock on my wall, I saw the big and little hands were just about lining up on noon. I decided I'd let myself off the hook this time for coming in late as I'd done all right at the poker table last night, picking up a couple C-notes. I'd rolled into bed some six or seven hours ago as dawn struggled to break over the Coast Range before giving up in the windy face of cold Pacific Coast rain. When I don't have a case I admit I tend to fall into bad habits. No problem. Short nights don't bother me much. I'd learned to deal with them from eight years on the job.

Typical Monday morning mail filled my hands. Bills, junk, bills, junk. A coupon pack that might be worth looking through. As I sorted, a loose business card fluttered to the floor. Must not have been mailed. Hand-dropped into the slot, then.

Bending over, I used the nails on my left thumb and forefinger to lift it off the cool tiles, holding it on fingertips while I walked over to my desk. You just never know where stuff has been.

On the front the card read *Miranda Sorkin, Pharm.D* with the phone number printed beneath it hastily scribbled out, completely obscured with what looked like fountain pen ink, very crisp and clear. I turned it over.

Cole said you can help – PLEASE CALL RIGHT AWAY and a different, Marin County number scrawled across the back of the stiff cream stock in a hand that was probably neat on most days, but not this time. Today it seemed shaky, anxious, like a woman in trouble might write. I was no expert, but I boasted a passing familiarity with all the forensic disciplines, including the rather suspect art of handwriting analysis.

Also, I got these vibes sometimes, ever since the bomb blast. A homegrown terrorist's handiwork had left me with nerve damage in my right hand, put some scars on the right side of my face and rang my bell but good. Ever since, I got the occasional flash of weird insight. My mother said the spirits had given me something supernatural in return for their pound of flesh, but I didn't believe it. If anything, my brain had been rewired and not necessarily for the better.

Today, that vibe strummed a couple of nerves and piqued their interest, so I set the rectangle of pasteboard down in the center of my desk calendar and smiled.

It was nice to get a line on a new case on a Monday, especially from Cole Sage. The prizewinning investigative journalist from the *Chronicle* had sent me more than one lucrative commission and I appreciated it, even if I couldn't get him to take a serious look at me.

Sigh. Men.

Taking off my classic-cut gray blazer, I hiked the Glock automatic holstered at my left hip so it didn't catch on the arm of the old captain's chair behind my oaken desk. I tossed the jacket on the sofa across the room and reached for the phone in front of me.

When I was in my office, I used my landline as much as possible. It had certain advantages, one of which was the custom-made device it sat on that recorded everything – incoming, outgoing, voice, numbers dialed, messages, the works.

My tech guy Mickey who built the thing says by 2010 people will start to ditch their landlines in favor of cell phones, but that's only five years away and I didn't believe it anyway. He still thinks flying cars are just around the corner. I chalk it up to the same wishful fantasies that promise honest politicians and cheap gas, or even a black president. With Bush still in the White House and the economy in good shape that was a pipe dream.

Putting on my best professional manner, I dialed the number on the card. "Good morning, Ms. Sorkin. This is Cal Corwin of California Investigations," I

said as soon as I heard a woman's voice on the other end. "You said Cole Sage referred me? How may I help you?"

Silence. Then, "I thought Cole said you were..."

"A man? It's all right. I get that all the time." I was sure she'd misunderstood Cole, a common mistake where my name was concerned. People hear and see what they expect, forming false memories that have them swearing to things that never happened.

I had a dozen different responses to her reaction ranging from polite to withering. With potential clients, I played nice. I said, "Is that an issue? I have men among my employees, fit for any necessary role." Not strictly true – the employee part, that was. More like a mixed cast of regular freelancers.

"Yes, uh...I have a serious problem, and I need your help." The woman sounded mid-young, thirties perhaps, like me.

"I'm in my office. Come on by."

"Office? You have an office?"

What did she think, private investigators worked from home? I guess some probably did, but not the better sort. Without a hint of longsuffering, I said, "Yes, I do. Would you like an appointment?"

"Ms. Corwin –"

"California. Just call me Cal. Everyone does."

"All right, uh...Cal. Call me Mira. I thought this was going to be discreet. I can't leave my home."

Thought it was going to be discreet? What is that supposed to mean? And it sounded like she didn't believe Cal was my real name. What did Cole tell this "Mira" about me? I brushed my sable bob back behind my left ear, a nervous habit that diverted attention from the scars on the right, and asked, "Can you explain what this is about?"

"Not over the phone. This is a prepaid cell but I want to talk face to face. I want to see what kind of person you are."

I shrugged mentally. Clients were quirky sometimes, but as long as they paid... "All right. If I have to come to you, I'll be on the clock. Is that a problem?"

"Not at all. I have money."

A client with money was always a welcome sign to an independent businesswoman like me. "Where are you?"

Mira gave a Mill Valley address, and then said, "I'm not entirely sure they aren't watching the house. I'll leave the back gate open and you can come in there if you don't mind."

What "they," I wondered, but decided to ask when I got there. I paused a

moment as I wrote, long enough for Mira to ask, “Did you hear?”

“Yes. I’ll do my best to be *discreet*. See you within an hour.” I put the phone down and put my feet up on the desk to let myself mull things over for a few minutes. I’d often been accused of doing rather than thinking, so forcing myself to employ my “little gray cells” was a good exercise in discipline.

A house in Marin County’s Mill Valley meant upper middle class, except for a few older folks that bought long ago and didn’t sell out to the yuppies. North across the Golden Gate Bridge from the City, Marin was upscale for even its downscale residents, rivalled in the price of housing only by San Francisco proper. Mira’s accent had been pure West Coast, though without the stereotypical Valley-hippie-airhead tones the rest of the country associated with California.

Someone was watching, Mira seemed to think, perhaps tapping her phone or the house itself, and she worried enough to try a bit of cloak and dagger. I attempted to tease out more observations, Sherlock Holmes style, but the only thing on my list was the fact that the client claimed not to be able to leave her home, yet the business card had been hand delivered.

I was throwing on my blazer when I heard the groan. Instinctively my left hand dropped to the butt of my weapon, right reaching for the phone again. That was another reason I liked the hard line – 911 had a much better response time and the dispatch center would see my name and address on their screens.

“Mickey?” I called, easing over toward the open door at the top of the stairs leading to the floor below.

A strained voice drifted up. “Yeah, Boss. Sorry.”

I took my hand off the weapon and descended the steps quickly. On the lower level – technically not a basement as it walked out the back into a common courtyard-cum-private-parking-lot – I flipped on the light.

“Ow, ow – please, Cal.”

I picked my way across the floor cluttered with computer gear and rotated the blinds open before turning the ceiling light back off from the nearest switch. The overcast of the day provided soft but sufficient illumination to reveal the corpulent body of Mickey Tucker, my...well, it was hard to say just what he was. Lost soul, hacker extraordinaire, sloppy puppy, champion online gamer, research assistant. Mickey was all of those things, and often put his considerable talents to work for the relatively cheap price of computer gear, crash space and food money.

“Mickey, how many times have I asked you to just close the door at the top of the stairs and move the little slider to ‘*The Wizard is IN.*’ Someday I’ll end up shooting your sorry ass.”

“Some days I wish you would.” Mickey sat up on the old overstuffed sofa

that served him as crash space and rubbed his eyes with the back of his pudgy hands. He reached for a half-empty thousand-pill bottle of generic aspirin sitting on a subwoofer and palmed a handful into his mouth, following it up with a swig from one of the dozen half-filled plastic bottles of flat diet soda scattered around the place.

“All-nighter?”

“A double. Been here since Saturday, trying to beat the boss on Level 666. No cheats.”

“No cheats, eh? So did you?”

Mickey shook his head. “Nope. Think I passed out. Woke up on the floor. Crawled to the couch...”

I sniffed. “At least you still have something to look forward to. That and a shower.”

“Yeah. Sorry. I have some deodorant in the bathroom. Got any food?” he asked hopefully.

“No, but I have a case, which means you have a job and you can buy yourself breakfast. Stay near your gear, all right? I need you to actually work today.”

Mickey licked his lips and put on puppy eyes above his scraggly beard. “Umm...”

Understanding perfectly, I took out a money clip from my front jeans pocket and peeled off a twenty. “That’ll get you something from Ritual Coffee. Here.” I photocopied Mira’s business card, back and front, on the all-in-one printer, and then handed it to Mickey, taking the copy for myself. “See if you can lift the original number from under that scribble. After that, find out all you can about one Miranda Sorkin, pharmacist.”

“Above or below the line?”

I chewed my inner lip. “Above, for now. I’ll let you know when to start tunneling.” I could afford to hire Mickey as a researcher, but didn’t want to promise him a lot more for hacking until I found out what this job would pay. While I wasn’t behind on my bills right now, I detested a negative cash flow like Mickey hated losing his T1 line.

“You got a working sniffer?” I went on.

“Sure...around here somewhere.” Mickey rooted among some equipment and came up with a box the size of an old transistor radio.

I took it, checked the battery, and thanked him with a nod while sliding it into my blazer pocket.

Chapter 2

Exiting the basement walkout, I approached Molly, my royal blue Subaru Impreza, parked in the courtyard. Her parking space was part of the office building deed, and of my two cars, Molly was the more practical and could stand the weather best. My house a couple of blocks away – Mother's really, in her name though I'd paid for it – had only a one-car garage, like most of the local restored Victorians. I wasn't leaving Madge, my lime-green custom 1968 Mustang California Special ragtop, out in the rain.

Besides, I liked the walk.

I gave the Subaru a once-over by habit before sliding behind the steering wheel with a contented sigh. Something about the driver's seat of a rally car felt like home. No, not *home*. It felt like where I *belonged*.

Molly's supercharged engine screamed and her grippy rain tires would have squealed as I pulled out if the pavement hadn't been wet. While I had foregone most of the external markers of a hot rally ride when my girl had been customized, on the inside the car was a regionals-class racer.

I indulged my hobby whenever I had both time and money to spare, which meant not often enough. One nice thing about a case was I got to drive on the client's dime.

Shooting up Valencia to catch 101, I wove exuberantly through light traffic past the Palace of Fine Arts before crossing the old Presidio and onto the Golden Gate Bridge. The early afternoon breeze blew gusty and the fog was clearing fitfully, the day promising mist and sprinkling at sea level beneath brooding overcast until inevitable swirls of night rolled back in. I cracked the window to let in the fresh offshore air, smelling the tang of kelp and fish as Green Day's latest hit *Holiday* blasted from the stereo.

Five miles later I reached Mill Valley, a Marin suburb now green with recent rains. My GPS brought me to a house at the edge of the flat older section of town where the road just started to crawl upward into the low hills above. The dwellings I saw there were a bit smaller and more aged than those perched above, meaning they could be had for under a million. The higher the view, the higher the price. I glanced at a monstrosity at the top that had to cost at least ten mil and shook my head. When the Big One finally came, that puppy would

mudslide down like a Stinson Beach surfer on steroids, taking eight or ten other dwellings down with it.

When I got close, I flicked the GPS off to stop the cheery canned voice from complaining and pulled over to take a casual look at the front of Mira's house. Everything seemed neat and orderly except that a temporary wooden holder had been driven into the front lawn, the kind that held real estate "for sale" signs, though its crossbeam was empty.

I pulled out again and cruised the neighborhood looking for obvious signs of surveillance – delivery vans or small RVs parked on the street, large dark American sedans with suits in them, or houses with blinds lowered but rotated open. Nothing jumped out at me, so I parked around the corner at the end of the block.

Fortunately an unusual vacant lot bearing signs of local kids and their BMX habits allowed me to access the back gate of the Sorkin home without too much trouble via a footpath that wended its way behind the houses. This arrangement was odd but not unknown, especially in older developments built under the liberal or nonexistent zoning laws of the past.

It looked like these places had been individually constructed in the 1950s to house the Greatest Generation as they rebuilt postwar America, and had been renovated many times since, creating a patchwork of styles. Pseudo-Spanish architecture abounded – Sorkin's was one of those – but I also spotted Cape Cod, Colonial and several variants on mid-century modernism. In short, typical coastal California.

I pushed on the back gate of the weathered wooden six-foot privacy fence and slipped inside. The yard I saw teemed lush and had begun sliding into overgrown as if neglected for months. No swimming pool – the coast range towns were too cold from the Pacific breezes to make that feature *de rigueur*. Mark Twain had famously said, "The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco," which definitely applied to Marin County as well, even in July.

Movement behind the kitchen window made me pick my way up the garden path toward the back door, where I met a brown-haired Caucasian woman not too different in build from myself. With unwashed curls and housecoat, bloodshot eyes and shaky hands, she looked like hell.

Without speaking, she took my arm and pulled me toward a small, separate building.

Opening a door, the woman motioned me into what turned out to be the house's small freestanding garage. It smelled of automobile, wood and dust. Shutting the portal behind, the woman flipped on the bare-bulb light above a

nondescript Toyota sedan, and then let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you for coming, Ms. Corwin. I’m Mira Sorkin.” She clutched my right hand as if drowning, and then let go suddenly, confused at what she felt there.

It hardly bothered me anymore, people’s reactions. Best to get it over with. I brushed the hair back on my right side, revealing the scars that the reconstructive surgery hadn’t been able to completely banish. I’d had my bob cut to fall over them and with a bit of makeup I could conceal where they crept into the open along my jawline.

Mira’s surprise flattened out with the smoothing of her face. I ignored the other woman’s emotions by dint of long practice. “Bomb,” I said curtly, holding up my right hand and flexing it. “I was lucky. This hand’s a bit weak, but the blast didn’t even damage my eye.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Mira froze, as if not sure what to be sorry about, or how to act. “I suppose in your business...”

My business? I wondered if Mira thought all P.I.s encountered bombs, or should be damaged goods, like in a noir novel where the protagonist is always on the edge of falling apart, usually from alcoholism. Maybe Cole had told her I had been a cop, or that the P.I. trade was shady. Maybe that’s what she meant.

“It’s fine, really,” I repeated. “Can’t even tell with my hair in place. Got some ID?”

“What?”

“ID. I like to know for sure who I’m talking to.”

“Oh...not on me. Inside.”

I grunted in irritation. “Okay, later. Why are we in the garage?”

“I can’t be sure the house isn’t bugged.”

“Then why don’t we go somewhere else?”

Mira pulled a cordless handset out of her housecoat pocket. “I have to stay by my home phone.”

It appeared Mira would say more, but I held my hand out for the cordless and examined it briefly before pulling out a multi-tool from my belt. “Let’s make sure this isn’t bugged either, otherwise we’re in here for nothing.”

After opening it up, I shook my head, screwed it back together and handed it to Mira. “Nope. Looks clear. Now what’s this all about?”

Mira shuddered and breathed deeply in, and then out. Her exhalation sent the sharp sour smell of alcohol wafting under my nose. “My daughter was kidnapped two days ago.”

Hairs rose on the back of my neck as my cop sense woke up with a surge. I had expected some kind of marital dispute, even a custody battle, not capital crimes for breakfast. And Mira had been so calm on the phone.

If it was my daughter I'd have been climbing the walls and looking for someone to shoot.

I wiped the leg of my jeans where I'd brushed the Toyota in the close confines of the small garage. "Mira, let's go inside. I'll check for bugs in your house," I said, pulling out the sniffer and holding it up, "and maybe I could trouble you for a bagel or something. I came right over after our call and I haven't eaten. I think better with some calories in me."

"Of course, of course." Mira retraced her steps, leading us through the back yard.

"Remember, don't say anything that matters until I give you the all-clear."

Once we'd made our way into the house, Mira poured mugs of coffee and dropped two bagels into the toaster, puttering around as if lost. The interior of the house showed off the latest look. The kitchen had high-end counters, cabinets and appliances, and the brewing coffee dripped from a machine that probably cost more than a set of rally tires. It smelled heavenly.

So Mira was comfortably well off. I tried to figure how much I could ask for and not feel guilty, reminding myself that "a workman is worthy of his wages." Even after two years off the force it was hard to charge people money to help them, but I had a business to run and bills to pay.

While Mira puttered, I ran the sniffer over the kitchen and nook, and then the living room, working outward.

Nothing.

A less thorough check of the three-bedroom upstairs made me reasonably sure that no microphones lurked. Someone might be wiretapping the phone line on the way out or there might be one of any number of devices attached to the computer in the corner, but at least it seemed we didn't have to worry about talking.

I did see pictures of Mira and a girl in various settings taken within the last ten years. I recognized a couple of local landmarks – the carousel at Fisherman's Wharf, the observation deck of Coit Tower, the Alcatraz dock. As I looked at the photos, nowhere did I see a man or anybody else that might be family.

The girl's father must be out of the picture. Gone, rather than dead. People didn't excise the dear departed from their memorabilia, only those they didn't like anymore.

Or I suppose he could have been a sperm donor. Unusual, but not unknown.

Just to be sure we were not overheard, I shut the drapes and turned on the stereo in the living room, hoping the two tactics would limit the ability of anyone to paint a windowpane with a laser pickup. Devices like that read the sound waves coming off the glass, but worked best with a quiet background.

Finally, I sat down in the kitchen nook across from Mira. I slapped blueberry cream cheese on a bagel. "Okay, I think we're clear. First," I lifted a finger, "business. It's a hundred an hour plus expenses, max a thousand a day, and I need ten thousand up front as a retainer." I'd charged more, occasionally a lot less, but to a pharmacist who probably took down two or three hundred large a year, ten should be doable.

Nor was I wrong. Mira nodded without flinching. "I'll write you a check. Just help me, please."

"Good. Now, tell me about this kidnapping. Start with why you haven't called the cops."

Mira gulped from her mug, her eyes bleak. "The people that took her said not to talk to police, but they didn't say anything specifically about a...someone like you."

My expression might have turned a bit strained, but I tried to ignore her words. The client was the client. "I used to be a cop, if that makes you feel better."

"Really? How did you...never mind."

Ignoring her strange attitude, I asked, "So why did you wait two days to get in touch with me?" Or maybe she didn't wait. The card could have been put into my drop box any time after Friday night.

"Cole Sage was the only person I knew that wasn't police, that might have...connections to...people like you...so I called him first and he referred me. Don't worry. I can keep my mouth shut. But I gave them what they wanted and thought I would get Talia back right away but it didn't happen, and now it's been more than an extra day and I'm about to lose my mind."

So Mira could keep her mouth shut, she claimed. That was another odd thing to say. I fished the photocopy of the business card from a pocket, not letting her see the front as I unfolded it, glancing at it before I folded it over again. Something seemed out of whack, but damned if I knew what. Things were tugging at my subconscious, but weren't ready to surface. "Cole said to get in touch with me...how?"

"I put the card where he told me to, and he said you'd get it."

So that explained how the card got to my office. Cole Sage must have picked it up and dropped off. He did live in the City, a couple of miles from my office and home in the Mission District. It would be just like the journalist to do it that way. I'd probably come on too strong last time and scared him off, dammit. Or, to be fair, he knew of my late-night proclivities and when I didn't answer the office buzzer he simply dropped it off and left.

On the other hand, there'd been no message on my answering machine.

Cole was nothing if not meticulous. He confirmed everything. I filed that anomaly away.

While I was thinking, Mira finished her coffee, and then went back to the machine for another fill-up. Her stealthy motions as she did it, the details hidden by her turned back, and the *clop* sound of plastic on the counter triggered recognition in my brain.

“You might want to go easy on that stuff,” I said.

Slowly Mira turned, an orange prescription pill bottle in her hand. “I just...”

“You don’t have to make excuses. I’d be popping Valium too if I was in your position.” I wouldn’t, but I was trying to be sympathetic. Fortunately I never had any trouble with drugs or alcohol.

Adrenaline...that was another story.

Mira sighed. “It’s prescribed. I have anxiety these last couple of years, since my divorce. Panic attacks sometimes.”

“I’m not judging you.”

“I’m a pharmacist, you know,” she said as if that explained something.

“Yes. It was on your card.”

“I don’t have enough money for anyone to make Talia a ransom target but I’m the assistant warehouse manager for the biggest distributor in the northern Bay Area. My building has hundreds of millions of dollars worth of high-grade pharmaceuticals in it, though not many people know it.”

“And they wanted you to, what? Help them rob the place?”

“Yes. They forced me to give them my keycard and my codes. They have my thumbprint on a silicone thingy, which I assume they were going to use on the scanner. They also have all my personal info – social security number, former addresses, family names...and they made me tell them what my security questions and responses were.”

“There’s a monitored alarm?”

Mira nodded, seeming to relax as the Valium hit her, so fast that part of the effect must be psychosomatic. So she wasn’t kidding about using them for a while. “Yes. To open the warehouse you have to call the monitoring center, identify yourself, give them a password, respond correctly to a security question, scan a keycard, put in a PIN code and put your thumb on a scanner. Oh, and all of that is in front of a high-resolution camera with them looking on. Otherwise they send a security team and call the cops.”

I sat back, taking a bite of bagel and sipping my coffee. It gave me time to think. “That’s a lot of security. They would have to have someone to double for you on camera. So right off the bat we know there’s a Caucasian woman of

about your age involved, maybe with dark hair. Of course, she could wear a wig. Did you see any of them?”

“No. Just a male voice, middle aged I’d say, on my home phone. Blocked number.”

I took another bite and a sip, thinking while Mira fidgeted idly with her cup. “But you say they haven’t pulled the heist?”

“I...I don’t think so. I had the grocery nearby bring me a prepaid cell phone along with a few other things – they do deliveries, costs an arm and a leg, but what can you do – and used it to call the security center and ask them for the exact time I’d last been at the warehouse. I told them I needed it for my records, and they gave me the same time I closed up Friday night. So the kidnappers haven’t used my info yet. As far as I know.”

“Maybe you better start at the beginning and tell me step by step what happened.”

“But my daughter! She’s in danger!”

I put my cup and bagel down and stared at Mira, not allowing myself to throw her own two-day delay back in her face. Not with a paying client. “Mira, I have to get all the details straight in my mind because *any* clue might be the one that helps me find Talia. Believe me, this will save time later. If you call the cops now it’ll take them twice as long to get started on this and there will be a lot of hoopla. Odds are very good that your daughter’s fine. Because you have had no personal contact with them, there’s no reason for property criminals to kill, especially not a pretty little middle-class white girl. The public would eat it up and there would be a manhunt coast to coast. The thieves don’t want that kind of heat on them.”

Mira’s face turned shocked and angry. “What does being a pretty white girl have to do with it?”

I sighed, rubbing my head, trying to put myself in her position. “It’s sad, but I’m just stating the bald, non-PC truth. Dozens of poor kids – mostly black and Hispanic – go missing every day in America, but only a handful of well-off white girls. Who gets on TV?” I deliberately did not go into my personal experiences with missing children. When things went off the rails, they usually did so horribly, but I sure wasn’t going to tell her that.

Mira looked as if she was on the verge of tears. “That’s terrible.”

“I know, but perversely, it’s good news. They’re less likely to hurt her. Really. She’ll be okay. I’ll find her.”

“I never thought anything like this would ever happen to us.”

“No one ever does. Take a deep breath and tell me what happened from the beginning. Give me details if you can.”

Mira took that deep breath and spoke. “Friday night after work I drove home and parked in my garage. Talia should have been here waiting for me – she’s a latchkey kid. The school bus drops her off on the corner. When I got inside I found a note in the middle of the table. There was also a big envelope with a form to fill out with all the information they wanted, just like an application, and a little plastic box with silicone in it for my thumbprint.”

“What did it say? I don’t suppose you copied it?”

“No, I didn’t think to... It just said to fill out the form and put everything including the note into the envelope, seal it and put it in my mailbox. It said they were watching, and not to call the cops or anyone, *or else*, and that they would return Talia by Saturday evening.”

“Saturday evening. So they probably intended the heist for Friday night or Saturday morning early. They’d tell the security people ‘you’ forgot to do something so you had to come in, but it would be the imposter. What happened next?”

“I did exactly what they said. I filled in every bit of information and put my thumbprint in the silicone box.” Mira’s tone was condescending, perhaps even self-righteous, as if doing what the kidnappers had said should have made everything work out.

I was beginning to vaguely dislike Mira. I wasn’t sure why. She wasn’t overly privileged or rude and she certainly couldn’t be blamed too much for popping pills in a situation like this, two days full of helplessness. Maybe it was just the feeling the woman looked down on me despite the fact it would be *my* ass on the line. Or perhaps it was a strong hunch she wasn’t being fully truthful with me despite the risk to her daughter.

Mira said, “Anyway, I put the envelope in my mailbox – it’s out front at the curb – and went into my bedroom and stayed there like the note said.”

“Your bedroom faces the back, right?”

“Right.”

“So when did the envelope get picked up?”

“Sometime in the middle of the night, I guess. I fell asleep finally about two, and then I woke up around seven thinking it had all been a dream until I remembered again that Talia was gone. No one had called. I went out to check and the envelope was gone from the mailbox. I came back inside, got something to eat, checked my email, turned on the TV and waited. They called about an hour later.”

“So that was Saturday morning...they called around eight? But you checked the mailbox around seven?”

“Yes. Does that matter?”

“It may.” It indicated, but didn’t prove, that the perps were not actually watching or listening in at the Sorkin house. I would have thought they’d have called as soon as they saw or heard Mira check the mailbox, not an hour later... unless they were very clever and that’s what they wanted anyone to think.

“Go on. Tell me about the phone call. You didn’t happen to record it, did you?” Lots of doctors had recorders on their phones for malpractice protection.

“No. I never thought I’d need anything like that. I mean, I don’t deal directly with patients. I was hired for my degree, not my clinicals.”

So she had no interest in helping people *per se* with her medical degree; she just wanted to be a well-paid glorified warehouse clerk. A little girl was in the hands of kidnappers, I reminded myself. Not to mention the ten grand and a client that, no matter what her job, didn’t deserve her current karma, especially not as it was tangled up with her daughter’s. At ten, Talia was innocent. I had a child to find and bring home safe.

“The phone call,” I reminded Mira.

“Yeah. Well, his voice was ordinary. Middle aged, as I said, and probably white. At least, he didn’t seem to have any...”

“Ethnic markers?” I prompted.

“Yes. No accent, either.”

“So you mean he sounded like he was from around here?” When people said “no accent,” what they usually meant was that the person spoke like they did.

“Yes, that’s what I mean. American English, not black or Hispanic or Asian...no offense.”

I chuckled. “One grandmother was Japanese, one Mexican, but my parents and I were all born here, so...none taken.” It showed just how PC everything was getting that Mira felt she had to apologize for making the simple factual observation that I was not quite white. “Go on.”

“He reminded me they were watching and listening. If I kept quiet and they had no trouble, Talia would be returned Sunday. It wasn’t fair because they said they’d return her Saturday night and now they pushed it back. Then they let me talk to her for a few seconds, I guess just to show that she was all right. She said she was okay. I could tell she was scared, but not absolutely terrified. She always was a brave little thing, like a boy.”

I bit back a reflexive lecture on gender stereotypes, because Mira’s characterization reminded me of myself and things my mom used to say about me. Sticking to the facts, I said, “Was that it? Did they say *how* Talia would be returned to you?”

“No, but...I mean, this is supposed to be a safe neighborhood. They could

drop her off anywhere and she could just walk home, and it's not like they care about her...oh, God." A sob welled up from Mira and forced itself from her throat. "Please, you have to get her back."

I reached across to take Mira's soft, well-manicured hand in my own callused left, keeping my right back. I'm a leftie and hadn't lost capability on my strong side. To merely look at my right you couldn't tell anything was amiss, but people were still funny when they sensed weakness, as if at some level they thought it was contagious.

"That's what you hired me for – to get her back. Not to catch crooks. That's the police's job. I'll do my very best. So, what happened next?"

"Well, I waited all day and all night, just trying to keep busy. It was agonizing. Then, when Talia didn't show up by noon Sunday, I started to panic. I got the prepaid phone and called Cole. He said he was out of town on assignment but asked a couple of questions that made me think to call the alarm monitoring, like I said, and found out they hadn't used my info to get in to the building and steal the drugs yet. Then he told me he knew someone that could help, though I didn't know who you were then. He just said you were someone discreet and *connected*. The rest you know."

No, I thought as I stared at Mira. I didn't know why Cole would say I was *connected*. That word usually referred to someone in organized crime. Or maybe Mira was getting the words wrong. Maybe he said I *had connections*, which was quite a different thing.

I also didn't know why Mira didn't just phone me on her burner and try to reach me Sunday. I checked my messages once a day at least. And, I didn't know how that card got into my drop box. It was one of the parts of this whole deal that made no sense. There might be a couple of other things I didn't know, but I couldn't pin them down yet, and if I asked outright, I'd tip her off for sure...

"So here it is Monday afternoon. Are you sure they haven't stolen the drugs between your call yesterday and right now?"

"Well, I emailed in sick, and then got a reply from my assistant, who would have mentioned anything wrong, I think. Then I called the monitoring center again this morning, just after shift change so it was different guys. I didn't want them to wonder about me asking the same question again. They gave me the same answer as before so...pretty sure."

"And you have heard nothing more from the kidnappers?"

"No. Nothing."

"Okay. You know," I said, speaking clearly and distinctly to try to help Mira focus, "at some point we will have to bring the police into this, even if it's just to report the whole thing after we get her back, so you need to be ready. Once I'm

gone, I want you to write down everything that happened, every detail, every jot and tittle that you can think of. It will help you later when you have to make a statement, and I may find it useful too. I notice you have a fax machine.”

“Yes, right there.” She pointed.

“When you’re done, fax it to my office at this number. Don’t email it, fax it. Harder to intercept, even if they are tapping your home phone, which I don’t believe they are.” I scribbled my numbers down on the corner of the card photocopy and tore it off. “Call me from that burner phone if you need anything or you think of something else.”

Mira picked up the scrap of paper and looked at it, and then nodded.

“Oh, are you moving soon? I saw the real estate sign holder on the lawn.”

“I *was* thinking about getting something newer but changed my mind,” Mira said, a bit cautiously it seemed to me. “Now I wish I had already. Maybe...” She rubbed her face. “Anyway, a gated community is safer for Talia.”

“Do you have a picture of her you could lend me?”

“Sure.” She retrieved a snapshot from a desk in the other room, and then set it in front of me.

I cleared my throat. “And I’ll need that check.”

“Of course.” Mira pulled a beautiful wallet out of her matching designer handbag and quickly wrote out the amount and the numbers, and then signed it with a ballpoint. She left the TO line blank when she handed it to me.

I stared at the check for a moment. That tug again. My conscience, or my cop sense? Sometimes they were hard to distinguish from each other. Also, Mira’s handwriting seemed to have improved from the scribble on the card. Probably more relaxed with the Valium in her.

I folded the piece of paper in half, slipping it deep into my money clip, which resided in a tight front jeans pocket. “Thank you. I’ll be in touch by dinnertime at the latest. Please don’t do anything before then without calling.” I stood.

“Of course. Thank you so much.” Mira stood and reached for the pill bottle again.

“And Mira...don’t take too many of those, all right?” I held up a hand in apology. “I’m not judging. Just because you need to be clearheaded. For your daughter. For Talia.”

“Yeah. I’ll...I’ll wait until later.”

“Is there anyone who can come stay with you? Someone you can trust?”

Mira shook her head. “No. No one close enough for this.”

I wasn’t huggy with women, but I made myself reach across to take Mira’s hand. “If you want me to look into this, I have to go now. You’ll be all right?”

You'll be strong?"

A tear rolled down Mira's cheek, quickly wiped away. "I think so."

"Okay, then. I have to go find your daughter."

"I know. Go on."

Chapter 3

I let myself out Mira Sorkin's back gate with relief. Now I felt like going, *doing*. The bright afternoon sun continued its struggle to burn away the lingering coastal drizzle, reinforcing that feeling of gusty, crackling energy.

I dialed Mickey's desk phone before I had reached Molly, speaking as I picked my way across the wet unmowed grass and weeds of the vacant lot, avoiding muddy BMX paths. "What you got?"

"Miranda Almone Sorkin, née Herndon, born in 1970 so she's thirty-five. Married once to Dennis Wilson Sorkin. No criminal record for either of them. Graduated Stanford pre-med at twenty and then UOP Doctor of Pharmacy at twenty-three. Married shortly after graduating in 1993, when she went to work for North Bay Distributors, a drug wholesaler owned by Rankin Pharmaceuticals. One ten-year-old child, Talia, born in 1995. They divorced in 2003, but she kept his name."

"Tell me about the ex," I said as I fobbed open my car with a beep and got in. At this point I really didn't think Mira was being watched. In fact, given that the heist – the presumed heist – had not taken place, Mira supposedly had not heard from the kidnappers and I had found no bugs, I doubted they were watching the house at all.

"Dennis is an MBA, a stockbroker. Liked to live big, from what I can tell. Flew high for a few years but lost a bunch of his clients' money on some bad trades right before the divorce. Dodged criminal charges, but the trading house dumped him hard. Looks like she was paying his bills for a while. Then they split up and he moved to Seattle where he now works at a small firm. Less than two mil in client assets. That's not bad, but not big like he used to be. He took home one hundred ten thousand last year."

"Decent, but not even what Mira makes." I popped the phone into its hands-free cradle and stuck the headset on. "So he either learned from getting burned and is on the straight and level or he's got an angle, something not obviously traceable, and is working this pedestrian gig as a cover. Was the parting amicable?"

"Not at all. Looks like a lot of bad blood, motions and countermotions, accusing each other of bad parenting, crazy stuff. Everything but child

molestation and adultery. Almost comical, really.”

“No adultery charges? Why did they break up, then?”

“The initial filing listed ‘irreconcilable differences.’”

“When things start to get ugly, people begin to lie. At least, exaggerate. Seems weird that neither accused the other of sleeping around.”

I could almost hear Mickey shrug over the phone. “Sometimes it just all goes wrong. That’s what Mom says when I ask about what happened with Dad.”

“Yeah.”

“I was wondering if maybe Dennis figured out a way to burn Mira. Maybe he sicced this heist crew on to her as payback for getting custody of the daughter?” Mickey said.

“Maybe.” I chewed my lip. “Hard to believe he’d put his daughter at risk, though.”

“Probably didn’t know they’d kidnap her. Things got out of hand.”

“Mickey, you’re smarter than you look.”

“Thanks, I think. Does that mean you want me to keep tunneling?” No surprise, Mickey sounded eager to put his skills to use and make some money doing it.

“Yeah. Dig away on both of them. I got an advance and as long as the check doesn’t bounce you’re good for a few days of work.”

“Sa-weet.”

I revved the Impreza’s engine, spun the wheel and hit forty in the twenty-five zone in two seconds flat, twisting through the narrow car-lined streets. Unlike more modern suburbs, garages and driveways were small in this neighborhood, seldom holding more than one car, and curbside parking was the norm. “I need you to take a look at Sorkin’s landline records for the last week, incoming and outgoing. Flag repeat calls, and try to match all the numbers to names. Then cross-reference them with the ex’s. Also,” I kept my voice casual, “pull up Cole Sage’s records. Any numbers he has, including his office numbers at the *Chronicle*. See if anything lines up. Print those all out, will you?” If I was going to pay Mickey to hack, I might as well feed my favorite obsession. Okay, maybe second favorite, or third, after racing and poker.

“Okay, Boss. I’ll have all this by tonight. Tomorrow at the latest.”

“That’s my boy.”

“I wish.” Mickey hung up.

“I heard a wistful undertone in Mickey’s words,” my dead father said in my ear. Okay, I knew he wasn’t really there. He wasn’t a ghost, I was pretty sure. He’d never told me anything I didn’t already know or reveal secrets of the Other Side. But ever since the bomb blast, he’d show up and talk to me, usually when I

was driving alone.

I couldn't help but look over at the passenger seat. Sometimes I could see him, sometimes only hear his words. Today he sat there in his corduroy jacket and long 70s haircut, exactly like he appeared in my favorite photo of him, the one on my office wall.

"Poor guy's had a crush on me since I hired him for one of my first private cases," I replied as if nothing weird was going on, refusing to allow tears to spring to my eyes. I'd found if I tried to make the hallucination go away, whatever part of my mind created it fought back harder. Better to simply roll with it, talk it out and let it fade along with the ache in my heart.

"I wouldn't worry. It's a hopeless nerdy fanboy thing, like having the hots for Halle Berry because she plays superheroes and villains."

"I don't worry."

"I hope you don't flirt with Mickey to keep him working harder for you."

I shook my head. "That would be cheap. Besides, unrequited hope seems to flow like caffeine through the whole gamer crowd's veins. I don't have to encourage him."

"But you don't *discourage* him."

"I don't want to crush his ego."

"If you did, he might get over you and find a girlfriend."

"I can't do that. I'm shocked you'd even suggest it."

"Sometimes you have to kill the hope-monkey," he said.

The hope-monkey was a metaphor Dad often used. He said people were addicted to hope like a junkie to the needle. I thought about Cole, knowing I might have more in common with Mickey than I'd admit. Maybe it was the scarring that put Cole off. I massaged the damaged area around my right ear with the heel of my hand. That part always still felt like it was asleep. My thoughts turned dark as I answered my own question.

"Your mind is wandering," my father said.

"It does that."

"You don't look that bad. Plenty of men show interest in you."

"Children don't run screaming and people don't flinch away, you mean." When I see myself in the mirror or a snapshot someone has taken of me I look completely normal, but what woman doesn't obsess over her flaws?

"Screw Cole," Dad said. "Get a grip, girl. Plenty of fish in the sea."

That was proof positive this apparition was no spirit, just a hallucination. Dad never used language even that strong. He'd been a good Catholic and a crusader for social justice, unfailingly polite even when he was being tough.

"Easier said than done, Dad."

I waited, but he didn't answer. When I looked over, he was gone, thank God.

Breaking out of the cramped neighborhood with relief, I turned off my higher brain function and floored it onto Miller Avenue, raced through the traffic as if I was at Le Mans, reveling in the physical. My fuzzbuster showed green and lasers didn't work very well in the drizzling rain, so unless some overzealous uniform got eyeballs on me, I should be fine. Adrenaline sang through my veins like joy, mixed with anger on Mira's behalf.

Whatever it takes to get Talia back, I'll do, I vowed.

I proceeded down Bridgeway until it met 101 again. The state highway was still lightly traveled and should remain so in the misty daytime until rush hour and ocean fog made their inevitable rendezvous on the Golden Gate Bridge before dusk.

I was happy to live and work in the same neighborhood where I grew up, the Mission District, now a bit more gentrified than it used to be but still full of character, and not have to commute in to work as I used to. Beat cops, even detectives, didn't make enough to live alone in the City, but now I owned my office and cars free and clear.

I'd also bought Mom and myself a house, and all it had cost was a damaged hand and face, one eardrum, some nerves and skin – and my career.

I'd happily trade the money back if I could. Because I couldn't, I worked hard, played harder, and lived life the hardest I could. "Die young, stay pretty, live fast 'cause it won't last," Blondie sang on the radio when I was a teenager in the 80s. Meat Loaf had an answer for her: "Two out of three ain't bad."

After crossing the Golden Gate I exited onto Marina Boulevard, just by coincidence less than a mile from Cole's place, and then pulled over. I opened up his speed-dial entry and pushed the button. When I called it went through to voice mail, so I left a message in hopes of getting a callback to clarify things. Maybe he could give me some more background on Mira. She'd said he was out of town, but it was Monday. Maybe he had returned from his trip by now. I needed a lead and I hated to return to the office and hang around waiting for Mickey to come up with something.

After trying Cole's office and unsuccessfully trying to get something more out of the receptionist, I decided to plug the address of the pharmaceutical warehouse into the GPS.

The voice of the machine led me back across the Bridge and up to a discreet commercial district in San Rafael straight to a large building with a high, heavy fence that I would have taken for a corporate headquarters rather than a warehouse if not for its utter lack of windows. A tiny plate read, "North Bay

Distributors.” When I pulled up to the talk-box at the barrier I had my story ready.

“Hi, Cal Corwin of Corwin Security,” I said. I actually had several business licenses, including security consultant and bail bondsman. Telling someone up front you were an investigator wasn’t always the best move. “I need to talk with your security people.”

“Umm...I can give you the number up at Corporate,” the young male voice said from the speaker.

The camera feed should be showing my face, my good side thank God, so I ran my hair behind my ear and smiled winningly. “How about the number to the monitoring center? That can’t be against the rules, right?”

“Umm...okay. But I can’t open the gate for you.”

“That’s fine. Just the number is good.”

I wrote it down and then backed up, waving an apology at the driver behind me as I did a five-point turn in the cramped space of the lane between the curbs. I called Mickey as I drove and interrupted him long enough to get me a reverse lookup on the number. I plugged that into my GPS.

Back when I was on the force we didn’t have these things. The department wasn’t going to spring for expensive new gadgets, but for me it was an essential time saver.

This time the machine led me farther northward to Novato and an office building with an open parking lot and a lot of traffic in and out. I could have just phoned, but I find a friendly face gets a lot more results than just a voice on the line when it comes to bending the rules.

At least forty clients were listed on the directory, with Clawson Monitoring on the second floor. I breezed through the unwatched lobby. Somehow I thought it ironic that the drug warehouse was well defended while the office of the security center was not. Seemed like a point of weakness.

At least the steel company door was locked, with a keypad and card reader to the side. Its small identifying sign seemed understated. I knocked, waited, and then knocked again harder before getting an answer.

The man who answered the door narrowed his middle-aged eyes in suspicion. “Can I help you?” He didn’t sound like he wanted to help me at all.

“Cal Corwin of Corwin Security.” I waved my impressive but largely meaningless badge at him. “Can I get a few minutes of your time?”

Relaxing fractionally after looking each way down the hall, apparently ensuring I was alone, he said, “Sure. Come on in.”

I followed him into a bare reception lounge with a couple of naked workstations in it – phones, computers, not much else. No one sat at them. In

one corner squatted an old refrigerator next to a kitchenette – countertops, cabinets, a two-burner stove, microwave and sink. A restroom door and another unmarked one completed the points of interest. I presumed the second entry led to the real monitoring center.

The man waved me to a seat and then sat down nearby. “What’s this about?” His eyes set deep in a grizzled hatchet face stayed very still, like a hunter, as did his whipcord-lean body.

“You’ve been on the job?” I asked, recognizing the signs.

“Like you. Bill Clawson, Lieutenant, Chicago PD, retired.” He still didn’t hold out his corded, veined hand.

“Cal Corwin, as I said. Eight years SFPD.”

His eyes flicked to my hip. “Still carry, I see.”

“Good catch. Yes, I do.”

“I don’t.” Distance surfaced in his haunted blue eyes.

“Should I ask why?”

“Can’t stand to touch a weapon anymore.” Bill snorted ruefully. “Pathetic, huh?”

I shook my head. “I get it. Everyone reacts differently.” I understood. Once bitten. Ask a plane crash survivor how they feel about flying. Some could do it and some couldn’t. I felt certain Bill had killed someone on the job and a piece inside him had broken off. Maybe it still rattled in his head. Given Chicago’s reputation as the murder capital of the U.S., I wasn’t surprised.

“So what’s this about?” Bill’s azure orbs searched my face and I felt myself getting distracted. I was always a sucker for damaged goods, especially a man with a bit of age on him. Mom says it’s daddy issues and I couldn’t really argue. My father had died young of a heart attack and left us both needing him.

Forcing myself to look away, I glanced around at the room. Suddenly, I doubted that this man had anything to do with Talia’s disappearance. Sometimes I just knew. That vibe again maybe, or just old-fashioned cop sense.

After a brief internal debate I decided to show some cards. Normally I’d go slower, be more cautious, but the clock was ticking on Talia, so I had to take a risk. Either this guy was clean and I could use his help or he was dirty and I should see it in his responses. Either way, I’d win.

“I’ll level with you, Bill, as far as I can. I am a security consultant sometimes, but right now I’m investigating a crime. I can’t give you too many details, but I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Cop to cop?”

“Yeah.” I met his eyes this time. They turned cool, appraising. “It’s about a young girl, if that makes you feel better.”

Bull's-eye. Bill's face crumbled and I rejoiced inside at his strong reaction, hoping it meant information was about to flow.

"How did you know?" he asked.

That sounded like an admission. Diamond clarity seized me by the scruff of the neck. "Just following leads, Bill," I said, casually letting my hand drift down near my holster.

Bill's eyes narrowed as they followed my movement. "Why would you be asking about her? It was...it was seven years ago."

"What was?"

"My baby girl. My little Sandy."

Baffled, I tried to keep from showing it. "The girl I'm talking about is missing right now."

"Oh." Bill took a deep breath, almost a sob. "I thought...but that makes no sense," he repeated. "I'm sorry. It's burned into my skull. May fourteenth, 1998, I...I had too much to drink. I came home, fell into bed, failed to secure my service revolver, and..."

Oh, God. I could see it in a flash of imagination. His daughter, walking in to see Daddy. Disobeying, as kids will do. Picking the gun up.

Pulling the trigger.

Bill, waking to that sound and a world-shattering nightmare of guilt, remorse, despair. Must have wrecked his marriage, too. Hard for a mother to forgive something like that.

My voice cracked. "I'm sorry, Bill. I really am. I can't imagine how that must feel. But right now there's another child out there. She's missing, and someone might have her. I'm looking."

Spreading his hands, he visibly steeled himself. "How can I help?"

"You guys monitor for North Bay Distributors, right?" An innocuous name for the company, obviously designed to keep a low profile.

"Sure."

"Tell me about the security system. Is it any good?"

"Pretty deep, though it's geared toward monetary loss rather than burglary prevention."

"Go on."

"Well," he scratched at the knee of his suit trousers, "there's just one security guard on during the day, and none at night. If I was a heist crew I could crash the gate, ram the door, be in and out in two minutes with a million bucks worth of stuff and no way the police could react in time. No, their security system is state of the art, but it's for preventing white-collar crime. Very tight access."

“So it cuts their potential losses and ensures that any break-in is going to be obvious, quickly found out, and limited by the time it takes to fill a couple trash bags with expensive Schedule 1 narcotics.”

Bill smiled without humor. “Actually there are much pricier things in there than Oxy. Some specialized drugs go for thousands a dose. They’re kept in heavy vaults. No smash-and-grab will get those.”

“So, bottom line, it’s a lot cheaper to pay for insurance than round-the-clock guards or heavier fortifications.”

“Yeah. But what does that have to do with a child?”

I cleared my throat, trying to split the difference on how much I was willing to tell him. I had to keep his sympathy, but I didn’t want to spread so much information that it might get to the cops or elsewhere and endanger Talia. “Bear with me a little longer. If you wanted to make more than a quick heist...say, if you wanted to clean the place out of the good stuff, how would you do it?”

“Inside job, of course.” He looked at me as if I had gone simple, and then realized my question had been rhetorical. “The girl. Leverage. Who is it?”

“I –”

Bill’s face lit up as his cop mind went visibly into overdrive. “It has to be someone that works at the warehouse. There are six people that have access. Obviously none of them are a willing part of it or nobody’d be leaning on them. So one of them has a kid and she’s been taken. Give me five minutes to look them up and I’ll tell you who.”

“Damn, Bill. You’re wasted in this job.”

“I was a good cop,” he said simply as he stood with a convulsive motion and looked away. “But I made my twenty for retirement and this job pays really well, so...”

“I get it.”

“No, you don’t.”

Bill walked over to the fridge and opened the freezer. He rooted inside and came up with a bottle of vodka, unscrewed the top and took a long pull of the subzero liquid with the motions of a professional alcoholic. He saluted me with the bottle. “But now you do.”

I held my hand up. “I just saw your eyes light up with the old fire. You figured out what I had in five seconds flat. I bet you were hell on wheels back in the day. Look, I’m not asking you to come with me out into the field. Just work with me, help me by filling in what I don’t know.”

“Then tell me what you already *do* know. I’m going to figure it out anyway. Would you rather I started poking around separately?”

No, I really wouldn’t. An uncoordinated investigation might snarl things up

badly, get someone killed.

I stared at him. My gut told me he was on the level even while my head nagged that he might be dirty. No. Nobody could fake the reaction I had seen. No way this guy could be part of anything that threatened a child. I decided I'd rather have him inside than out.

"Okay. The warehouse manager, Mira Sorkin, had her daughter kidnapped on Friday. They blackmailed her into revealing all the information for someone to get into the warehouse, but it doesn't appear the heist has come off and they haven't let her daughter go. She's a wreck, as you might expect, and of course they told her not to go to the cops."

"Taken Friday and they had all weekend to pull the job – but here it is Monday." Bill snapped his fingers. "Something delayed them. But what?"

"No way to know, and I'm not sure it matters." I filled him in on everything else Mira had told me.

Bill sat forward, rubbing his hands together – either a theatrical gesture, or from the cold bottle. "We ought to set a trap."

"How?"

"Now that I know, my guys and I can be looking for anyone that tries to impersonate Sorkin and get in. Once we got eyes on them..." He clapped his cupped hands together as if catching an insect.

"Look, Bill, no offense, but we only met today. I get a good vibe off *you*, but one of your guys might be in on it."

"No way!"

"For a cut of, oh, tens of millions? You sure? Any of them seem different lately? Anybody specifically ask to work Friday overnight, or Saturday?"

Bill sat back, realization dawning on his face. "Lattimer. Dammit. And he switched with Cy to get on tonight."

"That's our boy. With a guy on the inside they don't have to worry as much about slip-ups or anyone noticing the oddity of anyone going in at that hour. They have cover." I pointed at him. "Something delayed them before, but the longer they wait, the more likely something will go wrong. So they're going to do it this evening. You mentioned a trap, but that doesn't get us the girl back. In fact, if the cops swoop in and grab the thieves, whoever is watching the kid might..."

"Yeah. But look, I got a simple plan. They won't have any reason to think we're on to them, so we stake the place out and then follow. They'll probably lead us right to her. We can call PD when we have something solid." Bill began to pace and seemed suddenly filled with a zealot's flaming heart, as if he recognized his opportunity for moral redemption.

I nodded, checking my watch. 3:30 p.m. “Seems like our best chance. Let’s do it.”

“Pick me up at the diner across the street from here at about eight, all right?”

“No problem.” We exchanged cell numbers, I waved off a handshake, and then I headed back to my office for a meal and a nap on my sofa. Stakeouts often turned into long, boring nights and I needed to be fresh, because if Bill was right, this was our big chance to follow the perps back to Talia.

You might think I’d have had a hard time going to sleep, but as a cop I’d long ago learned to compartmentalize, to ignore what I couldn’t control and shut down my impatience. In this case, I dropped off instantly.

I woke to find a fax from Mira in my machine. Skimming it quickly, I didn’t see anything new, merely more detail. I handed it off to Mickey on the way out. He hummed and waved over his shoulder, eyes glued to the screens as I shut the door.

Chapter 4

Just after sundown I parked Molly at the curb on the corner facing the single vehicle entrance to the heavily fenced North Bay Distributors complex, the warehouse I'd visited before. I'd picked Bill up from work. He wore the same clothes, though he'd added an old suit jacket that made him look nondescript and forgettable.

I'd chosen a position under a dead streetlight where we could see the entire length of the block. Anyone would either drive right by us or approach us from the other end, though I doubted they would spot us; it was dark and we were just one car among many lining the streets.

"They have to come this way," Bill muttered, confirming my own thoughts. Out of the comfortable shell of the call center he seemed a bit deflated, his cracks more obvious. As he sipped coffee I could smell alcohol fumes in Molly's close confines.

"Yes, they do," I said. "Unless they plan on a forcible B-and-E over the back fence. But if so, why take the girl?"

"It bothers me that they delayed two days. Could she already be dead?"

I sighed through clenched teeth. "No way to be sure and we have no shot at a lead but this stakeout. Unless you want to go back to your office and beat it out of Lattimer...but he might not know anything."

"Yeah. If I was them, I'd tell the inside man as little as possible."

"Hang in there, Bill. This is the best chance we have." I sipped my own unadulterated coffee, glad of its warmth.

Fifteen minutes went by in silence, and then half an hour. Bill finished his coffee mix and started sipping straight from his flask. Maybe when this was all over I should introduce him to Mira. Would two substance abusers raise a kid better than one? Make each other happy, understand and forgive all faults? Or would it be twice as bad for Talia?

God, what a world.

"When did you say Lattimer's shift ended?"

"He's on at five, off at one a.m."

I checked my watch. "Nine fifteen. I'd bet they'll come between now and midnight, probably earlier than later. I'm going to guess between ten-thirty and

eleven.”

“How you figure?”

We’d already gone a few rounds of stump-the-cop on several subjects so I played along. Spinning deductive theories passed the time. “Nine is the middle of Lattimer’s shift. By nine, anyone who might stop in at the call center, say, because he forgot something, is probably home for good. By nine, most day-job people are off the streets. No traffic jams across the bridges or along any of the main routes. They’ll want a smooth getaway.”

“Okay, that’s the beginning. What about the end of your window? Ten-thirty to eleven?”

I idly rubbed the joints of my right hand, bending the fingers back and forth, a minor therapy I performed when I had nothing else to do. “The closer the end of his shift gets, the more chance of the next guy coming in early and blowing things. If I were a thief I’d want a very comfortable two hours of buffer. Also, most PD turnovers are at eleven. The oncoming shift is finishing up their briefing and the outgoing has already mentally checked out. Some will be dropping off their squad cars early to get to the head of the line. Hell, it’s Monday, right? A slow night.”

Bill nodded. “Sounds plausible. You’re a lot more tuned-in to the local area than I am.”

“Consider this your orientation to the underside of the Bay Area, then.” I sipped. “So what brought you out near the City?”

He snorted. “I called Chi-town ‘the City’ when I was on the job.”

“Yeah, and so do New Yorkers. Yada, yada. Answer the question, Bill.”

“No deductions?”

“No. You don’t want to talk about it?”

“We partners now?” He sounded defensive.

“Maybe. What do you think?”

“We sure ain’t lovers.”

“Nope.” I looked sideways at him. “Stay focused, Bill. Remember Talia.”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“No harm, no foul.” I really didn’t mind. He hadn’t said a word about my scars, which was a welcome change, and he remained on the upside of pathetic, so I took his backhanded pass as a compliment. If he’d been off the juice I might have even given him a shot. Like I said, I don’t mind a bit of age on a man. Some things get better with time: a fine whiskey, a good cigar, a classic car. But my own addictions writhed beneath the surface too close to want to deal with anyone else’s.

Demons, I’d found, are best faced alone. If you get help beating them, you

never know if it was really you that won. Eventually, when you're all by yourself, they'll jump you from the shadows. On that day you'd better be ready to throw down and win.

Eventually Bill spoke in answer to my earlier question. "After Sandy died, I crawled even farther into the bottle...but you already figured that."

I nodded.

"They put me on a desk for a while. Mandatory counseling, weekly shrink sessions. It didn't take. They eased me off the force. Retired me. I understood. They had to do it. I was useless. By that time it was too late, though. My wife had left me. Couldn't blame her. She was ten years younger...pretty. Full of life. Deserved a second chance." His words slurred slightly, and the next time he lifted the flask I reached over to stop its motion toward his lips.

"Give it a break, Bill." He wiggled the flask under my hand but I clamped down firmly and held his eyes. "You've had enough for now, Lieutenant. I need you upright and operating."

Slowly his hand relaxed under mine, his eyes clearing as he capped the container and slid it into a breast pocket. "Okay. I'm good."

Another hour of silence passed, broken only by the occasional exchange of remarks, before Bill said, "I'm gonna take a walk. Drain the monster."

"Right." That was one concrete advantage men had over women – the ability to pee standing up. Must be nice. Me, between rallying, stakeouts and marathon poker sessions I'd developed the bladder of a camel so I just held it.

"Give me the flask first."

"I'm not that far gone."

"Flask," I said in a voice of stone.

Bill raised an eyebrow, but took out the container and handed it to me before he exited and walked around the corner, probably heading for a small park half a block back. As long as he picked a good shadowed tree he'd be all right. I thought about pouring his liquor onto the street but that seemed rude, an insult tantamount to throwing poker chips in the trash.

Just then the first large vehicle in a while rounded the opposite corner, its lights illuminating the street. I slouched down as low as I could while keeping an eye on it. We'd figured they'd bring some kind of truck for the cargo capacity. With an inside job and no need for smash-and-grab hurry, the more they carried away, the bigger their take.

The vehicle turned out to be a white heavy-duty panel van, an extended model perfect for a heist like this. It didn't turn in to the warehouse drive, though. Rather, it cruised slowly down the block. I ducked, squeezing my small frame sideways under the steering wheel and lowered my head to cover the

lighter skin of my face, my black hair forming a concealing canopy.

I realized they were checking the parked cars as a spotlight washed over Molly. Lucky Bill had left the vehicle. He'd never have been able to hide from a good once-over sitting inside. As long as the perps didn't get out to look closer I should be all right.

The van passed by, engine revs increasing as it turned the corner and accelerated away. I rose carefully and waited until it showed up again at the other end of the street, having circled the block. Hopefully Bill had stayed well out of sight and wouldn't blow the stakeout.

This time the van turned crisply into the warehouse drive, and then a hand reached out the driver's window to buzz at the gate. The metal barrier immediately rolled out of the way, Lattimer's doing for sure. The vehicle surged in, turning off its lights and parking quickly by the steel personnel door to the windowless building.

A woman got out of the passenger side. At this distance, forty yards or so, I couldn't make out much except she was about Mira's height and build, with dark hair. She opened a box on the wall and picked up a handset.

Molly's passenger door opened quietly and Bill slid into the car, shutting it quickly and silently like a pro. At least the vodka hadn't impaired his technique. Probably he was already starting to sober up.

"They're early," he said.

"Guess I still need to work on my Sherlock routine."

"You were pretty close. Fifteen minutes."

I grunted and turned back to look at our prey across the street near the warehouse. The woman talked for a minute on the handset, and then hung it up. After another moment, probably to input the code and apply the fake fingerprint to the scanner, she set her feet, leaned hard and pulled open the warehouse's personnel door. It must be quite heavy to take that kind of manhandling.

While she was doing this the driver, a heavyset white man in a dark jacket and knit cap, hopped out and folded the side mirrors flat. After getting in again he backed the van up and did a quick one-eighty as the woman opened the cargo loading door. In reverse, the vehicle rolled completely inside, barely clearing the edges. The steel curtain slammed down, leaving no trace of its presence.

"I see why they didn't get a bigger truck," Bill said.

"Yeah. Perfect size."

"Wish we could call this in."

I glanced sideways at him. "The *girl*, Bill. I don't give a shit if they get away with millions in pills as long as we get Talia back."

"I know. Still..."

“You want one more shot at glory, Bill? Proof that you can still cut it?” I felt like slapping him, but stopped myself, letting my voice do the work. “The only way that’s gonna happen is if we find that little girl. Once she’s safe, you can take all the credit you want. Get your name in the papers. Be a hero. ‘Former Chicago Cop Saves Kidnapped Child in Drug Heist Bust.’ You can have the publicity. I don’t want it.”

Bill eyed me skeptically. “You for real? Something like this could get you reinstated.”

I shook my head, turning to stare at the warehouse to cover the stab of pain I felt. “That ship has sailed. The Thin Blue Line never forgets. I might be able to work at some other department, but not here in the Bay Area. Probably not even in this state. The City is my home. I’m not leaving it.”

“God, you’re beautiful,” Bill blurted.

“And you’re still drunk, so how’s about we call it even,” I returned in a flat tone. Funny what attracts men and what comes out of their mouths at the oddest times.

Or maybe, not so odd at all. I’d just made a declaration of loyalty in front of a guy who’d been ditched by his wife and discarded by his profession. No matter how justifiable, those things left deep scars, especially on a cop. With the good ones like Bill and me, honor and integrity wrapped our core, stiffened our spines. Without it, we felt – I felt – brittle. Hollowed out.

“I saw something,” Bill said suddenly.

Our thieves hadn’t left the warehouse, so I glanced around. “What?”

Bill stuck his thumb over his shoulder. “Back behind us, around the block. When I went to piss. Guy in a late-model green Audi sedan, just sitting.”

I craned my head to look, but Bill shook his head. “Naw, he left when I made him. Probably completely unrelated.”

“What’d he look like?”

“Young. Late twenties? Light skin, maybe blonde. Average height and build. Hard to say more.”

I shook my head. “You should have told me that first.”

“It didn’t matter. Like I said, he hung a U and sped off.”

“He could have come back. Could be watching now.” I craned my head around, not trying to hide my surveillance anymore. As Audis were common rally platforms, I felt fairly confident I could spot one even half-seen in the dark.

Nope. Nada.

Bill cleared his throat and tugged his collar. “You think these guys are pro enough to have brought a cover driver?”

“If it was me I would. One lone jockey can knock a tail off or decoy pursuit

if he's good, and then bug out any number of ways – on foot, swapping cars, even a boat or helo. Anything to get the goods away."

A grunt came from Bill, wordless agreement.

I pointed. The warehouse cargo door showed a dim crack beneath it before rolling up suddenly, quickly. The van pulled forward and the driver leaped out to slap a button, causing the big portal to close before he climbed back in and drove to the gate. I could see the plates had mud smeared on them obscuring the numbers, a common trick.

"Does your security center open the barrier or is it automatic?" I asked.

"It's automatic unless we disable it or the alarm trips."

I reached for the ignition to start Molly, leaving all lights off. "Better buckle up, then. This might get interesting." I pulled my four-point harness down and snapped in.

"Uh..."

"What?"

"I get carsick."

"This isn't a high-speed pursuit. If they make us, we have to drop off anyway."

"Then why the seatbelts?"

"Same reason you got a safety on your weapon. Unexpected shit happens."

Bill stared at me for a moment, and then reached for the harness. Once buckled, he opened his hand. "Flask."

"Like hell," I retorted, not feeling charitable right then.

Bill dropped his hand, defeated.

I hoped I wouldn't regret this night, trying to help a fellow ex-cop get over his fears and back into the field. Maybe I should have come alone. I put the doubts out of my mind as the van exited the warehouse drive to steer left and away, cruising back the way it had come from.

Easing Molly out, I let the van get a block ahead, then two before I turned on my lights. Checking my rearview mirror, I didn't see any tails. No Audi, green or otherwise. We followed as the thieves picked up the state highway across the top of San Pablo Bay toward Vallejo.

"Where you wanna bet they go?" Bill asked.

"South," I said. "Napa's too refined. Hard to hide. The 80 corridor is a possibility, but their options that way get more and more limited the farther they go until they hit Sacramento at least. South, though, and you got nothing but suburban sprawl for miles. Lots of places to hole up."

"You don't think they'll drive the haul out right now? Head for a big city to fence the stuff – Vegas, L.A., Seattle? Leave the girl somewhere, phone the

mother for a pickup? That's what I'd do."

I chewed my lip. "They gotta know the theft will be found out in the morning, maybe even tonight during the next shift if your guys are diligent in checking the logs and get suspicious. Everything is on video even if the plates were obscured. At the very least they'll have to transfer the cargo to a new vehicle and it's logical the girl will be there with a third member of the crew."

"It could get dicey if we find their hide. What if they decide to tie up their loose end?"

"They won't. Murder takes the story from two forgotten column inches and a mention on the local news straight to the front page of the *Chronicle* and nationwide TV coverage. In fact, if that happens, I know an investigative reporter that will run these sons of bitches to ground before law enforcement does, if I don't first."

"You're assuming rational self-interest, but what about the two-day delay?"

"Could be one of many reasons. Like, the first two trucks they stole both broke down. Or the driver tripped, hit his head and had to sleep off a concussion. Or they scored some uncut smack and put themselves out for a day and a half. Maybe they ate some bad burritos and spent a sleepless night on the crappers. With lowlifes it could be anything."

"What if they aren't making the decisions? A heist this big...they deliver the cargo, their employer pops them and the kid too, just in case. Five gallons of gasoline and, *poof*, there goes the evidence."

I glanced over at him as the shifting lights washed his face. "Is doom and gloom your default mode, Bill?"

"For a while, yeah." He sighed. "I ain't a big believer in everything working out."

"Let's stay positive and do the job, all right?" I focused back on our perps as we approached the I-80 on-ramps. "South, baby, come on..."

The van turned onto the southbound freeway entrance and I kept an eye on it as we followed.

"Shit, he's rabbiting," Bill said.

I swore. He'd seen it before I had, that the heavily laden van was accelerating far faster than it needed to. "They must have spotted us, gotten suspicious," I said as I downshifted and accelerated, thumbing the button to kick in the supercharger.

Molly leaped forward as the blower screamed like a fighter jet. I loved that sound, and I loved the kick in the ass even more as I took the sweeping turn onto the on-ramp at the optimal line, still accelerating north of seventy.

"Cal, back off! Cal!"

“What?” I snapped, letting the revs climb toward redline as we approached the merge.

“You’re confirming their suspicion that they’re being tailed. You’re gonna get the girl killed! You told me yourself this isn’t about busting them.”

“Crap. You’re right.” I took my foot off the gas and dropped back to the speed limit, watching the van pull rapidly away. My body shuddered with the excess speed in my veins, the natural stuff, better than anything from a needle or a pill.

“They might not even have seen us. Could be they just wanted to shake the bushes and see what they scared out.”

I slapped Bill’s thigh with the back of my right hand. “Good call.”

Bill put his head back against the rest with a faint smile. “Thanks. But what now?”

“I’ll speed up gradually, try to hang on to them.” I thought I still had their lights in sight about a mile ahead.

“Good luck. Hope your eyes are better than mine.”

“My eyesight’s very good, thanks.” That was one reason I didn’t let the bomb damage bother me too much. It could have been so much worse. “Looks like they’re heading east on the feeder.”

If I had the correct set of taillights they’d soon dump onto the freeway heading north or south. I strove to keep them in sight by accelerating, weaving among the cars in light traffic at about eighty. Given that the van had no rear window, I hoped that we would be impossible to pick out in the darkness from this distance.

When our quarry approached the freeway interchange I lost them. There was too much town and landscaping in the way, or maybe they turned off their lights. I floored it and Molly rocketed smoothly up to one-ten for half a mile, but by the time we reached the interchange I couldn’t locate anything that looked like them.

“South,” I muttered, sticking with my earlier guess, and held steady at ninety around the smooth curve of the feeder and onto the Benicia-Martinez bridge. Bright lights from an oil tanker sparkled in my peripheral vision as we passed Army Point and the pipeline terminus before hurtling across toward the multiple refineries on the south shore that fueled the California economic machine.

Two minutes and three miles later I admitted defeat. They’d had several exits to escape and we’d lost them. I slammed my palm on Molly’s wheel. “Dammit.”

“Dammit,” Bill echoed flatly. “Sorry, Cal.”

“Any ideas?” I dropped back into the right lane and cruised under the speed limit, still heading south.

“If I was still on the job or if I had ears on the street around here I’d try to find some word of the heist. Maybe we’ll get lucky and they’re going to offload some of it locally for quick cash. If so, the big fish clue in the little fish, who tell the minnows, who tip off the plankton.”

“Plankton.”

Bill sniffed, looking away. “I always loved those marine shows. Sea world. Aquariums. Cousteau. So did Sandy.”

I resisted the temptation to talk about his dead child. This wasn’t the time for therapy. “Okay. It’s a shot. I know a few people.”

“So where’re we going?”

“You’re going home, Bill.”

“The hell I am.” He sat forward with a drunk’s bluster, bouncing against the four-point harness.

“You’re fine now, Bill, but soon enough you’ll be wanting more of the sauce and it’s getting later all the time. You’ve been a big help, but right now I have to go places you can’t, or shouldn’t.”

“What is that supposed to mean? I saw it all back in Chicago. No way anything in this burg can be any worse.”

“That was back before you cracked. Before Sandy,” I said harshly, regretting it immediately. “Sorry.” Me and my mouth.

Bill deflated next to me. “Never mind. You’re right. I’m useless now.”

“You’re not useless, Bill, but you’re not ready for the streets yet. You’ve done enough for tonight. I’ll call you tomorrow and let you know what I found.” I turned toward Oakland and the Bay Bridge, heading back to the City. In light traffic, nowhere was far from anywhere around here though during rush hour some destinations might as well be on the moon.

I offered Bill a ride home to his San Rafael condo, but he insisted on being dropped off to take a cab, talking to me in monosyllables. I could tell he was angry and hurt. He’d get over it.

Where I was going, having no partner at all seemed better than bringing along a shaky one.

Chapter 5

Some say the Tenderloin is getting gentrified since the 2004 city initiative to clean things up began. It's true that there's been nibbling around the edges. PD has more presence, at least between daybreak and midnight. Enterprising restaurants can rent cheap on the corner of a street the average tourist wouldn't want to walk down, night or day. Maybe that adds to the charm: the whiff of slum, the scent of danger just a stone's throw away. As long as the establishment is willing to pay for round-the-clock security and the patrons don't mind getting the stink eye from the crackheads and pregnant junkies and prostitutes – often one and the same – they can make a go of it. Some served absolutely top-notch food.

Me, I'm a bit bolder than the next girl. These may not be my home waters but I can handle all but the biggest of the sharks. The trick is to always seem too much trouble to mess with.

Though all the chic places had closed, a meal was still my rumbling stomach's first priority. Tonight's nirvana was an all-night Mexican place near Fifth and Ellis called Boca Grande's, which served up fantastic California-style crispy tacos.

Something you have to taste to believe, crispy tacos are made by stuffing a large corn tortilla with filling, traditionally *barbacoa* – shredded beef – clamping it closed and then dropping it into a lard-filled deep fryer. Brought out piping hot and crunchy, the clamp is then removed and they're finished off with cheese, shredded lettuce, salsa and anything else your heart desires. Heaven in your hand.

After I dropped Bill off, coming up on eleven thirty p.m. the crowd was still fairly respectable with the inevitable security guard keeping the worst of the transients away. Not all of them, of course; those that could pay and didn't smell too bad or cause trouble got a hot cheap meal and a seat on a hard plastic bench for as long as they could nurse a soda.

When I got in line I felt a hand on my ass. Turning cat-quick, I grabbed the shirt front of the offender – or tried to. What I ended up with was a handful of silver chains cascading within cleavage between mounds to rival Moro Rock, all framed in a black leather biker vest. I shoved the big smirking mulleted bull

dyke back with, I had to admit, a touch of envy. Okay, maybe I shoved myself back more than I did her, but my message was clear, I hoped.

“Problem, ladies?” the hulking young security guard said from behind the groper. His nametag read TYRELL.

“Not unless this bitch tries to feel me up again,” I replied, releasing the chains with a flick of my short-nailed fingers. I was glad he’d been on the ball. My next move would have been to rake my heel down her shin and stomp her foot. As she sported more muscle than a lot of men I knew, I sure couldn’t hold my own in a close-quarters wrestling match.

Welcome to the Tenderloin.

“Back up a bit, please, miss,” the guard said to my opponent, and after a look of pure poison she did.

“Here or to go?” I heard from behind me, and realized I was now first in line.

“Combo number one, for here,” I replied, turning my back on the two behind me to pay. Afterward, I nodded to the guard, ignored the bitch and waited off to the side. Three minutes later I’d collected my styrofoam plate and sat down to eat next to a group of slumming college kids.

When I started on my second taco, the guard came over to me. Amused eyes lit up his dark face, highlighting even white teeth. “Don’t let that bother you,” he opened.

“I don’t.” I wasn’t giving him any rope, not tonight. Cute, but not my type.

“Yeah, you handled yourself all right.”

Yet, as long as he was here...I crooked my finger, motioning him to lean over. With the chaos and buzz of conversation all around, that was all the privacy I needed. “Hey, you been doing this for a while?”

“Over a year. I work for a service, though. Not always this joint.”

“Then you might hear things.”

“Maybe.” His face clouded a trifle.

“Hear about a big shipment of new high-grade pills hitting the street anytime soon?”

Eyes narrowing further, he shook his head. “You a cop?”

“Not anymore. P.I.” I slid my money clip out of my front pocket, peeled off a twenty. “Got anything for me?”

“I don’t need your money,” he said.

“But I need your tip if you got one, Tyrell, and everyone needs cash. No offense, but they can’t be paying you much over minimum.”

Tyrell licked his lips. “Okay. Yeah, I got something. I play college ball,” he said, flexing a bit, “and I heard guys talking about some good juice that’s going

to hit this week.”

“Steroids.”

“I don’t use. Shrivels your dick.”

“Doesn’t seem to bother her,” I said, pointing with my chin at my handsy lesbian fan glowering at us from across the room.

Tyrell laughed in my ear, a little closer and huskier than necessary. “You a trip, girlfriend.”

I patted his cheek. “Thanks, bro, but I’m busy tonight. And why aren’t you hitting on some younger hotties?”

“I like a woman who stands up for herself. Besides, I never been wid’ a Asian.”

Hoo, boy. That was the way to make a girl feel special for sure: tell her the conquest checks a block on your bucket list. I held back my eyeroll with difficulty. “Thanks.”

A folded piece of paper appeared between his fingertips. He set it down next to my plate. “Call me when you got a night off,” he said, winking and standing up, all brash confidence. “I work six to two, mostly.”

I picked up the paper and slid it into my blazer pocket with a cock of my head. “I might.” I wouldn’t, but there was no point to stomping on his ego, and for a P.I., a source was a source. “Oh, do me a favor, would you? That’s my Subaru parked on the corner. Keep an eye on it for me until your shift ends, will you?”

“Sure thing, gorgeous.” Tyrell turned to deal with an obvious crackhead sliding in the door, making sure the guy had money and kept his cool.

After finishing my meal and nodding to Tyrell on the way out, I hustled down the steps and into the street, angling deeper into the Tenderloin. Within half a block the streetlights above had gone dark and the junkies began inspecting me much like I’d eyed my tacos. Wisps of light fog blew cold, faint ghosts to match the denizens of the night.

Instead of using either sidewalk, broken with root heaves from the sickly trees growing from their niches, I walked in the street, between the parked cars and traffic. That provided more visibility and distance from the lurkers in the doorways and the groups of young men hanging out and doing business.

The working girls didn’t give me a second glance, nor did their pimps skulking in their tricked-out rides. I obviously wasn’t competition, not dressed as I was. Hopefully my purposeful stride and no-nonsense demeanor would keep trouble at bay long enough for me to reach my destination.

Several blocks and corners later my hopes were dashed. In the dimly lit street, the gloom broken only by the flickering neon signs of a seriously run-

down bar, two men drifted into the street in front of me.

Immediately I made a hard right turn and hustled between two parked cars, glancing back the way I came to see two more closing the trap behind me.

Had I still been a cop I'd have shown my badge and weapon, trusting to the double threat of immediate force and the weight of PD retribution to back them off. I could have tried it anyway, using my P.I. badge and a false claim, but if that didn't work, bullets would be my only remaining response. Instead, I hurried down the steps into a half-belowground after-hours joint and pushed open the scarred steel door.

Inside, the clientele and bartender stared at me as if I'd stepped off a flying saucer. With my business casual attire and mixed-Asian racial type, I didn't fit in among the mostly dark faces. Those few lighter types still matched the social group, looking as if life had dumped them over the side too many times to count, leaving them broken and washed up here like bloated and gasping fish.

"Got a back door?" I said to the ancient barman as I hurried past the onlookers before they could react further.

He pointed silently and I followed his finger past a stinking toilet to a portal with an *Alarm Will Sound* bar across it.

Ignoring the warning, I shoved the heavy door open, my rubber-soled boots making an unpleasant ripping sound on the sticky floor. No alarm sounded after all. Up the stairs to street level with my hand on my weapon, I debouched into a dark alley and immediately turned left, which would, I hoped, allow me to continue toward my destination while circumventing the bandits.

A rustle and groan from a nearby dumpster brought my Glock out of its holder and into a two-handed grip, but the bleak soul who leered a meth-rotted smile at me from within presented no threat. Trotting down the alley with the weapon held low, I glanced over my shoulder to see dark figures burst out of the door behind me.

Damn. I'd hoped they were just muggers, though four working together would be unusual. No, these guys seemed to be after me specifically. I was no runner, though. My workouts consisted of yoga, light weights and judo several times a week.

Fortunately, as a P.I. and private citizen I had an option I'd never have exercised as a cop: a warning shot.

To cops, warning shots are pure bullshit. If you're under direct threat, you shoot to take the bad guy down and if he dies, he dies. If not, discharging your weapon will only bring a pain-in-the-ass investigation that will put you on a desk for weeks or months before it clears.

In this case, in this neighborhood, keeping my five quarts on the inside

outweighed the slight risk of getting caught to face a reckless discharge felony.

Besides, were my pursuers going to call the cops? Not likely.

Aiming low, I put a shot into the ground halfway between them and me. “Back off, scumbags. The lead man gets the next one in the face,” I snarled.

They stopped, but didn’t run right away, another sign they weren’t ordinary lowlifes. “Not kidding,” I said, shifting my weapon.

They backed off, reluctance in their body language. “C’mon,” I heard one say, and then four figures sprinted for the other end of the alley, visible momentarily within the backlighting as they disappeared into the mist.

Using my mini-light, I located the shell casing and pocketed it after holstering my weapon. Odds were nobody would even report the shot, much less find the ricochet, but the fewer bits of evidence lying around the better. I trotted down the alley, slowing to a determined walk when I reached the street. Checking my watch, I saw it read quarter to midnight.

As I strode I considered what Tyrell had said. I hadn’t thought about the underground sports market until then, but high-grade steroids could bring a mint. If I couldn’t wrap this thing up soon I might have to get Tyrell to cough up the name of his supplier and interview him – and so on up the chain. Maybe the security guard could be persuaded to back me up in my inquiries. If not, I had a couple of freelance bounty hunter friends that didn’t mind taking my money to crack a few deserving lowlifes’ knees.

The sharks kept their distance for the moment, and three blocks later I slipped into *Vyazma*, another dive on the outside not so different from the one I’d dashed through. This time, though, the familiar clientele was relaxed, no more wary than usual, sparse on a Monday night.

Sergei nodded at me from behind the bar, and a couple of acquaintances lifted hands when I entered. The tapman had a frigid MGD already opened when I stepped up to the rail, and I took an appreciative pull, dropping a bill onto the counter. That vanished with a swipe of a towel as if by magic, at least thirty years practice behind the move. “*Za vas*,” he said.

“Thanks. Game going yet?” I turned to lean an elbow on polished wood as I surveyed the joint. As I was here, I might as well play a few hands. Just to keep in practice, you understand. Besides, Sergei wouldn’t appreciate me hitting him up for info only to bolt out the door. He had an old-school attitude about relationships and respect.

“*Da*. Two tables. Seat should be open.” Sergei’s English was nearly perfect, but he stubbornly refused to use even the simplest articles such as “a” and “an” unless forced and like most Russians I knew he couldn’t resist dropping bits of his mother tongue into every conversation.

“*Spasibo.*” I lowered my voice and rotated back to him, hunching my shoulders. “Sergei, you heard anything about some high-grade pharmaceuticals arriving in the next few days?”

“*Da.*”

“Any word on the supplier?”

“Don’t put me on the spot, *solntse*. I don’t want you get hurt.” Sergei had called me *sunshine* in Russian as long as I can remember, since I was a child... back when my father was alive. The two men had been close.

“I’ll make it worth your while. I can play a few rounds.” The offer was pro forma.

“With you, Cal, there is no *few rounds*.” Sergei held out his hand, palm up. “Guns.”

With good grace I handed over my Glock and the holdout .38 from my ankle. Once he’d secured them below the bar – he had an arsenal down there most days – I turned to walk my beer through the pub area to a door in the back. The man-mountain named Rostislav moved aside, turning the knob and pushing the steel slab open. They knew me well here.

No *few rounds* indeed, I thought. I could walk away any time I wanted. *Snap*, like *that*.

As Sergei had said, two of the four poker tables were running, a 1-4 limit seven-card stud and the usual 2-5 no-limit Texas Hold’em. Each had a seat or two empty.

Being Monday night, these were small games with barely a few grand on the felt all told. This operation was off the books, technically illegal, but with the old regulated card rooms and new tribal casinos in California, it was hardly worth Vice’s time to bust it or others like it as long as they kept their noses otherwise clean. When I was on the force I’d driven at least half an hour out of the city to find a legal place to play, but now that I’d become a civilian doing that seemed damned inconvenient when a nice friendly table waited for me within blocks. Of course, I usually arrived during daylight and left the following morning.

My heart rate climbed and my mind seemed to expand as concentrations of positive stress hormones flooded my brain and nervous system. Even if the mind said no, the brain said *yes yes yes*. If they had this high in a pill I knew I’d pop it regularly. As they didn’t, I just had to admit that nothing beat pitting myself against a table full of decent players and winning.

Because I was *way* better than decent.

Some people think poker is gambling. That’s true only if you aren’t more skilled than most of the table. Sure, there’s luck involved, but just like market

trading and venture capitalism, if you're an expert and your opponents aren't, the odds will eventually put money in your pocket. In fact, you can even swim with the sharks and come out ahead if you stay out of serious confrontations with them and everybody takes their bites of the fish.

Fish are what we call the guaranteed losers on the felt, the ones without a deep understanding of the game, the ones who often don't even realize how badly they are outclassed, the ones who *do* believe it's all about luck. These are why people like me are here, night after night, waiting for their pounds of flesh.

For a wise working rounder, a steadfast player-of-the-odds or *grinder*, it's about doing eight to twelve hours and coming out ahead, night after night, four to six nights a week. It might be fifty bucks a session or five hundred, occasionally more, but it pays the bills.

Me, I could never be a grinder. I'm a *player*. I lose more often, but I win more money. This is just my style. I don't have the patience for the grind. If I play every night, I'll start dropping too much, and then chasing my losses in a fog of judgment-sapping adrenaline poisoning.

I know. I used to do it.

I did it the night before the bomb.

Fortunately, it hadn't affected me that day. Being a bit less fried and a little sharper wouldn't have done a damn thing to change the outcome of the situation, I was sure.

Pretty sure.

The tables sang their siren songs to me as they always did, but this time I had the case to fend them off. Talia's picture hung in my mind's eye.

Looking around, I spotted a guy I'd played with now and then, a big redhead with his beard and long hair unkempt, a cheerful maniac at the table in a faux retro Zeppelin t-shirt and black roadie jeans. I'd seen him snorting before – maybe cocaine, maybe speed, so he seemed like my best bet for a further tipoff. I didn't know his name, but in the manner of poker aficionados everywhere we exchanged cordial nods.

"Not playing tonight?" he asked.

"Not tonight."

"You need a few bills I could front you."

"Thanks, no. But maybe I can buy you a drink."

The redhead looked at his cards and tossed them into the muck with a grimace. "I'm out," he said to the dealer before collecting his chips and standing up.

After he cashed out I led him out of the back room, my barely touched beer in my hand. He ordered a double Jack and Coke from the bar. When Sergei had

set it up, we slid into a dim booth across the room.

Red lit a cigarette. "What you want, girlfriend?"

"Ain't your girlfriend, hair boy."

"You don't like it?" He ran both hands through his ginger locks and slipped a rubber band around the mass, forming a ponytail.

I shrugged. "Not to my taste, I guess."

"Look, you asked me over here. You must be interested."

"Not in hooking up. I just want some info."

"What kind of info?" He took a swallow of his drink.

"What do I call you, anyway?"

"Red works."

"I'm Cal."

Red licked his lips. "Nice to meet you, Cal. I got some high-quality blow back at my place. Pure. Uncut."

I shook my head. "Listen, powder ain't my thing, but you know where I can get some high-quality uppers? The real shit only, nothing street."

"Maybe. Not tonight, though. Couple days for sure. How much?"

"Whatever five bills will get."

"Yeah, I can hold that much. Pass them to you cheap." He leered, probably figuring he'd take his profit out in trade.

I reached for my cell. "Give me your digits."

Red recited a local number, which I punched in and saved. I sent him a quick text. "There. You got mine. Ping me when you have something."

"Sure, girlfriend," he said as he leered again.

"Not gonna happen."

Red shrugged and smiled, clearly not put off. "Why not? We're the same, you and me. We both live for the game. I can tell." He reached across and took my hand in a strong grip.

Using a simple judo move, I disengaged my arm and shook it to let the sleeve of my blazer fall into place. "Touch me again and —"

"And what?" Red asked with that maniac's grin.

"And I'll have you barred from this club. The owner's an old friend of mine."

That threat stopped him more effectively than violence, as I knew it would. "Okay, okay," he said, lifting his palms to me. "Sorry. Jus' tryin' to be friendly."

I forced myself to match his leer. "I could be friendly too if you get me what I want."

"I said I would."

"I want more than that. I want you to introduce me to your connection. Cut

out the middleman.”

“Cut me out, you mean. Why would I do that?”

“I don’t sleep with people I do business with, so if you got any interest in hooking up it has to be on my terms.”

“You’re playing me,” he said flatly.

“What do you have to lose?”

“I don’t have the time to get jerked around. I got women whenever I want.” He snapped his fingers.

“Junkies that will do anything for a fix, you mean. If that was all you wanted you wouldn’t be hitting on me now.”

Red grinned. “I like smart girls. You ever think about partnering up?”

I knew he was referring to poker, not sex. Two players working together could collude to swing the odds in their favor, though it was hard to do subtly enough to get away with it. “That’s not me. Anyway...the introduction?”

Polishing off his drink and looking into the distance as if thinking, he eventually said, “Okay. Why not? Let’s go.”

“Good.” I stood and slipped out of the booth, holding up a hand. “Give me a minute.”

Red nodded and watched as I walked across to Sergei.

“How’d you do, *solntse*?” he asked.

“I didn’t play.”

Sergei smiled. “Good.” He left his concern at that flat syllable, but I knew he cared. He always nagged me when he thought I played too much.

“What I need is that info. Give me a name.”

“Not good idea, Cal.”

I leaned in. “Listen, Sergei, you know I can take care of myself. There’s a ten-year-old girl out there duct-taped to a chair and I promised her mother I’d find her. The people involved with this shipment have her. You’re a father. How would you feel in her position? How would you feel if it was me?” I gripped the bar and dropped my voice to a whisper. “That name takes me one step closer. Please, *dyadya* Sergei, tell me.” Calling him *uncle* always sweetened him up.

Sergei’s black eyes, dark pits set within deep sockets surrounded by prune skin, stared into my own as if searching for a way to avoid answering. Finally, he spoke. “All right, Cal. I tell you. And I tell your mother if you don’t come home tonight. The name is Houdini.”

“Houdini? Is that a joke?”

“No joke, and you heard nothing from old Sergei.”

I patted him on the cheek. “Not so old. You still have a heart.”

“In box, locked in my safe.” He caught my hand, kissed it and winked. I’d

always be a little girl to him. Maybe that was why I could usually get what I wanted.

“So, where do I find this Houdini?”

Sergei backed away to begin wiping the spotless bar again, eyes downcast. “Ask your other uncles. I tell you nothing more.”

I sighed with frustration, but I couldn’t blame him. Fingering a powerful drug lord could get him killed. “Thanks anyway. Listen, you know this guy?” I hooked a thumb over my shoulder at Red.

“Da. He’s not right for you.”

“I’m not looking to sleep with him, just get some information. How careful should I be?”

Sergei shrugged. “No more than usual. He’s not violent and I know where he lives.”

“Good enough.”

“You want muscle?”

“No, thanks. Your guys are too big and conspicuous. But do me a favor. Ask your people about anyone holding a child.”

“No problem, *solntse*.”

“Guns,” I said, holding out my hands. He reached under the bar without looking, bringing them up and carefully placing them on the polished surface.

I secured them in their holsters. “See you, Sergei.”

“*Das vedanya*, Cal.”

Chapter 6

Obviously Red was still hoping to get into my pants or he wouldn't be doing me the favor of introducing me to his connection. Yet, this was how things worked in the shadowy world of drug dealing. Everything was personal, based on gut instinct, shaky trust and often on hope. People chasing their next high took big risks for small payoffs, which was why the real businessmen didn't use their own product.

We walked a couple blocks through streets littered with the husks of the people of the night. I kept my hand on my weapon, but Red's presence and the lateness of the hour seemed to ward off any trouble. Mutters and profanity followed us from time to time, payback for disturbing the denizens' fitful sleep. Once, a poorly aimed wine bottle broke at our heels. Red roared like a bull ape and a dark figure slunk back behind his chosen dumpster.

I was relieved to follow my guide through a creaky fence gate into a tiny backyard full of junk and up a set of rickety fire escape steps. Red rapped lightly on a dimly lit window.

The curtain, a dirty hanging sheet, jerked aside and a suspicious face stared at us for a moment before unlocking the frame and lifting it. "Hey, Red," the teenager attached to the face said. He reeked of the needle and the damage done, with emaciated arms and sunken cheeks more fitting fifty than fifteen.

"Sup, Roach," Red replied. "The man in?"

"Think so."

"Let us through."

"Kay." Roach stepped out of the way as we climbed in the window.

Red led me quickly to the front door of this apartment past a smelly rat's nest of indescribable detritus, broken furniture and paraphernalia. When we stepped into the hallway it closed behind us with the audible clunks of multiple deadbolts.

"It's easier and safer to come through there than the front door," Red said in my ear by way of explanation as we walked slowly through the surprisingly clean hallway. "All twenty-four units are controlled by the guy I'm taking you to. Everyone works for him one way or another – dealing, transport, muscle, recruiting. Now that we're inside, they'll assume we belong. Most of them know

me anyway.”

“Do you work for him?”

“No, but we’re cool.”

That could mean anything from not hating each other to bosom buddies so I merely nodded, playing along. If Red and I kept our heads on straight this could work out, though I had to admit I was flying by the seat of my pants here. With no leverage and the thinnest of leads, I was hoping to pick something up that would point me in the right direction.

“This guy have a name?” I wasn’t expecting Houdini, but you never knew.

“His street handle is Luger. I never asked for anything else and neither should you. Oh, and he’s Brotherhood.”

“Aryan Brotherhood? Great.” I gestured at my face. “I’m not exactly lily white. Maybe this was a bad idea.”

“Naw, don’t worry. He don’t like blacks and Jews but he’s pretty cool with Asians.”

“Oh, a liberal. What about beaners? I’m a quarter Mexican.”

“It doesn’t show, so don’t tell him. Relax, be cool and it’ll work out. He’s a businessman, not a thug.”

In my experience the two weren’t mutually exclusive, but I held my tongue. Red gestured up the main stairs and we climbed to the third and highest floor. He led me to a door at one end of the hall, nicely painted but obviously heavy steel.

Before he could knock, a grilled look-through snapped open. “Who’s your friend?” the voice from the other side said.

“A player I know from Sergei’s. She’s cool.”

I felt myself being examined for a long moment, and then the tiny opening slammed shut. Locks clattered and soon the door opened to show two tough-looking skinheads, the bigger one with a baseball bat and the shorter guy with a .45 in his hand. “C’mon in,” the first one said and Red stepped confidently between them.

“I’m clean,” Red said as the first guard put aside his bat and frisked him.

“I’m not,” I offered as I opened my blazer by the lapels, showing the Glock. Bat guy tugged at the grip for a moment before I reached down with one finger to push the holster release, allowing him to take it from me and put it on a shelf behind him. When he started frisking me I said, “Right ankle,” and he took my holdout too.

“Any more?” he said with the lift of an eyebrow.

“Nope,” I lied straightfaced. I still had a tiny derringer and two blades. No reason to make his job easy.

“She looks like a cop,” the guy with the .45 said.

"I used to be one, but I got thrown off the force for using." I showed my teeth. "Now I'm a bodyguard."

"Chink chick bodyguard, right," sneered the big guy with the bat. "I'd go through you in nothing flat."

"I'm a quarter Japanese, not Chinese," I deadpanned but let the rest go. No percentage in challenging the flunkies. I needed to get to the boss.

My answer seemed to confuse him enough that he had no obvious retort except to mutter, "Japs."

"C'mon, Weiser. We need to see Luger," Red said.

"What about?"

"None of your business."

"You tapping that?" Weiser flicked his eyes at me as if I wouldn't notice.

"None of your business either."

"Whatever." Weiser picked up his bat and led us into a nicely appointed living room with tasteful modern furniture, clean and well lit. "I'll get him."

The other guy holstered his .45 and stood in the doorway, watching us. Red threw himself onto a sofa and put his feet up on one arm as if he owned the place. I hoped he wasn't overplaying it.

A moment later a slim man of about forty with a light brown crew cut and a goatee stepped into the room, dressed in tactical pants and shirt, the kind you see all those Blackwater mercenaries wearing in Iraq and Afghanistan. His Doc Martens were spit shined and his eyes held mine after glancing at Red with a brief curl of his lip.

"Good morning," he said.

I raised my eyebrows. "Morning?" I echoed.

"I like to be precise," he said in an even voice, his eyes turning to the clock on the mantel. "It's after midnight."

I refrained from mocking excessive precision and shrugged, putting on my best charming smile. "Can we speak privately?"

"Of course," Luger said immediately, surprising all present including me. He reached out to take my hand and turned, placing it on his arm as if to stroll with me to a ball. Although I could have pulled away, I let him lead me into the next room, a study appointed with leather chairs and dark wood paneling. I glanced over my shoulder and winked at an openmouthed Red as I walked. I guess the immediate invitation surprised him.

Luger brought me to an armchair and placed me there like a well-bred gentleman of the old school. I couldn't help but smile. This man might be a criminal, but he had style and confidence.

After closing the door, he walked over to a small side table and poured

himself a drink from a crystal decanter. "Would you like something?"

"Whatever you're having."

Luger nodded, pouring a second highball with three fingers of what turned out to be a good brandy. After handing it to me, he clinked his glass to mine and sat down. "*Prost*," he said.

"Is that German?" I glanced over at an idealized portrait of Hitler hanging on one wall.

"It is. And you're Japanese."

"One quarter. My grandmother was from Misawa."

"Our ancestors were allies."

"In World War Two? I guess they were."

"Blood will out." Luger sipped. "So why did you come to me, miss...?"

"Call me Gale." That was my middle name and had the added benefit of being spelled unusually, reducing the ease of tracking me down.

"You may call me Gunther." He pronounced the name with a hard "t" rather than the "th" sound, like a German would I suppose, and raised his eyebrows, silently reiterating his question.

The whole situation felt surreal, one of those things that only happens in art films or real life, which is always stranger than fiction. This guy seemed more like a reclusive millionaire than a neo-Nazi drug dealer. I wondered if he could be Houdini after all, a blind within a blind.

If he was, and having got this far, what would I say to him? Anything I asked might reveal more than it gained. Proper police interrogation methodology was to establish a rapport with the interviewee to try to make him feel like you're on his side and have his best interests at heart. Find some common ground. Also, a healthy dose of half-truth got better results than the slickest lies.

"I used to be a cop, but now I'm an independent businesswoman. I do some bodyguarding, security consulting, skip tracing, that sort of thing." Taking a drink, I paused as if searching for words and trying to be eloquent.

Luger's expression remained polite, interested, but he said nothing. A man of self-control, then.

"Like you, I often walk in a gray area between the legal and illegal to get the job done. Like you, I have my own ideas of right and wrong, and like you, I suspect, I stick to them the best I can."

Sipping his brandy, Luger continued watching me under lowered brows. It was a bit disconcerting, this intensity, but I had no feeling I was in any danger. If anything he seemed fascinated. Maybe he had some weird fantasy of an inter-fascist ideological hookup.

"I asked my *acquaintance* out there," I cocked my head at the closed door

to the front room, “to introduce me to you because I want two things. The first and more minor one is an occasional supply of safe, genuine pharmaceuticals, which I understand you can get your hands on.”

“Why don’t you want to get them from the Irishman out there?”

The Irishman? Red? It seemed Luger constantly thought in racial terms. I said, “Markup. Reliability. Discretion. And the second thing, which is something only you might be able to give me.”

Again, Luger merely raised his eyebrows. He used silence quite effectively, this man.

I went on, “There’s a young white girl of ten I’m looking for. She’s disappeared and I have reason to believe she’s been taken by someone dealing in pills. I know the pipelines are usually different from one product to the next, but I hope you might have heard of a man named Houdini.”

“Everyone has heard of Houdini. That means nothing.”

“Good. I hope that says you’re not involved.” I knew no such thing, of course, but keeping my cards close to the vest was second nature to me. “Because you’re not, perhaps you could help me get her back.”

“Why would I do that?”

“I’d owe you a favor. Also, I have no interest in making trouble for your business. This kid is trouble. Her body turning up will bring down a lot of heat. In fact, if she does turn up dead and I do too, I’ve made arrangements for everything I’ve found to fall into the hands of several powerful people who owe *me*.”

“Are you threatening me, Gale?”

I held his gaze. “Not at all. I’m stating certain unpleasant possibilities and hoping we can work together to avoid them all.”

“I get the feeling you haven’t involved those in your former profession yet. I have friends in the police department. Perhaps I should inform them and they should handle it.”

“You’re right. I haven’t, because the department always works too slow once word gets to the higher ups. If I told one of my own friends on the force they might make some progress, but no more than I can. Mister Luger, I have only one goal: get the girl back to her mother. If you can help make that happen I’d be happy to split my fee with you and still owe you that favor.”

“I’m not interested in your money,” Luger said, tapping his finger on the rim of his highball. “The favor...perhaps. I’ll make some discreet inquiries.”

“Thank you.” I thought he was putting me off. He’d probably make those inquiries, but whether he’d pass anything he learned to me was doubtful.

“I’d like to see you. When the girl has been found and you have some time,

that is.”

That flipped things around. Maybe he would tell me what he found out after all. No way I was getting involved with this neo-Nazi, but I could use him if I was careful. “I’m open to possibilities,” I said, lifting my glass. “Allies, then.”

“I do believe we’re the Axis, actually,” he replied.

I laughed, standing to reach for a pen and paper on his desk nearby. “Here’s my cell number. Call me when you have something.”

Luger had come to his feet as I stood. When I gave him the paper he reached up to brush the hair back from my scars. I fought down an instinct to slap his hand away. “Don’t do that,” I said, stepping out of reach.

“There is much beauty in pain,” he replied.

“Not to me.”

“You’re not a proper judge. I am the beholder and I see beauty.”

I swallowed. Whether or not it was an act, Luger’s quirky observation touched me, made me feel better somehow. Maybe it was that I’d seen no pity in his eyes, only interest, even fascination. “Thanks,” I said.

Luger escorted me to his front door under the watchful eyes of his thugs and gave my weapons back to me before solemnly kissing my hand. “*Auf wiedersehen.*”

“Yeah, *sayonara* to you too.”

Red glowered at the exchange but the older man ignored him, nodding at me as we left. “So what was that all about?” he asked as we walked through the front door this time, past another pair of guards. Back to *Vyazma* we went.

“We have an arrangement. I charmed him.”

“He’s bad news.”

I glanced over at him. “You’re turning green, Red. Nothing to worry about.”

“Whatever,” he said, his tone grumpy as we approached Sergei’s club. “So, you coming back to my place or what?”

“Not tonight, but thanks.”

“Play a few hands, then?” Hope springs eternal.

“No time,” I replied as we walked in the door.

“Fine. I’m hitting the tables.” He pulled a roll of cash out of his pocket.

“Good luck.”

Red only snorted with pique and frustration as he turned his back on me and headed for the poker room door.

Chapter 7

I slid into an empty booth, waving at Sergei. He smiled and returned the gesture, looking relieved. I was happy to ease his mind.

Of all the people I wished I could reach at one-thirty this morning, Cole Sage topped my list. In my experience the journalist was a bulldog with a story. To get it he'd take calls at any hour and stay up for days if necessary. He also knew just about everything that went on in this city, legit or not, but all I had was his office number.

I could call Mickey and he'd give me Cole's private cell, but then I'd have to explain where I got it. "Who cares?" I muttered aloud as I called my office. When the answering machine beeped I growled, "Mickey, pick up. It's Cal. Come on, Mickey –"

"Cal, hi," Mickey's breathless voice came on. "What's going on?"

"Still haven't beat that boss?"

"You're the only boss I want to beat. No, wait, that came out wrong. I mean, the only boss I really care about. No, I mean –"

"Save it, Mickey. Give me Cole Sage's private cell number."

"Okay."

When he'd recited it and I'd entered it into my phone, I went on. "What else you find for me? Anything?"

"I got everything else you want on Sage. I thought a big-time journalist like that would be flush, but he's almost broke most of the time."

"The only time a journalist has money is when he writes a tell-all book about someone famous, or maybe if he becomes a TV anchorman. I don't care about his bank accounts unless there's something criminal going on. Is there?"

"Not unless you count writing a check for three dollars and forty-two cents to a hot dog vendor. Hasn't this guy ever heard of a credit card?"

"How many hot dog vendors take plastic?"

"Cash, then."

"Obviously didn't have any."

"ATM?"

"He's old-school. Something you young punks don't understand. Still writes his stories on an old Selectric, or even in longhand, and has someone else

type them into a computer.”

I could hear Mickey’s appalled disbelief through the phone. “No way.”

“Way. Now let’s move on. What about Mira and her ex, Dennis?”

“That’s where it gets interesting. They’re both not very well off, on paper anyway. Almost broke, cash-wise. Miranda owns the house she lives in and her Toyota. She gets a nice paycheck from her employer, but deposits money into a joint account she still maintains with Dennis, and he takes it out every time. Ten thousand a month. More than half of what she makes.”

“Ten – wow. For how long?”

“Ever since they broke up.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “That makes no sense considering how ugly the divorce got. Nothing in the settlement?”

“Nope. Ended up being ruled no-fault. No alimony. Not even any child support for Talia. If I read the court records right the judge got sick of them both and shoved a ruling down their throats.”

“Hm. Mira had the guaranteed high income and at the time Dennis had no job. I don’t see Mira paying her ex that much unless there’s a very, very good reason. Something else is going on here, Mickey. Something related to the heist and the kidnapping, something we’re not seeing.”

“Blackmail, maybe? Something Dennis has on Mira?”

“That fits, as far as it goes.”

“But Cal, there’s more.” I hadn’t heard Mickey sound this excited since the latest PlayStation came out.

“I know,” I replied. “You said they were both cash-poor, yet Dennis is getting all that money. Where’s it going?”

“Offshore. Caymans.”

“Tax dodge?”

“Not exactly. His records say Dennis declared the payoffs as capital gains from trading so he paid a lower rate, but unless the IRS actually audits him the chance of them noticing anything irregular is miniscule because the numbers match up. Money in, taxes paid, money out and on its way to the Caymans. Not illegal. Of course, once there it’s untraceable.”

I chewed on a nail and waved as Sergei caught my eye from across the room to make sure I knew he was closing up soon. “So this is weird, and if we want we can tip off the feds on the relatively minor tax charge, but we’re still not seeing any major crimes. Mira works in a warehouse full of stuff that’s literally worth its weight in gold, but all we’ve got is part of her paycheck being diverted. There has to be more to it. Keep digging.”

“Cal, I’ve dug as deep as I can. From now on I’m looking for new places to

dig and that's more your thing than mine."

I debated telling him to start researching Houdini or Luger, but if I did he'd pull another all-nighter and might be wrecked when I really needed him. Instead I said, "Fine. Chill out and I'll get back to you later."

"Boss –"

I could hear the whipped-puppy anguish in his voice, so I made my reply kind. "It's all right, Mickey. You did good. Turn off your machines and get some sleep." I hung up before he could start blubbering.

Next I called Cole, but it went to voice mail. After muttering a string of curses I left an urgent message.

Once I picked up my hardware, I slipped Rostislav twenty bucks to walk with me several blocks back to my car. The enormous guard by my side would make any predators decide we weren't worth the trouble. He left me as I slipped into Molly's welcoming Recaro seat. Fortunately she'd only been left alone for a half hour or so, from Boca Grande's closing time until now.

I saw lights still on in the restaurant behind its locked security bars, no doubt employees doing the cleanup, but Tyrell had gone, for which I was grateful. I hadn't been hit on this much in weeks. Weariness suddenly threatened to overwhelm me, the fatigue of a long, stressful day. My own bed would feel good.

Five minutes later I pulled into the courtyard behind my office, my code lifting the bar to let me reach my private space. Molly's engine sighed to silence, broken only by the pops and creaks of contracting metal as the damp Pacific Ocean night air claimed its heat. I considered and discarded the idea of going inside in favor of my own bed at home.

Walking the block home on the relatively safe Mission District streets seemed child's play compared to the gauntlet of the Tenderloin. When I slipped into the back door of my mother's house – that's how I thought of it, despite the fact that I'd bought it and we'd both moved in at the same time – I heard the cacophony of snores from her bedroom that told me all was well. Mom's two Pekingese, Chloe and Kira, could saw logs louder than most humans. That's why I'd chosen a room upstairs and at the other end of the three-story Victorian.

Snowflake, my big Russian White, greeted me with a purring full-body rub to the calf. Sergei had given the cat to me when Dad died a few years back. I scooped him up. "*Whoof*, Snowy. Has Mom been feeding you extra tofu with milk again?"

My mother claimed to be a vegan, but that was more affectation than conviction. Often enough I'd left a carton of leftover Chicken Vindaloo in my fridge – I'd put in a separate kitchen upstairs – planning to have it later myself,

only to have it mysteriously disappear. Ditto for my milk.

Mom's ethics had always exhibited a certain Bohemian flexibility.

Some people called her a free spirit. I called her a pain in the ass, but I loved her and I knew she loved me and at the end of the day that's what mattered.

Climbing two flights drove home to me how tired I was all over again, and I skipped the shower I should take in favor of shucking my clothes and falling into bed, Snowflake curled at my feet. Before I went under I reached for my clock radio, setting it for six while trying to ignore the benighted thing's current readout. 2:17 a.m.

Ugh. I closed my eyes and tried not to think about it. No matter how much I wanted to, I doubted I could accomplish anything in the wee hours and I had to get a few REMs to keep my performance up. Sleep-deprived people made mistakes. I couldn't afford any today.

Waking to Tom Petty on KFOG, I felt much better, though my stomach twisted up as I thought about Talia. Hard to believe it had been only eighteen hours since I'd found Mira's card on my foyer floor. Despite believing everything I'd told Mira about kidnappers avoiding the manhunt that abusing or killing the girl would bring, criminals didn't always act rationally. Sometimes their best-laid plans went out the window. Someone would get scared and do something stupid. Usually it was innocents who paid.

After a quick, welcome shower and change of clothes, I slipped quietly downstairs and turned toward the back door.

"California Gale Corwin, I know you're not trying to sneak out without rapping with me," floated my mother's voice from the front of the house.

Snowflake mrowed and scampered toward Mom, knowing full well that scritchies and patches of sunlight awaited him in the big east-facing front room.

"Traitor," I muttered, sighing and turning to follow him. A few steps brought me to a gorgeous glowing space, the reason I'd fallen in love with this place and known it was perfect for my mother.

For some inexplicable reason, after the 1906 fire the row of houses opposite had been rebuilt to only two stories rather than the usual three and they were on the downslope side of the hill, so the glorious morning sun remained largely unblocked. Stained glass windows Mom had laboriously handcrafted and set transformed the yellow beams into a kaleidoscope of color that washed across the thick sprawl of Persian rugs and macramé-hung plants.

Mother sat cross-legged on the floor, Snowflake on his back in her lap as expected. Chloe and Kira's squashed, bug-eyed faces watched imperiously from atop the overstuffed sofa.

With Mom's big round rose-colored glasses and straight hair starting to tinge grey, she always reminded me of a less harsh Yoko Ono, Grandmother's full Japanese blood showing strongly through.

"Did you really say 'rapping,' Mom? It's 2005. Learn some new slang."

"Come sit down and relax, Callie. I'll make us some tea." She made as if to get up.

"Mom –"

"*Starlight*. 'Mom' is elitist and hierarchical, a sop to outmoded values."

I didn't know why I bothered arguing except that I wasn't willing to admit defeat. "It's a term of respect and love, Starmom. And I'd like to, but I can't stay. I'm on a case, trying to find a missing child."

Mother blinked at me, her eyes widening. It took a lot to get through her obfuscatory fog of self-congratulatory New Age ideology, but that seemed to have done it. "Oh, my. You'd better get moving, then. I'll go to the Saraha temple and pray for you. Good thing for you it's Tuesday."

"Why's that matter?"

"Tuesdays are slow days. They have a lot of positive energy to put into prayer."

"Great, Mom. Don't forget to bring your own incense this time. You hate what they have there and it's overpriced anyway."

"Monks and nuns have to eat, too."

"And tourists are suckers. If you want to help them out, just drop a few bucks in the collection plate."

"Buddhist temples don't have collection plates. They have boxes."

"Mom, for someone who's supposed to be so laid back you sure do nitpick about labels."

"You're right, Callie," she said indulgently. "*Forgive* me. What kind of people-killing device are you carrying today, a fifty-caliber Browning?"

"It's a forty-caliber Glock, Mom –"

"Aha!" she said, wagging her finger at me. "Do unto others."

"That's a Christian saying."

Mother's nose rose, holier-than-thou. "I embrace all truth from whatever source it derives."

"If only." I leaned over to rub Snowflake's belly, eliciting an affectionate four-pawed grab. "Listen, I'll hang out and *rap* with you when this one is done, okay?"

"Hanging out and rapping is good. Go find that girl."

My eyebrows rose. "How'd you know it's a girl?"

"A mother knows."

“So now you’re my mother again?”

She plastered on that enigmatic smile I hated. “I do not see myself as one or the other.”

“I hate Taoist koans, and you twisted that one.”

“Koans cannot be twisted or untwisted.”

“How about this one: if you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.”

“You and your killing.” Mom scowled.

“I’ve never killed anyone in my life, but there’s always a first time.”

Mother stared at me blandly, but I knew she was thinking about the bomb tech, the one who’d died in the blast that maimed me...and she knew I knew.

Survivor’s guilt stabbed me anyway, though a pinprick compared to what it once was. I raised my hand. “I have to go. Be well, Mommy Starlight.”

“Be well, Callie-gee.”

Glad to get away from Mother’s surreal world-capsule and back to the crisp reality of my beloved streets, I walked briskly to clear the cobwebs, picking up a half-dozen assorted pastries from Malek’s before heading to my office. On the way I texted Mickey to meet me there immediately.

Once inside, I went upstairs to my kitchenette and brewed a pair of quadruple lattes, dividing the baked goods evenly into two baskets. Putting them all in one risked Mickey making the rest disappear before I’d finished with the first turnover.

From behind my desk downstairs I dialed Mickey’s cell.

“On my way, Boss,” he said when he picked up, not sounding on his way at all.

“Your four-shot and fresh pastries are sitting on my desk getting cold and stale,” I told him.

His next response seemed more sincere. “Be right there.”

I knew the food and coffee would motivate him. Three minutes later he stomped heavily up the stairs to throw himself into the chair in front of me, both hands reaching for the goodies before his butt hit the seat. “Mm,” he said after the first bite of *pain au chocolat*.

“Enjoy it, because I want you handy all day.”

“You know I’m very handy, Boss. Your wish is my command.”

“Right now I command you to keep working.”

“I got a couple things for you,” he said with a *did-I-do-good* expression.

“Let’s hear it.” I finished my first turnover and wiped my fingers on a napkin. I’d long since learned not to lick them with Mickey around; his eyes would lock onto my mouth and sometimes he let out an involuntary moan. Do you wonder why I never set foot in the basement bathroom?

“Okay, your pharmacist client called several different numbers since Friday night. Two to prepaid cells, I think. Another to your buddy Cole, his private cell number, but it was very short, fourteen seconds. Probably voice mail. After that she received a call from one of those prepaids. Doesn’t have to mean anything. Everyone uses them nowadays, even you.”

I sighed audibly, making a hurry-up motion with my non-eating hand.

“Okay, okay. Then she gets a call on her home phone from a different prepaid, but what’s weird is, it’s a number that’s almost sequential to one of the other ones she has been talking to. Like it was in the same lot, maybe bought at the same store near the same time.”

My mind chewed on that one for a moment. “Anything else?”

“She called Cole again Sunday morning. Short. Probably just left a message again.”

“Hmm. She never said anything about that.”

“What do you think it means?”

“No telling. That it?”

“I still have more numbers to correlate.”

“Okay, here’s a new lead to research. Somebody in the drug trade called Houdini. A big player, I’m thinking. Might be the guy who commissioned the heist, or at least will be buying the load.”

“Houdini. That’s all you got?”

“There’s another guy called Luger. Aryan Brotherhood, neo-Nazi, mid-level dealer by the look of things. Might be into other stuff; he’s a little unusual. I believe he owns the entire block of apartments where he lives.”

“I’ll add that to the list.”

“Be careful. These guys ID you fishing in their pond, they might come after you.”

“I didn’t know you cared, Boss.”

“I don’t, except they’d come after me next. Or your mom.”

“Ouch.” Mickey’s face lost its banter. “I’ll be very careful.”

“Good.” I stared at him for a long moment, and then snapped, “Go on, take your goodies and get to work.”

“Right. Don’t have to be mean,” he mumbled as he got up.

“Sorry, Mickey.” I pulled out my freshly recharged money clip. “I’m just wound up and running on very little sleep right now.” Tossing five twenties onto my desk for him to pick up, I said, “That’s a down payment. I’ll give you the rest later.”

“Thanks, Boss,” he said, mollified, scooping up the cash before heading downstairs to his lair.

I checked my answering machine, not hearing what I wanted – Cole Sage’s voice. Only telemarketers, an inquiry from a potential client that sounded like he wanted me to surveil his cheating wife and a personal call from Elle Saint John, the chief of police out in the dusty San Joaquin Valley town of Turlock. She was wondering when I’d be coming through again and would I like to have lunch. I sent her a quick text telling her I was on a case and I’d get back to her, and then tried to figure out where to go from here.

Mira was being surprisingly reasonable by not freaking out and calling me every few hours for an update. Was that suspicious? Maybe. I picked up my landline, which activated the automatic record function.

My client answered on the first ring. “Yes?” she said, her voice thin and shaky.

“Mira, it’s Cal. Have you been contacted?” I liked to ask open-ended questions because sometimes people ended up telling me completely unexpected, revealing things. Not this time, though.

“No, nobody’s called. Please tell me you’ll find her soon!”

“I’m getting closer, Mira. I really am. So...no one from your job has talked to you yet?”

“No. Should they have?”

“Not sure.”

I thought about the fact that someone with Mira’s biometrics had ripped off the warehouse last night. If the theft had been reported to the police, they’d have detained her for questioning already. Was it possible no one working there had noticed yet? Of course, I’d told Bill to overlook anomalies – not to call it in unless he absolutely had to. Once the cops got involved, the kidnappers’ hand would be forced. They’d have to wrap up their heist and I didn’t want them pushed into something hasty or desperate, like murdering Talia.

“What’s going on?” Mira asked.

“I’d rather you not know. Eventually the cops will question you. The more ignorant you are, the better. If I tell you things they might get mixed up in your head and make you sound guilty because of that extra information you shouldn’t possess.”

“Please, just tell me my baby will be all right.”

“Your baby will be all right. Hang in there. I hope she’ll be back by midnight. Call you later.” I ended the call.

My assurance was a mere educated guess at best, but I needed Mira not to stir things up in the critical next hours. Now that the criminals had their goods they had no reason to hang onto the ball and chain of a child – at least, not once they delivered the drugs to whatever major supplier had the cash. Even at a deep

discount there must be at least a cool million involved, maybe ten, but the girl would likely stay put until they made the trade. After that, they'd go mobile, disappear with their bundles of hundreds, and an anonymous tip to SFPD would lead law enforcement to the glorious rescue.

Probably.

I didn't depend on *probably*, though. Any number of things could go wrong.

Chapter 8

My next call was to Bill Clawson. He'd given me his home and cell numbers, but both went to recording. I left messages. When I dialed the security center I got someone named Sal.

"Bill there?" I asked.

"Um, no," the Italian-American accented male voice on the line said. "Who is this?"

"A friend of his. He's not answering his home or cell phones."

"I know. I'd like to find him too."

"When's he due in to work?"

"Ah..."

"Look, Sal, I know he drinks. He ever so plastered he doesn't answer?"

"Hell, no. He's not like that." Sal sounded worried.

"Give me his home address."

"I thought you said you were a friend of his?"

"I'm a new friend, Sal. Never been to his place." Struck by a sudden inspiration, I said in a tone full of innuendo, "He always comes to my place, if ya know what I mean."

"Oh. Um, okay. But don't tell him you got it from me. And tell him to call in, okay?"

"Sure thing, Sal. You're the best."

Sal recited Bill's address, in San Rafael as I'd expected. After scribbling it down and hanging up, I descended the stairs to exit my walkout into the parking courtyard, telling Mickey to call with anything new. He mumbled affirmation, eyes on his main monitor.

As morning rush hour traffic across the Golden Gate was largely southbound, Molly carried me steadily north toward Bill's place. I'd just started to relax when I felt Dad's presence beside me.

"I don't like it when you lie," he said.

"We're rehashing an old argument, dad," I replied. "There's no eleventh commandment of 'Thou Shalt Not Lie.'"

"Satan is the father of lies."

I guess he – or my subconscious – wasn't going to be so easily dissuaded.

“God told the prostitute Rahab to lie about the Hebrew spies in Jericho so they could get away.”

“One exception doesn’t make it right.”

“It means there *are* exceptions, and I’ll lie like a dog if it gets a little girl home safe.” The only way to prevail in an argument with Dad was by using his own belief system. I’d gotten good at it. He always told me debate improved the mind. “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another,” he used to quote.

When I looked over, he was gone. I guess I’d won that round.

My satisfaction mixed with sadness that he didn’t stay longer. Sometimes I told myself I wanted him gone for good. Other times I begged him to appear to me, but the phenomenon wasn’t something I could call up on demand.

I tried Bill’s phone again, but got no answer. The intercom at his gated condo community didn’t reach him either, so I punched in common access codes, starting with 1111, until I hit something. In this case, 1234 opened the rolling barrier just fine. I choked a chuckle at the “security” provided as I drove in and parked in a visitor spot near 65, Bill’s unit.

A beat-up Ford pickup was parked in the numbered slot. It fit Bill somehow and seemed to indicate he was home, unless the man had more than one vehicle. From his state last night I imagined he’d overdone it, maybe turned off his ringers despite Sal’s assurances of his boss’s work ethic. After all, it was only about seven thirty a.m.

I hammered on unit 65’s third-floor door with the meaty part of my fist and yelled intermittently for a good two minutes until neighbors started to poke their heads out and stare. Walking over to the nearest, an older woman in a housedress, I asked, “Where’s the manager?”

With a silent scowl the biddy pointed the way. I returned a deliberately false smile to follow her finger and a couple of neat signs until I found the office.

“Ms. Geiner,” I said to the young, overdressed woman there after reading the nameplate on her desk, “I work with Bill Clawson in 65. He hasn’t shown up for his shift and isn’t answering the phones. He has a heart condition and I’m concerned that he might need help. Could you get a key and escort me to check on him?” I said all this in my cop voice, the one that brooked no argument and usually got unthinking cooperation from the average citizen.

“Should we call an ambulance?” she said, clearly worried.

“Let’s take a look first. We’d both feel silly if he’s not there. Besides, I don’t want to get charged for an unnecessary response. Do you?”

“No, of course not. I’ll...” She rummaged in a metal box mounted on the wall behind her desk, coming up with a key on a plastic ring. “Here we go.” Placing a placard on her desk with *Back In 15 Minutes* on it, she led me in her

uncomfortable-looking heels down the landscaped pathway and up the stairs to 65.

After a few seconds of pointless knocking of her own, Ms. Geiner unlocked the door with her key and stepped in hesitantly. "Mister Clawson?"

"I already called to him before. He's either not here or something's wrong," I said as I pushed past her. Flipping on the light, I saw an open plan with kitchen, dining and living rooms sharing the same space, divided only by a half-counter with two barstools. Several liquor bottles, empty or partly so, decorated the area, as well as take-out boxes and an overflowing plastic trash can. Geiner sniffed disdainfully from behind me.

Trying the first of two shut doors, I found a messy, stale-smelling bathroom, its tiny window closed tight. When I opened the other room I smelled alcohol. Not the sour smell of evaporated booze that left behind residue, but rather the fumes themselves, indicating either a recent or heavy spill.

Stepping into the darkened bedroom, I sighed with relief as I saw Bill under the covers of his queen-sized bed. Instead of blinding him with the overhead lamp I picked my way across the messy floor to the window and rotated the blinds to let a half-light in, and then I shook his shoulder.

"Bill," I called before awareness of the rigid immobility of his flesh had reached my consciousness. "Shit!" I stepped back.

"There's no need for such language," the manager said at my elbow.

I'd have laughed derisively if the situation hadn't been so dire. Instead, I immediately dialed 911 from Bill's house phone. "I need an ambulance and PD. A man is dying or dead," I said, and recited the address, knowing full well Bill was beyond saving. Rigor mortis meant he'd been at least three hours gone, but I wasn't a medical professional or a cop. Legally, I couldn't make that call. I hung up before the dispatcher could start with the inevitable quiz.

"I told you we should have called right away."

"I'm calling to cover our asses, Ms. Geiner, yours and mine both. He's been dead for a while, but we need an official determination as fast as possible to clear us."

"Us?" The young woman looked suddenly frightened. "I didn't do anything."

"Exactly, but I used to be a cop and I'm just making sure that's proven, crystal-clear." The phone rang just then, certainly 911 calling back to confirm. I stopped Geiner from picking it up. I wanted to get the process over with as fast as possible, and that meant a quick, concise statement to the responding officers, not wasting time with the overworked 911 call center.

In the meantime, I lifted the blanket and examined Bill's corpse as best I

could without disturbing anything. It looked like he might have a bruise near the base of his skull. With a pocket light I confirmed it. Was that cause of death, or just a result of the knockout blow? Only the forensics would tell.

I suppressed the feeling of sympathy and sickness that welled up in me, glad I didn't know him all that well, and especially happy we hadn't gotten closer. Compartmentalize, I told myself. Grieve later, with all the other people you've lost.

The EMTs reached us first, and after the obligatory examination of the body they called in the official time of death's discovery. They were just leaving as the shields barged in.

"Well, well, well, what have we here? Cal 'the pal' Corwin," my former partner Lieutenant Jay Allsop sneered, his short, scruffy-faced young partner behind him looking on in confusion. Not my favorite voice, it was attached to one of my least favorite people and the nickname wasn't a term of endearment. In cop speak, "pal" translated as "personal ass-licker" and also applied to those considered traitors to their brothers and sisters on the force.

That was the price I'd paid for my lawsuit against the department, despite the fact I'd won and proven my supervisor, Lieutenant Stanger, had acted with reckless negligence, culpable for the bomb tech's death and my injuries. To many, I'd bitten the hand that fed me. I'd never have done it if Stanger hadn't lied on her report, pinning the fiasco squarely on yours truly.

In my mind, she was the real traitor. I'd ended her career and stuck it to the department for seven figures in compensation, but in doing so I'd lost all goodwill with SFPD. I'd still trade the money back if they'd let me have my old job again, but I knew that would never happen.

"Nice to see you too, Jay. Since when does a lieutenant show up first on the scene?" Normally uniformed officers checked out all questionable deaths, freeing higher-ranking Homicide personnel to deal with those where foul play was probable.

"Since I happened to be in the neighborhood. Brody, take their statements – outside."

Relieved Allsop wasn't inclined to bust my balls further, I followed the rookie detective outside past the gazes of the curious neighbors now lining their doorways, Geiner trailing behind. "Let's get some privacy," I said as I marched toward the stairs, forcing the kid and the manager to follow. Okay, Brody must not be a complete tyro, as all detectives had to have three years in service before they could test for their shields, but his off-the-rack suit still looked like it should have price tags attached.

Once we reached the courtyard I stood near the pointless fountain. Its

burbling would mask our voices from the curious onlookers straining to hear what must be the most exciting thing to happen to this part of upscale, neatly scrubbed suburbia in a while. The young detective took a flip notebook and a pen from his rumpled, slightly oversized gray tweed jacket. "All right..."

I interrupted him with my prepared recitation, holding out an open wallet. "I'm California Corwin, a P.I. and acquaintance of the deceased, Bill Clawson. Here's my license. At seven thirty-four I arrived at unit 65 and banged on the door after receiving no answer on the deceased's home and cell phones and determining that he had not shown up at work." I paused, watching the scrawny young suit scrawl furiously. "Going too fast?"

"Naw, I got it."

"When he didn't answer I enlisted the assistance of Ms. Geiner here, who escorted me to the deceased's dwelling and unlocked the door. We called out and, upon receiving no answer, conducted a cursory search of the premises, at which time we found the deceased. We touched the door handles and I shook the deceased's shoulder. Suspecting he was no longer alive by the sensation of rigor mortis, I immediately dialed 911 from the landline in the bedroom to call for EMT and PD. We waited, touching nothing further. I did notice what appeared to be a bruise at the base of the deceased's skull." I stopped to let him catch up.

"Okay, great. Miss Geiner, do you have anything to add?"

"*Miz*, please. And no, I don't."

"Then that's all I need. You can go, *Miz*."

Geiner hurried off in the direction of her office. I stayed, looking at the kid. He seemed energized. Maybe it was his first murder. I wondered how he'd bypassed the usual stairsteps like Narcotics and Vice. Homicide was generally considered the apex of the detective pyramid. Might be a prodigy, or someone's nephew. Each was equally likely. Anybody who thought the Department free of nepotism was delusional.

"Brody, if Jay hasn't told you already I'm sure he'll tell you later. I did eight years on the force, and when I made it to Homicide, Sergeant Jay Allsop was my partner. Taught me everything he knew. We got along great back then until our super, Lieutenant Stanger, ordered me to assist an explosives tech in disarming a bomb."

Brody grunted. "That's against policy."

"Damn right. I wasn't trained in EOD any more than you are. In fact, they should have just thrown Kevlar blankets over it, surrounded it with barriers and cleared the area. The device wasn't huge, but Stanger didn't want it going off. She wanted a heroic story to sell, with her in charge. So she sent the guy in alone and, when he said he needed help, she ordered me to assist."

Brody narrowed his eyes. I could see the kid was sharp. “You should have refused.”

I nodded wearily. “In hindsight, yeah. I should have raised a stink right there and tried to keep the tech from going in at all. Once he was committed, though, she would have just ordered someone else to help. So I complied with an unlawful order. That’s my cross to bear.”

“So what? Why’re you telling me this?”

“Because the bomb detonated, killing the tech and wounding me.” I brushed my hair back to show him the scar tissue. He winced. “When I was in the hospital recovering, keeping my mouth shut like a good cop, Stanger filed her official report blaming me for his death. Said I went in against orders.”

“Bullshit. The force takes care of its own.”

I shrugged. “Not always. It’s in the official record, or you can look up the news stories. I filed a formal complaint. That triggered an IA investigation that supported her side of the story despite the deposition of several witnesses who agreed with me. They took my shield, put me on a desk and started talking about forced medical retirement.”

Brody snorted. “You’re saying it was a fix?”

“I’m saying it was a cover-up from a supervisor that saw her ambitions for promotion about to disintegrate. Bad enough we lost one guy – why take the blame, right? So I found a high-powered law firm and filed suit against Stanger, the IA lead investigator and the department.”

“Dangerous, going up against the department. You won?”

“Partly. They retired Stanger and fired the IA officer in charge but refused to reinstate me, claiming I should have stood on policy and declined to go in.”

“They were right.”

“I know,” I sighed. “I did get awarded damages for my injuries – a fair chunk of change, which set me up in the P.I. biz. I think that’s what sticks in Jay’s craw, really: the money. He believes that’s why I sued, but he’s wrong.”

“Interesting story, Miss Corwin.”

“Call me Cal.”

“Tanner.” He stuck out his hand with a grin that was hard not to return.

I stared at it for a moment, and then took and shook, trying to make my fingers grip normally. This kid had given me a fair hearing and didn’t seem to condemn me unduly so I found myself caring what he thought. “Anyway, that’s my side of things to compare with whatever Jay will say.” I pulled out a business card. “Reach out to me if you ever need anything.”

“Thanks. Maybe I will.” He smiled without a trace of a leer. I wasn’t sure how to feel about that – relieved or insulted. I decided to give him the benefit of

the doubt.

Or maybe he was gay.

“Brody, if you’re done slumming, get your ass up here,” Jay bellowed from the third floor balcony.

I flipped Jay off as he turned to go back into Bill’s apartment, and then gave Brody a mocking salute. “Hey, when they determine cause of death, let me know, will you? Bill was a retired cop trying to help me on a case.”

“You don’t seem broken up about it.” His eyes narrowed.

“Now you’re thinking like a detective...but I only knew him a day or two.” I shrugged.

Brody cocked his head. “What kinda case?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.”

“You think someone offed him to slow you down?”

I chewed my lip. “Maybe. Awful inconvenient timing, and it’s difficult to whack yourself in the back of the head, fall into bed and pull up the covers. Then again, maybe someone only wanted to grill him and they hit him too hard. That’s why I want to know.”

“You’re gonna owe me, Cal.”

“As long as you don’t ask for payment in blowjobs.”

Brody choked back laughter, shaking his head before heading for the stairs with a wave.

I called after him, “Be cool, kid. Jay’s all right, really. Just don’t get on his bad side.” With that, I turned on my heel and strode away.

Chapter 9

I believe in coincidence, but I don't trust or depend on it. The odds of Bill's murder being unrelated to the case were slim and I'd been the one to involve him in it. That made me responsible at a certain level, though I refused to claim fault.

The real question was, why hadn't they come after me instead? If someone had noticed my inquiries, I was the logical target. Maybe Bill had started poking around apart from me, tipped someone off.

Then I remembered the four guys last night. They'd seemed unusually persistent for mere muggers, chasing me through the dive and into the alley, only breaking off when I sent a round their way. But they were hardly pros. Freelance muscle, punks for hire. Maybe they didn't even have orders to kill me – just put me in the hospital for a week or two.

Yeah, that was comforting.

Hopefully Mickey would dig something up on Houdini. Until then, it appeared I had only one lead.

Lattimer.

Somehow I thought simply talking to him might not do the trick. Circumstances pointed to him covering for the heist, making sure it went smooth. In my book that made him as guilty as anyone.

Now Bill was dead. Someone was tying up loose ends, and Lattimer might have pointed the way to his boss.

He also might be next in line.

I needed some muscle myself, now. Pulling up my speed dial, I called Meat and Manson as I eased into Molly and locked the doors.

Their real names were Malcolm and Mason Estridge, but they preferred their street handles, or collectively, "The M&Ms." Huge, mixed-race guys that reminded me of Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, they could pass for almost anything but Scandinavian depending on their dress and manner. Based out of their iron-fenced home in Oakland, they freelanced for several bail bondsmen, had their gun cards and enough flexibility in their morality to get jobs like this done.

"Cal, what up?" Meat, the older brother, came on the call.

"Hey, Meat. Got a job. Usual rates."

“When and where?”

“Today, soon. Probably up in Marin. I have to pin a guy down and ask him some questions.”

“Okay. We’ll head on up to Maderos.”

“Right. Get me a chorizo and *huevos* burrito. I’ll call you when I find him. Oh, and Meat? Dress like P.I.s, not thugs.”

Maderos was a family-owned Mexican joint, one of those sprawling over-the-top stereotypes filled with outlandish paint, indoor fountains, sombreros and live plants that nevertheless managed great service and outstanding food. Any time they ended up north of the Golden Gate, the M&Ms found some excuse to go there. Today, it made an excellent holding location, especially as they were open for breakfast.

I forced myself to drive reasonably, heading in the direction of the security center. On the way I dialed their number. When it picked up, I said, “Sal?”

“This the lady that called before?”

“Yeah.”

“You get ahold of Bill?”

“Before I tell you, I need to talk about Lattimer. Is he there?”

“No. Comes in at five.”

“Five p.m.?”

“Yeah.”

“He say anything about skipping his shift?”

“Nope. What’s this about?”

“I’ll tell you when I get there in ten minutes.”

Sal met me at the door, a fortyish swarthy fellow of Sicilian descent if I had to guess. I pushed past him and into the lounge where I’d first talked to Bill. “You alone?” I asked.

“Yeah, since Bill didn’t come in.”

“Have a seat.” I sat on the edge of the sofa, and after a moment he grabbed a chair and set himself on it, puzzled.

“You don’t look like I pictured you,” he said.

I ignored that and put on my best bad-news sympathy expression. “I just came from Bill’s condo. The cops were there.”

“Something’s happened?”

I nodded slowly, heavily.

“Mother of God. Is it bad?”

“Bad as it gets. He’s dead, though it didn’t look like he suffered. Hit on the back of the head for sure. I’m waiting on an official cause.”

I watched closely as Sal buried his face in his hands, looking for a hint of

anything off. After all, if one employee here might be in on it, who's to say another wasn't? A moment or two later, he ran his fingers through his slightly too-long hair and took a deep breath. "That sucks," he said, and I saw his eyes were full.

"Yeah. Majorly." I lifted out my P.I. license and showed it to him. "Bill was helping me on a case. It may have got him killed. Last night four guys made a run at me too, but I scared them off. Can you keep your mouth shut?"

"Me and Bill, we go way back. He brought me out here from Chi-town to work. Best move I ever made," Sal said, scratching under his watchband.

I noticed he had prison ink there. "How'd a con hook up with a cop?"

Sal shrugged. "You know. He busted me for armed robbery, put me away in juvie when I was seventeen. Best thing that ever happened to me."

"How so?"

"Bill visited me every week in the joint. I was just a stupid young punk. Mob wannabe, you know, and maybe I would have been, but Bill kept me off that path. Father figure, I guess you'd call him. Got my record sealed and when I got out told me to come out here and work for him. Gave me a real chance at life." Sal shook his head and a tear fell.

"You want some back?"

Lifting his head, Sal's eyes narrowed. "How? I ain't gonna get sent up again. That's not what Bill would have wanted."

"Lattimer is involved. We weren't sure how, but some way. Give me everything you got on him and I'll take it from here. Nobody will know about you unless you tell them."

"That rat-bastard. I knew there was something I didn't like about him. Bill's got – he had – a soft spot for reformed cons, but some of them you just can't trust, you know? I tried to warn him. Takes one to know."

"Just tell me where I can find Lattimer."

"You gonna kill him?"

I chuckled grimly. "I'm a P.I., Sal, not a hit man. I might rough him up a little, but he'll be alive when I leave him. More than that you don't wanna know."

"Yeah. Okay. Gimme a minute." He stepped briefly into the monitoring room, showing me a glimpse of a room full of computer screens, and then came back with a piece of paper. "Here's his info. You didn't get it from me."

"Nope. He tough or what?"

"Naw. White collar. Nerd."

"Good. By the way, I wouldn't be surprised if Homicide interviewed you soon. Best to forget you talked to me, okay?"

Sal nodded solemnly. "Just find out who did this, sister." He placed his hand on his heart. "I'll owe you big."

"No sweat."

"Hey...what do I do about the business?"

I shrugged as I stood up. "Not my department. Did he have relatives?"

"A sister back in Chicago."

"Call her, then. You next in charge?"

"Yeah. Assistant manager, more or less."

"Sounds like it's all on you. Sorry, Sal." I handed him one of my business cards. "Put that out of sight. Call me if anything comes up."

"I will."

"Oh, one more thing. You ever hear anything on the street about someone named Houdini? Maybe a dealer?"

"No, sorry. I'm clean now, and I stay away from people in the life."

"How about Luger?"

"Nope."

"Fair enough." I turned to leave, and then looked over my shoulder, hand on the doorknob. "You might want to plan for someone to cover Lattimer's shift."

Back inside Molly, I called the M&Ms. "You boys finished with your carne asada and chili verde?" They always ordered the same things no matter the time of day.

"Almost."

"I'm swinging by. Be outside and ready to follow me in five."

"On it."

When I pulled into the parking lot my watch read five after nine. Meat sat behind the wheel of their lifted dually with the monster tires, his younger, slightly smaller brother Manson standing nearby with a white Styrofoam carton. They both wore clean jeans and calfskin jackets, their version of "dress like P.I.s." Leather fedoras like hats out of *Rocky* covered tattoos of crosses on their foreheads.

Could be worse.

Manson handed the box through my open window and I placed it in my lap, unwrapping the first warm breakfast burrito as I talked. My stomach rumbled. The pastries had long since digested. I stuffed the wrap into my face, hardly chewing. Once I'd finished with the first roll of heaven, I spoke.

"There's a little girl that's been kidnapped for leverage in a heist. This guy

Lattimer works at the security center and he helped cover up the job. Someone just wacked his boss, a guy named Bill Clawson that was helping me. I need to find out what he knows, so you guys do your best to scare him shitless. If that doesn't work, we start with pain and proceed to injury. Cool?"

Manson nodded solemnly. "Cool," the younger one said. Meat scowled. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of that expression.

"Follow me, then. Stay back a bit. That cowboy Cadillac of yours is memorable. When I pull in at his place, park at the end of the block and join me on foot. He's supposed to be a geek but he may rabbit, so we'll run a standard bounty drill."

"Got it, Boss."

I handed them most of the green in my money clip. "Down payment for today."

"Thanks." Manson saluted me with the folded cash before climbing into the passenger side of the truck. When I pulled away, they followed.

The address I had turned out to be a small single family home in a decent neighborhood of pre-World-War-Two construction. Not rich, but no broken-down cars adorned the green front lawns, which seemed more or less neatly kept. Few garages, but most had carports on the side and lots of mature trees. Quiet.

I parked Molly at the curb on a property line a couple houses away beneath a spreading Eucalyptus. The smell washed over me when I stepped out, reminding me of my childhood in Menlo Park. An old tabby gazed momentarily at me once from the front porch of the nearest home before turning to continue cleaning its flank.

I leaned against the big tree and idly peeled off a section of its papery bark, staring across at Lattimer's house as I waited for the M&Ms. It seemed exceptionally neat and tidy, this one. Combined with Sal's description of him as a nerd, I pictured a small guy with thick glasses, acne and dandruff.

"Dogs?" Meat asked as he walked up beside me.

"Forgot to ask. Sorry. Other things on my mind."

"Guns?"

"I doubt it."

Meat slapped his chest. "Got vests and stunners."

"Good. Firearms?"

Meat shuffled uncomfortably, remaining silent.

"Okay, just keep them holstered unless you see a deadly threat. He's a bit player, I'm pretty sure."

"Pretty sure?"

I turned to raise an eyebrow. "That's all you boys get today. Wanna back out?"

"Naw. Let's do this." Testosterone has its uses, especially when it lets me dare men into doing things I want them to do.

A teenaged girl walked past us with a well-behaved Lab, iPod in her ears and head down to text one-handed on her flip-phone, oblivious. Other than her, the street was empty.

"Okay." I shoved off the tree with my shoulder and sauntered across the shady asphalt, the two ogres behind me doing their best to look inconspicuous. We approached the target's house and turned in.

Meat went around the back while Manson backed me up at the front door. I motioned him off to the side, out of sight, and then pulled out my P.I. badge and knocked. A moment later I saw movement behind the inset upper window. I spoke loudly. "Mister Lattimer? I'm Detective Jones from the San Rafael Police Department. Can I speak with you?" I waved my P.I. badge, and then closed the wallet with a decisive snap.

"What do you want?" he asked as he opened the door. A small man with short, mouse-brown hair, neatly dressed in slacks and button-down shirt, he didn't seem to be any threat. I almost felt bad about what we were about to do until I remembered Bill lying dead, and Talia...

"It's about your boss, Bill Clawson. May I come in?"

"Sure." He stepped back to allow me to walk past.

Manson pushed in behind me and grabbed the little guy by the shoulders, hustling him over to throw him down on a nearby sofa while I shut the door. Lattimer gibbered on his back, hands up in front of him. I quickly let Meat in the back door and then returned.

"Listen to me, Lattimer." I leaned over the terrified man while the M&Ms loomed behind me looking scary. "Bill Clawson is dead and you helped get him killed. Homicide will be here soon enough and you'll be arrested for accessory to murder. You can talk to me or you can talk to them."

"I...I...what?" His eyes fixed on the muscle behind me.

I slapped Lattimer across the face. "Look at me. What's your first name?"

"Ow. It's Phil."

"So Phil, here's the deal. Tell me everything or I turn these guys loose on you. After that, if you're lucky the cops will take you to the hospital before they throw you in jail."

"You said you were a cop!"

I slapped him again, drawing a whimper. "Focus, Phil. I lied. If I was a cop would I be threatening you with severe pain? Tell me about the heist?"

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything.”

“My mom is in a home. This guy who called me told me he would make her suffer if I didn’t do what they said.”

“That’s it?”

Lattimer looked away. I could see what Sal meant. Shifty.

“I guess a few slaps won’t be enough.”

I jerked my head at Meat, who reached down and grabbed the man’s left hand. Manson exhibited the teamwork the brothers were famous for by covering Lattimer’s mouth with one large paw. He tried to protest, but all that came out were muffled throat noises.

Meat bent Lattimer’s pinkie back until it almost folded against his hand. The man screamed and jerked beneath Manson’s gag of flesh, but the M&Ms held him effortlessly.

“That’s just the beginning of the hell you’ll experience if you don’t tell me everything. Your mom was the stick. What about the carrot?”

Manson lifted his palm enough to let Lattimer speak. “They promised me a hundred thousand dollars.”

“See? That was easy. When and where are they supposed to pay you?”

“Tomorrow. Said he’d call with the details.”

I cursed under my breath. Catching the bad guys after the fact was cop work. Nothing Lattimer had said was getting me any closer to Talia.

“Anything else you can tell us about the heist? You’re only helping yourself if we catch these guys and get the kid back.”

“The kid?”

“Yeah, didn’t you know? They kidnapped a ten-year-old girl for leverage.”

“Damn. I didn’t know. What could I do?” He actually had the decency to look distressed.

I shrugged again. “Water under the bridge. What did the guy who called you sound like?”

“Middle age. White American, probably.”

“Very helpful. Only a million of those around here. Anything else? Anything at all?”

Lattimer shook his head.

“You ever hear of someone called Houdini? A dealer, maybe?”

The little man’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah, just a few whispers. Moves a lot of product, I hear.”

“Cartels? Mob?”

“I don’t know. Really, I don’t.”

I stared at him for a while but he didn't flinch. "What about Luger?"

"Him I heard of."

"Anything to do with this heist?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know." I nodded to Meat, who prepared the next finger.

"Really, I don't! I only know what I told you!"

I could see the naked fear in the man's eyes so I decided to believe him.

"Okay. Let him up," I said to Manson. "Let's go. Cops could be here any minute." Pointing a finger at Lattimer, I said, "The less you say about us the better. It will only complicate your life and it will piss my friends here off. When they get pissed off they like to break more than just a finger or two. Get it?"

"Yeah. I know how to keep my mouth shut."

"Not that I could tell," I said.

"Cops don't break fingers."

"Some do." Jay had.

A knock came at the front door, startling everyone in the room. Manson clamped down on Lattimer's mug. I jerked my head at Meat, who looked carefully out the front window from the farthest edge, peering between the blinds and the frame. He held up a hand for silence.

The knock came again and Meat stood there, palm out, while I waited and Manson held Lattimer immobile. After a long minute, Meat dropped the hand and said, "He's gone."

"Who?" I asked.

"Slim white guy in expensive sunglasses. Long dark hair, light colored trench coat. Twenties."

"Cop?"

"I doubt it. Besides, where's his partner?"

"Around the back?"

Meat padded into the rear of the house to check. "Nobody."

"Did you see a car?"

"Yeah. Dark green foreign job."

I jumped to my feet and ran the several steps to the front window. I saw the back of a trench coat sauntering across the street and down a couple houses toward a green Audi. "Damn. You see that guy again, grab him." I began moving toward the back door.

"Who is he?" Meat asked.

"No idea, but he's involved," I called as I walked. "Bill saw him the other evening when we were staking out the heist. I'm guessing he's with the perps, tying up loose ends." I turned at the kitchen door to look into Lattimer's wide

eyes. “If I were you, I’d forget about your hundred grand and lay low. Get out of town, maybe. If we hadn’t been here you might have joined Bill in the morgue.”

When Manson lifted his hand from Lattimer’s mouth he said, “I’m so screwed. Why does this shit always happen to me?”

I shrugged. “Some people got all the luck. Guys, let him go. I’ll call you later. I’m gonna try tailing this guy.” With that, I slipped out the back.

Chapter 10

I waited until I saw the back end of the Audi round the corner before I sprinted across the street and threw myself into Molly. I started her up and accelerated as fast as I could without laying rubber, all four tires pumping power into the pavement, hurling the lightweight car forward like an eager racehorse. Rounding the block, I spotted the Quattro's distinctive tail pattern as it turned onto another residential street.

Turning one block early, I scrabbled to pull my racing harness on and snap the buckles while steering with my knees, a technique I'd learned, believe it or not, from a traveling pastor in my younger days. Once I was wedged in tight I goosed the throttle, and then slowed to take the next curve.

The Audi crossed in front me as I slowed and pulled over to the curb. I made sure to aim the dash-cam at it as it went by. Maybe Mickey could use electronic trickery to pull the number off the mud-smearred plate.

As my target rolled out of sight I picked up speed again to keep him in view. Whoever this guy was, I could hope he would lead me to something, anything, even if not Talia herself.

Or maybe I'd follow him right to her. Stranger things had happened. As every poker player knows, sometimes you have to get lucky, and winning was about putting yourself in a position to get lucky.

That's what I was doing.

I followed the Audi out of the neighborhood and onto Andersen Drive, running southwestward through light industrial buildings and behind shopping centers. I thought for a moment he would head south toward the Golden Gate and the City, but instead he cut over to cross the long bridge to Richmond, a dense semi-suburban city jammed between the water on the north, west and south sides and the hills overlooking the San Pablo Reservoir to the east.

By trailing him at the limits of my vision I hoped not to spook him. He accelerated to over seventy on the bridge, but that wasn't unusual. In fact, doing so was a routine precaution against surveillance, upping the stakes and forcing any watchers to work harder.

A one-car tail was hard to maintain. Law enforcement pros used at least three ground vehicles, one trying to stay in front and two rotating from the rear

in order to minimize the footprint. A helicopter with a long-range stabilized camera, such as those used by TV news, was even better. Best of all was to plant a tracking device on the car itself, especially one of the new GPS-enabled ones, and stay out of sight entirely. But I didn't have a tracker. I'd have to get Mickey to make me up one, though there was still the problem of planting it.

My quarry took the second exit into town, dumping onto Cutter and then turning north onto Harbour past the MLK memorial park into the midst of a bustling, mostly nonwhite neighborhood. Not a dangerous one by any means, just hardworking lower-middle-class folks relaxing after work.

Kids played on the sidewalks under the watchful eyes of mothers, squads of teenage boys sauntered here and there, tossing basketballs to each other and launching lustful looks at groups of girls in too-tight clothing, who sent the sizzle right back. I could almost smell the hormones wafting here and there on the late afternoon breeze.

I had to pull in closer, dodging bicycles and jaywalkers, but it appeared the Audi's driver had slowed his frenetic pace as well. I got the impression he was searching for something. Eventually he reached Barrett and turned west toward the railroad cargo terminal, a major reason for Richmond's existence.

Such operations needed large swaths of commercial buildings – warehouses, transloading facilities, unpretentious offices. Good places to hide out, I thought.

Through these demesnes I followed the Audi, turning onto Richmond Parkway, the artery carrying scores of big trucks to and from their appointments with the business of shipping. The driver meandered northward past the Richmond Country Club and its associated golf course.

Eventually the neighborhoods changed, becoming more white-collar and, frankly, white. The Audi turned onto Hilltop and headed for the eponymous Hilltop Mall, a suburban megachurch dedicated to the worship of consumerism, built in the mid-seventies on a former Chevron petroleum handling facility. I wondered if all the ladies getting their makeovers at Macy's or Emporium knew about the spills beneath their feet, or cared.

On the other hand, these were people who applied toxic chemicals directly to their faces in order to conform to society's standards of beauty.

Then again, I had to admit I used makeup too. My feeling consisted of sour grapes, I supposed, or perhaps envy aimed at those with nothing to hide more distracting than a pimple or two.

My mental diatribe on the ills of suburbia ended when the driver spotted me – or I assumed he did. Perhaps he just decided to test out the capabilities of his vehicle in the enormous oval mall parking lot. Most of the cars clustered inward

toward the central complex, leaving the edges largely free of obstruction.

The Audi wove between concrete planters, orphaned vehicles and lightposts, probably hitting sixty. I cruised on the ring road trying to keep him in sight. After a minute of this, he slalomed around a speed bump and shot across the street a hundred yards in front of me, ignoring all traffic signs. Behind him I could see a mall guard with flashing yellow lights, vainly trying to keep up.

I laughed. The most that guy could do was chase him away and call the incident in. I wondered what caused the Audi driver to play that way, calling attention to himself. I sped up to follow. When I turned off the ring road I found myself back on Hilltop heading the other way. My quarry had made a circuit and reversed course.

I triggered the supercharger and punched Molly to catch up, blazing past Mercedes, BMWs and Escalades, but found I wasn't overtaking him fast at all. Why became clear when we crossed San Pablo. I was pushing up on ninety, my foot glued to the floor and more than three hundred horses roaring behind my dashboard when I ran the red light just as the yellow faded.

He must have spotted me after all. If I hadn't matched his acceleration he would have trapped me behind four lanes of traffic heavy with semis from the port. As it was, I hung onto him like a starving blue tick, all thought of stealth blown away like thistledown in a hurricane. The speed and risk vaulted me into the zone of concentration so welcome and familiar, the place I loved and lived whenever I could.

Now it's on, you son of a bitch, I thought. You ever see one of those animal shows where the cheetah goes after the gazelle, following every twist and leap with utter concentration? That was me, my eyes fixed on the German sport sedan and my mind running every possible scenario at lightning speed.

I had to catch this guy. I had to beat Talia's location out of him. That was all there was to it. Him or me is what it came down to. If I could make it happen, I'd run him down, drive him into a wall or a ditch, push him until he made a mistake. My rally skills should keep me close and my cop training should let me take his wheels out from under him.

The standard maneuver for this is called a PIT, for Pursuit Intervention Technique. In simplest terms it meant knocking the rear of a fleeing vehicle sideways, causing it to slide to an abrupt stop in a somewhat controlled manner if everything worked as planned. Then, several pursuing squad cars would surround the perp and block him in.

Of course, it could also cause the Audi to roll. That was okay by me, because I didn't have the luxury of blocking vehicles. My best result would be him crashing, and then me with a boot on his broken wrist for five minutes of

intensive interrogation before an ambulance showed up and I had to bug out.

Nothing ever goes as planned, though. This mother was good. Really good. There were a dozen ways to avoid giving me a chance to PIT him and he used them all. Twice we were kissing bumpers down short straightaways, NASCAR style, but I couldn't get a line to put Molly's corner against his rear quarter to do it. Like a track racer, he kept me from passing.

Though the Audi undoubtedly had more top end and its V8 pumped out more horsepower, it was heavier than Molly and not as nimble, so on these city streets he shouldn't get away. Still, I had to watch both him and the situation in front of us, while he only had to avoid crashing and look for a place to lose me.

That came when he got onto the freeway northeast toward Sacramento. Within ten seconds we were up over one hundred again, swerving among cars and laying on our horns. Over the next several minutes he pulled away by skillfully using his greater stability and better top-speed gearing, leaving me slamming my palm on Molly's steering wheel and spitting epithets.

Within a minute, I'd lost him.

I caught sight of rollers – squad car lights – as they came on well behind me. We must have either passed a speed trap or an officer had spotted our race while he traveled in the opposite direction. I maintained my highly illegal velocity until I dove off the next off-ramp somewhere in Fairfield, following the surface streets away from the freeway before turning south. Meandering back the way I came on the country roads between towns, I eventually cruised back to the City, still spitting with frustration.

It was one thing to screw up, but I hadn't. Had his car been less of a monster and his skills been poorer I'd have taken him down, but that Audi came out of the factory costing a hundred thousand dollars, and money bought capability worth every penny.

It's a screwed-up world when the scumbags have all the best toys, I thought. Then again, I had dash-cam recordings of the Audi. Maybe Mickey could work his magic.

With no other leads I headed to my office. On the way I dialed Cole Sage, but got nothing again. What kind of investigative reporter didn't even answer his private line?

I called the *Chronicle* main number and eventually, after being handed off several times, played the sister solidarity card to get the prim voice on the other end to admit Cole was on assignment out of state. That was all I could drag out of the woman, so I left another message to call me before giving up.

I was on my own, again. Naturally.

Mom says I'm a loner, and maybe she had a point. I could have kept the

M&Ms around as my posse. Maybe I should have. Maybe I'd regret it later.
What can I say? I am a rock. I am an island.

Chapter 11

When I opened the basement door to my office building around noon, I saw Mickey stacking Zs on the sofa, an empty plastic two-liter diet cola bottle clutched to his chest. He claimed he couldn't sleep without it, which made no sense to me. Caffeine kept me awake, usually a good thing.

I slammed the door and flipped on the light, watching in amusement as my assistant flailed and covered his eyes. "Get up, Mickey. I'm not paying you to sleep. That's why I sent you home last night, so you could keep the revs up all day. Come on, come on." I snapped my fingers near his ear. "You did go home, right?"

"No, sorry. My mom had some new guy over and the walls are thin. Awkward." Mickey rolled to his feet and in one ponderous motion dropped his butt into the nearby office chair, which creaked alarmingly.

"Just as long as you got some sleep. Here," I said, handing him the dash camera. "Look for shots of the back of an Audi with dirty plates. If you can pull a number we might be in business."

"Okay, I'll get right on it." He plugged in a cable and started tapping at his keyboards. When I didn't move, he spoke without turning. "Food would be really cool."

"Okay." Hovering wouldn't make him work any faster, so I got up and popped over to Mission Picnic for a couple of sandwiches.

When I got back, Mickey triumphantly exchanged a stack of printouts for a hoagie. "On top is a DMV record."

"Excellent. 2003 Audi A8 Quattro owned by –"

"Skip that for now. Look at the police report."

I flipped over the stapled sheet. "Crap. Stolen plate, up in Redding...but not the car?"

"Nope. The car wasn't touched."

"So look for another stolen A8 –"

Mickey grinned, cola-stained teeth showing through his beard. "Way ahead of you, Boss. Turn the page."

I flipped to the next sheet. "Here we go. Green A8 boosted last week in Sacramento. Sandy Henneman, 49, reported her keys were stolen from her purse

at a nightclub in Old Sac, which she only noticed when she went to a nearby parking garage and found her car missing.”

“I always wondered how you *find* something *missing*.”

“Same way you eat jumbo shrimp, I guess.” I leafed through the paperwork to a grainy picture of a man in a trench coat opening the Audi’s door. “Great work, Mickey, but unfortunately it’s another dead end. Confirms what I already suspected: he stole a plate, a misdemeanor, to cover grand theft auto, a felony, and then further obscured the numbers.”

“Now you know how he got here, though.”

I raised my eyebrows, and then got it. “Oh, via Redding? So he came down from Portland, probably, but that’s too thin. He could have stolen a different car, swiped the plate, and then dumped the old one...near the site of the Sacramento theft. Mickey, you’re a genius!”

“I know,” he said, looking down at the remnants of his bitten nails with false modesty.

“Stay right there,” I said as I charged up the stairway to my office. At my desk, I took a deep breath and dialed Tanner Brody, Jay Allsop’s rookie partner.

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Tanner, this is Cal Corwin.”

“Hey, Cal. What’s cookin’?”

“I need a favor. Can you hit up Sacramento PD and see if there were any high-end stolen cars recovered in Old Sac in the last week or so?”

“Just in Old Sacramento?” Old Sac was the upscale-funky historical district, a big tourist draw and therefore well policed.

“Right. There’s an Audi stolen there I’ve run across and I’m thinking the perp dropped off his former ride to boost it, so it should be within walking distance.”

“Does this have anything to do with Clawson’s homicide?”

“Maybe.”

“Does maybe mean *no* but you want me to help you out, or does it mean *yes* but you don’t want to give me more details?”

Sharp kid. I sighed. “It means *yes* but everything I got is very thin.” I mentally balanced how much I should tell him against the potential for police involvement to spill over into my search for Talia. “Look, I have a live client in trouble. You have a dead body. I’ll tell you what I can as soon as I can, all right?”

“All right. Call you back soon.”

“Thanks, Tanner.”

Click.

I headed back down the steps to Mickey's world. "Okay, tell me what you learned about Houdini."

"Yeah, yeah. Nothing in any of the police computers I can hack and not much on the web. In a decade or two everything will be on the internet, but not yet."

"Everything, huh? How are people going to get all that info on the internet? A million monkeys typing it all in?" I took a seat on the arm of the sofa again.

"Some will be scanned in, but a lot of stuff people will just want to tell everyone and put it up themselves. There's this new thing at Harvard and Stanford called 'The Facebook' where the students upload all sorts of crazy shit they'd never usually tell anyone – who's hot or not, party pictures, sexy shots, test answers. Kinda like MySpace but better."

I picked my way over to perch on the arm of the sofa. "Sounds pretty stupid. What if their parents found out? Or the administration?"

"That's what I tried to tell Zuckerberg, but he doesn't care."

"Who?"

"Never mind."

"So is this Houdini on The Facebook?"

"Criminals aren't stupid enough to put stuff online to help catch themselves."

I snorted. "And Stanford students are? These are supposed to be our best and brightest."

"Dunno about your college experience, but some of the dumbest people I know were in class with me."

"Yeah. Binge drinking and STDs." I thought about the four years I spent at California State University Stanislaus, graduating in 1995 with a criminology degree to qualify for the police academy, and I had to agree. I'd have rather gone somewhere near the City, but the living was cheap in the dusty San Joaquin Valley town of Turlock and there was no waiting list, unlike closer programs. "So, Houdini?"

"A couple of articles in the Sacramento Bee about a flood of pills back in 2003. That's it."

"Print them out for me, will you?"

Mickey scabbled in the pile on his desk and came up with a stapled packet. "Here you go."

I took them. "Hey, college students like pills, right? Rich kids especially."

"Yeah. Ludes, Ecstasy, Oxy, stuff like that. And dope of course. Mostly they stay away from hard shit like crack and meth."

"What about you?"

Mickey's eyes widened. "Me?"

"You use anything?"

He hesitated, and then said, "I never buy. Can't afford it. I'll take a hit off a joint if someone passes it."

I shrugged. "I'm not a cop anymore and I'm not your mom. As long as you can do the job and don't bring anything illegal here..."

Mickey relaxed. "You know what? You're the coolest boss ever."

"Yes, I am." I spent the next few minutes filling Mickey in on the latest, and then said, "Monitor that Facebook thing, and MySpace too. Maybe someone will blab about Houdini or a big shipment of pills coming onto campus."

"Already on it."

"Also, there's this guy called Luger, white supremacist. Give me a workup on him."

"You got it." Mickey turned to his array of screens.

My cell phone rang then. "Hello."

"Gale?"

"Speak of the devil." It was Luger. I climbed the steps back up to my office and paced while I talked. "Do you have something for me?"

"And a good day to you. How have you been?"

I gritted my teeth. "I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you for asking. And in answer to your question, yes, I have a word for you. I made discreet inquiries and I was told it's being handled."

"That's it? It's being handled?"

Luger's tone was careful, as if he was walking on eggshells. Like someone was listening. "This word was given from someone who knows. A source one doesn't doubt. Am I being clear enough?"

"Not at all. I'd really like to know more."

"As we all would. That's all I have. You'll have to trust me."

I sighed. "I believe what you say, but it doesn't get me any closer to recovery."

"I'm sorry. That's all I can say on that topic. On another, it may please you to know I'll have some merchandise available for you. Come by on Friday evening around seven and you can choose whatever you like. We can have dinner."

"Let me check my calendar."

"You're being coy. I like that."

"Look, Luger –"

"I'll expect you at seven. Goodbye."

Dammit. He assumed I was a pill popper and would want the product even

if I didn't want him. Maybe I'd go after all, play along. I didn't want to antagonize a source.

I sat down at my desk to listen to my messages while I waited for Brody to call back. Still nothing from Cole, which wasn't surprising. Nothing from Mira, which was. I rubbed my face and phoned her, confirming she'd heard nothing. I told her the heist was over and done last night, but to sit tight and say nothing. The kidnappers should be contacting her soon, or maybe just dropping Talia off. Until then, I'd keep trying.

My reassurances seemed to calm her down, another oddity, but I didn't ask. If I was in her shoes I'd have been frantic, wondering what was keeping the crew from freeing themselves of the burden of a child prisoner and worrying that they'd do it the simple, ugly way. Now was not the time to grill her about it, though.

Instead, I raised the blinds behind me to let in more light and read the two-year-old newspaper articles Mickey had printed out.

They quoted unnamed sources on the street that claimed Houdini had recently become a big player in the illegal distribution of prescription drugs. He was reputed to have ties to Chicago organized crime, but none to the cartels south of the border. The articles speculated some of his product came from Canada and some was smuggled in from the Far East.

Lab tests paid for by the newspaper's investigation on various pills bought on the street showed them to be either genuine or high-quality fakes with the same, if generic, ingredients. No fillers, none of the substitute drugs that often made scoring from the street deadly dangerous.

Apparently, Houdini's buyers got what they paid for. Kept them happy and it was smart business on his part. Fewer overdoses, fewer dissatisfied customers ratting to Narcotics or pushing back against the supply chain...in short, a sterling reputation in the community of his peers.

Houdini was the Warren Buffet of pharms, the Steve Jobs of pills.

I knew from my time on the job smart abusers even got legitimate prescriptions from real doctors, providing bottles with genuine labels and keeping them filled with the uncontrolled versions. As long as they didn't drive high, no cop could even arrest them for possession. It was a beautiful system for everyone with few of the risks of distributing street drugs.

As long as Houdini could keep getting high-quality supplies for cut rates, that is. Like paying a heist crew a few hundred grand to score ten mil worth or more.

Near the end of the second article a paragraph mentioned the possible connection to a pharmacy warehouse heist in Canada, one of the big mail-order

outfits that made a specialty of re-exporting cheap drugs to the US – all legal, at least on the Canadian side. The theft had been carried out by two men and a woman, never caught, and the article didn't report how it was done.

It did mention that they had left a security guard dead on the warehouse floor, shot several times in the chest. That chilled me. Once they'd crossed the line to murder there seemed no reason to flinch from killing Talia.

Looked like they had lived on their profits for a couple of years and were now ready to score again. I made a note for Mickey to look for more on the heist and crew. Maybe he could connect them to more jobs they had pulled.

I threw down the printout. All this was great background, but got me no closer to freeing the girl. I was starting to feel irrelevant. Or worse, that poking into the situation had made myself a target, gotten Bill killed and put Talia at greater risk. I had a horrible vision of Mira collapsing on her kitchen table as I brought her the worst news any mother can get.

Yet again I pushed all that aside, all the distractions that liked to chew their way into my brain, tried to shut it all down and *think*. All the great real-life detectives from Vidocq to Pinkerton to Serpico emphasized thinking first, being smart, only taking action when the time was right.

But this wasn't a case of catching the criminal after the fact. In that sense I had more in common with fictional investigators such as Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot, racing against time to save the latest victim chained in a basement somewhere...only real life seldom wrapped up the plots so neatly. I had a strong feeling that even if I got Talia home safe I wouldn't be tying up all the loose ends on this one.

I picked up a pen and began jotting down notes, reviewing what I knew about the case starting with the beginning to see if I had missed anything.

Miranda Sorkin called Cole Sage for help getting her missing daughter back. On one hand I had no independent or concrete evidence Talia was really kidnapped. Therefore, she could be anywhere – visiting her father or some other relative, for example. On the other hand I could think of absolutely nothing Mira would gain by lying. If she was in on the deal, why call attention to herself?

Yet Mira seemed distraught but not the wreck I would have expected. Was that a result of Valium-induced numbness or did she know more than she was telling? If the latter, was the lack of concern from despair or from confidence Talia would be all right?

If confidence, she wouldn't have called me.

So, despair or tranquilizer.

And what did Mira paying her ex-husband Dennis large sums of money have to do with it? I'd love to go up to Seattle and grill him about it, but any trip

there would take a minimum of twelve hours. Someone like Cole could do it, but I knew no one else with the investigative chops, not that I trusted anyway. Not unless I wanted to go against Mira's wishes and inform SFPD. I made a note to phone Dennis, though. Not as effective, but maybe I could get something.

Next, Cole Sage was out of town and had passed the case on to me. Mira had apparently reached him, but now I couldn't. Might he be putting me off, avoiding me? I couldn't see why.

The heist crew was fairly competent. They'd exerted leverage against Lattimer at the security center to smooth the way, they'd put the armlock on Mira with her daughter to get easy access to the warehouse and they'd employed a young white man in a stolen green Audi to stand back, watch and cover them if necessary.

That guy may have killed Bill, may have gone to Lattimer's to do the same to him, may have employed some thugs to take me out. However, killing seemed a bit extreme, likely to draw more attention, very unprofessional. It didn't fit.

Until I knew cause of death for sure, Bill dying might have been an accident when things got rough. The guys in the alley might have just administered a beating to me and maybe the guy at Lattimer's door was there to drop off his payment or threaten him further.

Maybe.

Or maybe these people were more ruthless than I thought and intended to tie up all their loose ends with bullets. That would mean Talia's corpse might already be rotting in a hole somewhere.

If so, I'd do my damndest to bring Houdini down.

I wished again that Meat had thought to snatch the young white guy at Lattimer's door. I'd have enjoyed beating the info I needed out of him.

Try as I might, I couldn't put any more pieces together, nothing that would help me. That left only one thing I could think of, a weak long-shot: calling Dennis Sorkin, Mira's tax-evading ex-husband with the offshore accounts.

I reached for the phone after making sure Mickey's gadgetry blocked my number on caller ID, and then dialed.

Chapter 12

“Equalizer Investments, Dennis Sorkin,” said the smooth, pleasant voice on my phone.

“Hi, Dennis. This is Norma Jones and I’m an auditor at Valley View Credit Union in San Rafael?” I deliberately put that question into my voice. I’d found it made my impersonations more believable. “I noticed you and your wife have a number of recurring high-dollar transfers over the last couple of years and I was just making sure everything’s all right?”

“Sure it’s all right. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I’m really sorry, sir,” I went on in my best apologetic and matronly voice, “but it’s my job to check on these things. We are required by the federal government’s credit union insurance program to maintain certain accountability standards, and by the IRS to report transactions exceeding certain limits.”

“Our transactions haven’t exceeded those limits, Ms. Jones. I know. I’m a financial analyst,” Dennis said with a hint of pomposity.

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” I gushed. “Your job must be so much more interesting than mine. All I do is stare at spreadsheets all day. Anyway, I know according to the guidelines you haven’t exceeded the limits, but we are coming up on an audit and anything *approaching* the limits is bound to raise some eyebrows, don’t you know? If I could at least have some kind of sensible reason for these transfers it might head off questions later.”

Silence poured from the earpiece for a moment, and then came a sigh. “Just put down that I’m investing some of my wife’s salary for her,” he said. “That’s what my job involves: investments.”

“Oh, that’s fascinating. I have all my money in money markets myself. Do you think that’s wise?”

“Ms. Jones, I am really busy, and I’m sure a local financial adviser can help you. Will there be anything else?”

“Why can’t you help me? I do like to invest with someone I already know. I do have quite a lot of money my husband left me when he died. My friends ask me why I even work when I have so much I could retire today, but I’d be bored, and the ladies at the office are so nice...”

“How much did you say you have to invest?”

“Well...I suppose I could tell you. My dear departed Harold just left me his estate, over a million dollars worth.” That should hook him.

Dennis’ voice changed smoothly from uninterested to charming and eager. “Well, Ms. Jones, that’s quite a lot to be tied up in the money markets paying a couple of percent when I could easily get you at least ten percent, perhaps more.”

“Oh? How would you do that?”

“Properly timed trades, informed by a deep understanding of the market and proprietary analytical methods I’ve come up with myself are how to do it. I specialize in short selling, puts and calls, leverage, that sort of thing.” Dennis’ charming manner slid smoothly into patronizing his clueless potential client, the jargon obviously designed to flim-flam. I’d have to go over the recording and make a call later to a day trader I knew. Maybe he could give me some insight.

“Oh my. That sounds very profitable!”

“It can be. Do you mind giving me your full name and phone number, Ms. Jones?”

“Yes, it’s – oh, my supervisor is waving at me. I have to call you later. Goodbye!”

That hadn’t told me much, but at least I got a sense of the man. A smooth salesman, but a bit gullible himself. I’d have insisted on calling Mira’s credit union back and confirming the existence of Ms. Norma Jones, auditor, before talking to her at all.

I felt stymied, irritated. I had to get out and *do* something. But what? Where could I go that might have some bearing on the case, even in the slightest? Tyrell? Maybe he could lead me to a dealer in performance-enhancing steroids, and I could get the M&Ms to try to beat it out of him, work our way up the food chain...naw. That was a real long shot. These wouldn’t be street dealers. They’d be doctors, pharmacy techs, physical therapists and trainers, and not the type to keep a good pummeling from the police.

Then I thought of Cole. I’d run into dead ends every time I tried to contact him, but what about doing it old-school? Yeah, that’s what I’d do. I made sure I had all my gear with me and walked down the stairs.

Before leaving, I said to Mickey, “I’m heading over to the *Chronicle* to see if I can get some answers about Cole. I’m sick of talking to answering machines and flunkies.”

Without turning from his screens Mickey said, “You want me to hack their office emails and see if I can find out where he is?”

I thought about that, thought about what it might cost me with Cole if he got caught. “No, thanks. I’ll do this the old-fashioned way.”

“Okay. Let me know if you change your mind.”

I didn’t answer as I closed and locked the door behind me, scurrying beneath leaden skies through the drizzle to Molly. Shaking my hair and fluffing it to lose some of the moisture, I buckled up and pulled out, emerging from the Mission District toward the newspaper offices on, ironically, Mission Street. On a sunny day I’d have walked the mile or two, but I wanted to arrive as presentable as possible.

I paid too much to park at the attached garage, and then took the service elevator up to Cole’s floor. I managed to make it to his locked and dark office before someone accosted me. Several inquiries later, I got walked to the front desk and lectured in no uncertain terms that all visitors needed to sign in and be escorted.

It didn’t matter. I’d confirmed Cole hadn’t been hiding out in his office not taking my calls, and the one semi-straight answer I’d gotten from a young reporter on the floor had confirmed that he was out on assignment. “Somewhere back east,” he’d told me, but nothing more.

I decided to go by his condo. Why not? At least I could take a look, see if his car was there. What could it hurt? Ten minutes later I was looking at his place, locked up tight, numbered space empty. After sitting there for half an hour to make sure, I left his neighborhood more frustrated than before, feeling stalled at every turn.

Two minutes later my cop sense clicked in and told me that my favorite hunter-green Audi had been following for several blocks. My subconscious had obviously noted it, but the realization only now bubbled up. Interesting. He’d picked me up at Cole’s.

I’d intended to head back to the office, but now I didn’t want to lead the trench coated man there. Watching in the mirror with half an eye, I noted the way the Audi drove, the way it kept back so it could see me, not too near and not too far. I admired the way it moved, wishing I could afford one.

Turning away from my office, I pulled suddenly into a rare open parallel parking space and shut off the car, releasing the four-point seatbelt and popping my video dash-camera from its mount. The Audi made no move to turn off or pull in behind me, but cruised on past. I recorded it as it went by. Maybe I would get something this time.

The driver held up his nearer arm and kept his face back behind it, but I caught a flash of medium-length, dark-colored hair and a light jacket before the sports sedan got too far away.

Here we go again. Was the universe giving me extra chances at this one? That’s what Mom would say. She’d invoke the mystical Rule of Three, what pop

folklore had corrupted into the saying “three’s the charm,” and tell me to visualize success.

In this case, success included kicking the crap out of a kidnapper. That’s what I visualized.

Besides, if this guy was coming after me, searching for my haunts and hangouts, it was just a matter of time before he found my home and my mother.

I was really starting to get angry now. There was a time for subtlety and there was a time to grab balls and man up, and this girl was ready to grab. Maybe it was an excess of adrenaline talking; I never could say no to its request. I buckled up again and started the car. Leaving the lights off, I eased out several lengths back from the Audi and apologized in advance to Molly for what might happen soon. I resolved that, if I had to, I’d make some body shop a few thousand bucks today. Hopefully Mira would compensate me.

Now, you son of a bitch, we’ll see who follows who.

Using all my skill, I trailed him through the intermittent San Francisco drizzle. Unfortunately, a one-car follow was easy for anyone to spot in the daytime, no matter how expert the tail. It was only a matter of time before...

The Audi sped up and dove in between two cabs.

There he went. He’d made me.

Gritting my teeth, I grunted as water fantailed behind the Audi. Its tires spun in a controlled slide around the next corner. I followed fast, using both lanes and part of the center line. My world shrank to a bubble that encompassed just us drivers charging hard through the streets of San Francisco in the drizzly mist.

You don’t have to beat him, Cal, I told myself. Just stick with him until something breaks. This guy has info. He’s part of it and you’re not letting go of this lead. If you can save the kid there won’t be any charges no matter how many enemies you have in the Department.

Fantasies of putting a gun in the bastard’s face floated next to the vision of a bound and frightened little girl, erasing all thought of lawful arrest.

Twisting through the grid of the Mission District, I followed the Audi eastward, pressing close. This guy was good, and with that car no doubt he thought himself better than I was, but not today, not in my city and in my weather. Today, in the crowded hilly streets rather than the freeways, his lines through the corners were a little less clean, a little less confident, as if he didn’t know his machine and the very edges of its limits the way I knew Molly.

As we ran a red light and skidded around a leftward corner, I tagged him lightly, hoping to PIT him, to break his rear wheels free of the pavement and induce a spin, but he recovered superbly, only ripping a couple of side mirrors

from the line of cars parked to the right. Down the next block I pressed Molly's nose up against his bumper, using her superior quickness to force the pace. Just one mistake on either of our parts could end this, and fifty-fifty odds might be the best I'd get for a while.

His brake lights flared and I felt us slow at the next corner. Without knowing which way he would turn, flooring it might cause me to shoot wide, even smash Molly against the confining line of parked vehicles, so I braked hard and backed off a car length until he committed to the right.

The Audi stuck to the road like yesterday's spilled honey. I followed conservatively and almost lost it as Molly's tires slid over a manhole cover in the hard turn, the slick metal slinging us to the left and into the opposite lane. An oncoming truck slammed on its brakes and I was forced to do the same, squeezing around it as the driver gave me a one-fingered salute.

Half a block behind the Audi, I worked hard to catch up again, desperately hoping for another chance to put him into the wall, but now he'd found a straight downhill stretch that favored his heavier vehicle.

My opponent hit a hundred as the driver rushed the onramp onto I-80. Once on the freeway he wove from lane to lane, gaining distance. I was ready for him to dive off one of the next two exits before crossing the Bay Bridge, but he kept going. I followed onto the eastbound lower level, Molly's tires humming on metal mesh and bumping over joints.

With a good clear left lane for half a minute and the Audi blocked by traffic, I floored it and pulled to within a hundred yards, then settled in through the Yerba Buena Island tunnel. The tiny spot of land in the middle of the Bay formed an anchor for the two sections of the crossing.

Nothing I could do over the water with nowhere to go.

Once past, the Bay Bridge split again from its under-over configuration to a side-by-side concrete causeway just a score of feet above the shoreline. Half a mile ahead I could see ships at anchor in Oakland's outer harbor.

Bastard. I'd chased the van once, and later done laps with this guy around Richmond before he lost me. I wondered where he was leading me this time? An ambush maybe, and I might be risking the girl, but at this point I felt out of options.

In this situation the mind often races, working in overdrive as the body and nervous system automatically handle the physical tasks. I thought of Mira again and things about her that still felt wrong. Hidden elements, incidents and accidents and things left unsaid...but I remained convinced there really was a child in danger. Mira hadn't been faking that, even if some of her responses seemed off, and sometimes...sometimes the best thing to do is go for the throat,

get a bulldog grip and hang on, just choke the life out of the problem.

It had worked before.

Sometimes.

So here I was, with my foot to the floor one more time like a modern remake of *Bullitt*.

Exiting the Bay Bridge, the Audi took the freeway northbound and accelerated to over a hundred again. I matched him easily, Molly's tires humming and the wind rushing. I kept it in fourth, the engine revving high, an eager machine song of freedom and power.

When the speedometer crossed one hundred thirty I shifted into fifth and started to worry. Even on dry pavement, any error at this speed could be instantly fatal with the freeway rough and ill maintained in spots, jouncing me hard against the restraints.

Molly took it all with perfect equanimity until I had to slam on the brakes, ABS pulsing beneath my foot to avoid a damn fool who had pulled into the passing lane without clearing his rear. Instead of laying on the horn I swerved, blazing past him on the right at ninety.

The straight stretch along the waterside lasted only four miles and two minutes as we screamed up to autobahn speeds again. The Audi suddenly slowed to eighty, threading between cars and trucks as the freeway split.

Ignoring the freeway toward Sacramento, my rabbit took the familiar route that would lead him across the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge and back into Marin County. If he did, I would have completed another vast loop around the North Bay.

I leaned on the horn and shot a narrowing gap as another idiot tried to cut me off.

This whole thing is crazy, I thought. I ought to have Mickey call the cops and, oh by the way, where's the damned CHP when you need them? Then I wondered where this sudden attack of sanity had come from and pushed it out of my mind.

Around the wide curve into Richmond we blazed, Molly's wipers working furiously to keep the windshield clear. A mile later, just before the bridge, the Audi took the last Richmond exit, dumping straight into the industrial district next to the railroad terminus. Two hundred yards behind, I decelerated smoothly to seventy before fishtailing onto the surface streets in hot pursuit.

Horns blared as I ran the red light crossing Richmond Parkway. No way I was going to let this son of a bitch get away this time.

Weaving deeper into the warehouse park, the Audi led me past petroleum tanks and cracking towers of the refinery complex that filled most of the

peninsula. Chemical smells sucked into Molly's interior made my eyes water.

Rounding one final corner, the Audi slewed through the open gate into the parking lot of a run-down warehouse.

Got you, you bastard.

Chapter 13

The large metal building the Audi had entered backed up to a dozen huge oil tanks. I could see them looming like fat cylindrical high-rises through the back fence. Between the petroleum containers, tall uncut grass provided ground cover for the sandy coastal soil.

I was about to follow the Audi through the gate when I finally came to my senses. Pulling over at the gap in the barrier, I watched my target roll up a ramp and into the warehouse itself.

While there might be a rear vehicle exit, as far as I could tell from here the big building was ringed by a ten-foot fence. If this was his destination, now was the time to be smart, to think about Talia and what might happen if I drove straight in and got myself ambushed.

So I wouldn't drive. I'd do a lot better on foot.

But first, I'd get some insurance.

Calming my breathing, I dialed Mickey. "Mickey, you got me on GPS?"

"Yeah, Boss, I got you." Molly updated her location in Mickey's computer once a minute. It was a very cool system that he had built himself. He'd said someday everyone would be findable on GPS, day or night, but I didn't really believe that either. Where would the electronics go? It's not like you can cram it into a cell phone, after all. Maybe cars, sure, but...that was for the year 2050, not 2005.

"Get the cops out here right now," I told him. "Warehouse fifty yards north of me. Anonymous tip, kidnapped child, perps armed and dangerous. Give them the Audi, too. Tell them female officer on scene."

"But you're not an officer anymore, Boss."

"So lie. It's better than getting shot on sight."

"Righto. You going in?" Mickey sounded eager, like this whole thing was a video game. Maybe to him it was. Cal Corwin, avatar...only real life had no respawns.

"I shouldn't...but I am." Just like with the bomb and falling for Cole and a dozen other things I could name in my life, I was pushing all in and hoping the right card fell.

"You *crazy*, girl. Stay low."

“Doubtless.” I hung up.

Mickey was right. I was crazy, but the thought of the girl kept me in that zone where it seemed like I could do anything, like in a perfect rally, like a hot streak at the tables, like that one sweet break in a case.

Riding the tiger.

PD would take from three to ten minutes to respond with a couple of cruisers and they would be alerting the tactical team in case they were needed. With plenty of crazies calling 911 every day they had to confirm the tip before committing resources. That left me just enough time.

Dropping Molly into first, I accelerated smoothly along the outside of the fence line. It met another barrier at the corner, one more warehouse, but that was fine. It gave me a chance to get out of sight. I swung wide around the second building and passed behind it along the old access road that dead-ended at the oil tanks in the back. Nothing barred me from driving straight into the deep grass between the painted white cylinders, though I slowed to under twenty. It wouldn't do to blow a tire slamming into some hidden chunk of concrete.

With her rally clearance and four-wheel drive, Molly powered through the scrub. Gonna be hell to pay on the undercarriage, I thought as something banged up into a wheel well and a hidden pothole made Molly bounce hard. Not at all what I figured I'd be doing when this whole thing started.

I drove deeper into the forest of cylinders and parked behind one of the tanks, out of sight of the back of the warehouse the Audi had entered. Once hidden, I hopped out, hurriedly stripped off the blazer and opened the hatchback. Shrugging on a Kevlar vest, the one with SECURITY in big white letters on the back – technically I wasn't impersonating a law enforcement official – and a ball cap with the same, I grabbed a 12-gauge shotgun and a set of bolt cutters.

Crouch-running in the high grass, I reached the back fence to the warehouse and began cutting. The cyclone wire popped with metallic pings as I worked the cutters as fast as I could from the bottom up. As soon as I had a little door of fencing material I bent it out of the way, dropped the tool and wormed through, and then ran for the building.

A loading dock ran along this side of the warehouse, the big doors all closed. At each end a personnel entrance beckoned. I made for the left one, the closer of the two.

Sirens wailed in the distance. I hoped it was the response to Mickey's call coming in hot. If so, they would provide a distraction. If not...well, I'd do the best I could.

At the door I paused and racked a beanbag round into the shotgun. Useful for taking down wanted criminals without killing them, I used it for my bounty

hunting sideline. The attached sling held slugs and buck in case things turned ugly, and then there were my handguns. I was as ready as I could be.

Reaching out, I tested the rusty round knob. It turned, so I tried pulling. It resisted, but only because it was stuck, not locked. Slowly, trying to avoid too much noise, I dragged the barrier open by half inches.

Eye to the crack, I could see nothing. The wan daylight outside made the dim interior even darker.

Taking a deep breath I crouched, and then reached my fingers around the edge of the door and gave a steady pull. It ground against the concrete floor for a moment before coming free. Quickly I slipped inside and pulled it shut again with some difficulty, but left it not-quite-closed in case I had to get out fast.

I found myself behind tall cylinders, visible by looking upward to see light reflected off the steel-strutted roof's underside. Reaching over to touch one, I found it was composed of enormous rolls of paper stacked on their ends like coins, resulting in towers six feet wide by at least twenty high. As my eyes adjusted I was able to see down the row to a gap.

I stood there a moment more, ears straining to hear anything above the faint background hum of the city outside, the breeze catching the edges of the metal building, and the spinning rattle of the ventilator balls on the roof. Voices, maybe; the burbling tones of conversation.

The sirens came closer.

A low thud came to my ears then, and I turned the left to listen, because my right eardrum had been burst by the bomb blast and had never completely recovered. Not hearing anything yet, I moved stealthily forward toward the gap. As I drew closer I thought I heard a faint cough, and then two more thuds, as of sacks of dirt being dropped on hard ground.

I raised the shotgun to my shoulder and hurried to the gap, swinging around it to my left and pausing to assess. More rows of paper appeared, braced like gigantic worshippers in a church with me standing in the center aisle. Light from the large open door the Audi had entered poured from the far end.

Gliding forward on soft-soled boots, my heart thudded and I fought the urge to sneeze from the paper dust kicked up by my footsteps. I sped to a run as I heard a car start up, its engine revving once before its tires squealed and the sonic evidence faded.

Must have been the Audi driving out the door again. I wondered why it had done that. Maybe the kidnappers had fled, warned by my pursuit and the approaching sirens.

At the end of the aisle between the giant sentinels of paper I slowed, carefully easing out into the better-lit open space, scanning across my field of

vision for threats.

To my left sat pallets stacked with boxes, barrels and cans. To the front, the row of giant access doors, one of them open. To the right, an enclosed office space with windows, portable air conditioner visible on its roof, one door, and a heavy-duty white van parked farther in and surrounded by a spreading puddle.

On the concrete floor in front of it, three bodies.

I took two more deep breaths to calm myself and pushed them all the way out, yoga style. Then I moved forward, keeping the shotgun ready, and approached the scene of death, smelling gasoline from the puddle.

The body nearest the office door was female, and appeared to have been shot twice in the back of the head at close range with a very small caliber, probably a .22.

Reaching down, I turned the dead woman's head just enough. I could see no exit wounds, which supported my theory about the weapon. Such tiny bullets might penetrate a human skull once, but not twice, especially if, as I suspected, they were unjacketed soft lead, maybe hollowpoints. Those would expand and dump all their energy into the soft matter of the brain and then stop at bone.

The woman looked like Mira, kind of. Except for the being dead part.

The other two bodies were male, mid thirties maybe, each shot twice in the chest and then once through an eye. One was the driver of the van I'd seen last night on the stakeout. It looked like the two had been killed near the cargo doors, and then dragged over to the woman and the puddle of gas. I could see the marks on the floor. Bullets to the face looked to me as if they had been delivered last, from close range. The possibility that any marksman, no matter how expert, would make two head shots, putting rounds precisely through the standing men's eyes, and then shoot them twice each in their chests *afterward*, strained belief.

So...this was no gunfight, no sudden quarrel over the goods. They had all been executed.

On the concrete near the big door I could see the marks where the Audi had peeled out and down the ramp. The driver was younger and none of the dead wore trench coats. This seemed a well-planned, quick double-cross: a few precisely aimed shots and an escape with the money.

Glancing behind, I realized the puddle of fuel from the SUV continued to widen, dripping from its undercarriage, undoubtedly a punctured gas tank. It had reached the bodies and would soon surround them, soaking into their clothes. I made very sure I didn't walk in any of the blood or gasoline.

I could see flashing lights approaching in the distance and the sirens were getting louder. Apparently law enforcement had decided to come in fast and noisy.

A loud *ding* sounded from the direction of the office door. I turned to aim the shotgun before I saw what had made the noise: a white cooking timer, the spring-powered kind. It lay on the floor in front of the office entrance, weighting a piece of paper to the concrete.

The girl is in the office, read the computer printout, and beneath: Take her and go. You have three minutes until the bomb goes off.

I looked up to see a child's wide-eyed face behind the office window.

The girl, Talia.

I seized the office doorknob, turned and pushed. "Hi, Talia. I'm Cal. I'm here to rescue you." I reached out my hand to her.

"They said not to come out." Like a skittish animal, she held her own hands behind her.

"The bad people are gone." I gestured, *come here*.

After a moment, that seemed to do it. "Okay. The other man said you'd come." Talia seized my hand in both of hers, and then she threw her arms around my waist and clung on.

I struggled to walk with sixty pounds of girl attached to me. "Let go, Talia. A bomb is going to go off soon, and we have to go *now*."

"Okay," Talia said, and then began to run for the nearest opening, pulling on my arm.

I swung her around and directed her toward the rear of the warehouse, retracing my steps and shielding her vision of the three corpses with my own body. "This way. My car's out back."

The squad cars rounded the last corner in front, but by then Talia and I had made it to Molly without being seen. I hoped the cops would approach with caution. The Audi driver was cutting things close with the bomb. Maybe he didn't care about cops, only little girls.

Driving sedately out of the tall grass of the tank farm, I casually skirted the fence line where I could see three cruisers pulled into the warehouse parking lot. I turned away at the corner and reached for my phone. At that moment came a *whoomph*, and smoke started pouring from the open warehouse door, startling the cops into ducking behind their cars.

Chapter 14

Talia *ooed* at the fireworks and the blaze springing up inside her erstwhile prison. A moment later, the call to Mira connected and I put a finger to my lips to shush the girl.

“Mira, it’s me, Cal. I have good news. Your daughter is safe.” I deliberately didn’t say Talia was sitting beside me. Once I told Mira, I doubted I’d get anything coherent out of her for some time.

“You’re sure?” Mira seemed ecstatic.

“Yes, I’m sure. Listen, Mira...I’d really appreciate it if you could keep me out of this with the police...if you even want to report it.”

Silence on the other end. Eventually she said in a tellingly cautious tone, “Why wouldn’t I report it?”

I sighed, unwilling to accuse her. “I don’t know, Mira. Maybe you don’t want the police digging into your financial life?”

More silence.

I went on, “I’ll come by sometime this week and explain if you want, but for now, Mira, don’t mention me and they won’t end up asking me questions you might not want answered. But don’t lie. If you have to, just say you engaged a private investigator that managed to find your daughter. That’s the God’s-honest truth. Okay?”

Mira babbled abruptly, now a bit too high-pitched and nervous. “Right, private investigator. That’s a good story. This is amazing. This is so incredible. If you hadn’t...”

I suppressed an urge to choke. “Yes, well.” Then, because I had to, I thought about the money. Best to get a verbal agreement right now. At least half the retainer seemed fair, as I had risked my life to find the girl. “About my fee. I was thinking –”

“Oh, please, keep it all,” Mira gushed. “Ten grand? Worth every penny. And if I can ever do anything...”

“Sure. Now...there’s someone that wants to talk to you.” I handed the phone to Talia.

“Mom?”

For the rest of the ride to Mill Valley I had to put up with excited girl

babble, but after a moment I decided I didn't mind. Talia seemed remarkably unaffected by her ordeal. Perhaps the kidnappers hadn't scared her so much, or maybe she just recovered fast. And Mira...hysterically happy of course, and relieved, but something about the woman's reactions bothered me still. I just couldn't pin it down.

Dennis' and her financial arrangements still didn't make sense, but they weren't illegal. Certainly there was some other element here that I didn't understand, but I suppose I didn't really have to. People's real lives were complicated. Talia was safe and sound and soon would be back with her mother, and I got paid. Those were the important things. Some loose ends never got tied off.

I dropped Talia off at the Sorkin curb and watched her dash up to the front door. Mira opened it before she got there and mother and daughter threw themselves at each other in a desperate hug. Molly was already in motion. The last thing I wanted was Mira running out to the sidewalk in awkward gratitude. Ten grand was thanks enough.

I reached for my phone again. "Mickey, it's me. I'm coming back to the office. The girl is safe."

"Thank God. What happened?"

"I'll tell you all about it when I get there. Just don't leave. Be back in half an hour."

"Roger dodger, Boss. Over and out."

I sighed as I hung up. Seemed like I was surrounded by children. Maybe that was why I was attracted to Cole. Craggy, with some mileage on him, but the world hadn't beaten him down yet. He still cared. Like Dad. Tears welled up suddenly as I thought of my father.

I missed him so much. If only his appearances were real.

If only I could hug him just once more, tell him I forgave him for dying.

I shook my head to clear my eyes, pushing sentimental thoughts out as I parked on a side street. First I unloaded the shotgun and then reloaded its magazine, leaving the chamber empty, and slid it carefully backward by the barrel over the seat into the rear cargo space, avoiding the possibility of someone seeing me carry it even the short distance from door to rear.

Taking off the Security hat, I got out of the car and opened the hatchback to set the shotgun and vest back in their cases, shaking my head at the dings and scratches Molly'd managed to accrue. At least a grand in repairs, I thought. I bent over and stretched, working the kinks out before I drove back into the City.

Ten grand. That's what Mira had said. My cop sense prickled again, but refused to disgorge. My subconscious churned and bubbled. I let it be for the

moment. Likely I would be processing this weird little situation for some time, but I had plenty of open cases on my mental books from back in the cop days. Not everything got solved, or when it did lots of details never surfaced. I gave a deliberate mental shrug and tried to put it behind me. Let the cops have Houdini if they could catch him, or Luger for that matter. I'd keep him available as a resource for the future, someone to trade favors with.

Pulling out, I hung a U-turn and accelerated, enjoying the press of the seat against my back and the nimble sensation of Molly's tires on the road. I felt a bit let down now that I had no Audi to follow, no excuse to shatter traffic laws for a higher purpose.

The city skyline from this side was gorgeous as the overcast lifted and broke in places, patches of sunlight pushing through and shining on the grimy bay and crowded landscape. Seabirds perched on the Golden Gate, watching the endless traffic. As I exited the bridge over Fort Point, a pelican dove and came up with a struggling fish, flipping it into his mouth, and my stomach growled.

On the other side of the bridge the restaurants of the Marina District called to me but I ignored them. Parking was hell, the prices were high, and besides, Cole lived there and I wanted to forget about him right now. A few minutes more would bring me back to Molly's own space in the cozy Mission District. I speed-dialed Udipi Palace and put in a delivery order for curry, betting I would be at my office in time to meet the runner and pay in cash. If not, Mickey would get it and I'd reimburse him.

I made it to Molly's parking space just ahead of the scooter, paid and grabbed the bag of food, and then knocked on the walkout. When Mickey opened it I slapped his reaching hand and locked the door by habit behind me.

"Come upstairs and eat like a human being," I said. "Afterward, you go home and shower. If I can smell you over the curry you're pretty rank."

"Okay, Boss. You gonna get paid for this job?"

"Of course," I said lightly as I climbed two flights to the top floor, Mickey huffing behind. "I got a check."

"Hope it's good," he grunted.

"Don't I always take care of you?"

Mickey mumbled under his breath.

"What? I didn't catch that."

"Didn't mean for you to."

Probably something juvenile, sexual, or both. "Open the window and sit down." I pointed at the back side of the house, and then opened the opposite door to the balcony that overlooked the street. Between the two I got a nice airflow that kept Mickey's B.O. away.

Only then did I set the food on the kitchenette table and hand my helper the Vindaloo, his favorite. Containers of Basmati rice and Mulligatawny soup came out next, plus two packets of naan. For me, the butter chicken. All came with biodegradable bowls, plates and cutlery, testimony to San Francisco's environmentalism.

Over fantastic South Asian flavors I swore Mickey to secrecy again and told him what happened, leaving out only my wayward and unrelated thoughts. When I was finished with my food and story, Mickey said, "Let me see the check."

"You'll get paid, Mickey. Don't worry."

He made an impatient motion. "I know that, Boss. Just show me."

I unfolded the precious piece of paper and set it carefully on the table where he could see, but kept a finger on it. It wasn't that I didn't trust him. It was just that he had curry all over his hands and his sweatshirt front.

Mickey wiped his fingers, and then fished the business card out of his pocket, setting it down next to the check. "Notice anything?"

I stared at it a moment, then rotated it to line up with the check. "The number is written in Mira's hand. It matches the check. But the words, the message...almost, but not quite." I picked it up and brought it in close to my eyes. "And the pen and pressure is slightly different."

"So?" Mickey stared expectantly, triumph that he had gotten ahead of me written on his face.

"So if Mira passed it to Cole, why wouldn't it all be in her handwriting? And the words aren't written in Cole's hand either. Did she lie? Who would write on the card except her or Cole?" I sat back with the check and card in my hand.

"You know what?" Mickey pulled out a sheaf of papers and unfolded them. "Her phone records..." I could see notes scribbled up and down the right margins as he looked them over. "Calls to the alarm center, but..." He tapped the marked entries.

I craned my neck to look. "Five seconds. Seven seconds."

"Yeah. Too short to be asking for the info like she said."

"But long enough to claim it was a wrong number, maybe chat for a few seconds, but most people don't really have a good sense of time. She wanted to make the calls to support her story, but she didn't plan well enough to make sure she stayed on the line an appropriate amount of time."

Mickey nodded.

"Good work."

"What do we do about it?"

I pressed my lips together. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? But with everything you told me, and this, she must be involved! In her own daughter’s kidnapping...” he trailed off.

“Involved in the heist, maybe. Not in the kidnapping, I don’t believe. That was leverage, to keep her quiet. So what have we got? A strong hunch? The cops will just laugh at us. I can pass this observation on to the department, but if I do that I’ll have to explain everything, such as why I didn’t turn the girl over to them at the warehouse. And how do we know the kidnappers weren’t controlling Mira the whole time, every detail? They could have given her a script to run through and this might have been her trying to deviate from it to gum up their plan. No, Mickey. We saved the girl,” – I was feeling charitable right now so I included him – “and we got paid. That’s it. Mira might be dirty somehow, but three kidnappers are dead and I’m all right with that.”

“Okay. You’re the boss. Mind if I keep digging?”

“Off the clock, I don’t care what you do.”

“Aww...”

“You’re lucky I keep you in high-end graphics chips for your games, Mickey. You could never afford those on your own. You think I don’t know they aren’t really necessary for your actual work?”

He held up his hands in surrender. “All right, all right.”

“I’ll be giving you a bonus on this one anyway, Mick my man. The handwriting...that was a good catch.”

Mickey beamed.

“And what about the Audi or the driver? Anything more on it?”

“Not as of fifteen minutes ago. I’ll check, though. I have sniffer programs running.” He stood up.

I made a disappointed sound. “Another loose end I’ll probably never tie up.” I wiped my hands on a paper napkin as Mickey lumbered downstairs, leaving me with the cleanup. I began to grab empty containers and stuff them in the trash.

A moment later I heard a cry. “Cal! I got something!”

Leaving the check and card on the table, I hurried to the basement. “What?”

“I got a hit on the Audi’s license plate. Entered into the database of the Hotel Westlane. Thomas Jones, room 311.”

“That’s two blocks away!”

We stared at each other.

“Huge coincidence,” I said.

“Too huge. Why would a criminal give the hotel the correct license number, and why so close to here?”

Shivers coursed through my nerves. "It's a trap or a ploy of some kind."

"Yeah. Don't go."

"I have to." That same all-in feeling, that wild abandon that often came over me made my actions inevitable.

"I'll go with you."

I shook my head. "No offense, Mickey, but you have no training. You'd be more of a liability than an asset."

"Then call the M&Ms."

"They'll take half an hour to get here, maybe an hour. By then he might be gone."

"What do you care, anyway? You got the girl back, you said. Take your own advice."

I licked my lips. "Why do you spend days and days trying to beat a video game boss? Because I have to win, Mickey. And I have to *know*."

"Cal –"

"Now go home."

"Shouldn't I at least hang out here? You can put on your headset and I'll stay on the line as you check it out."

"No. You did a great job, but it's done for now." I wasn't exactly sure why, but I wanted Mickey out of the way, off my mind. "Go home," I repeated more forcefully, "shower and put on some clean clothes. You stink."

His face fell and he scratched self-consciously under one arm before standing up with sad eyes.

I felt like I'd kicked a puppy. "Sorry, but it's true. Go on. Go home, say hi to your mom for me and tell her you did a good job. You helped a kid and made some money. Come back tomorrow and I'll pay you the rest after I deposit the check."

"Okay. If you're sure."

I watched him leave. After making sure I had my usual load of gear on me – weapons, ammo, knife, extra cell and so on – I hurried out the door and fast-walked two blocks to the Hotel Westlane, a small but upscale hostelry catering to tourists who wanted to experience the Mission District's old-town charm firsthand.

Nodding briskly at the young brunette behind the registration desk, I flashed my P.I. badge. "Detective Colson, Homicide," I said. "I need a key to room 311."

"I can't –"

"You can and you will. I have probable cause to believe there's been a murder. Come on." I snapped my fingers under her nose.

Fright in her eyes, the clerk handed me an old-fashioned metal key, and then reached for the phone.

I leaned over the desk to place my palm on the receiver without touching it with my fingertips. No prints. “Don’t call anyone or do anything yet. I’ll be back down in five minutes.” I held her eyes until she nodded.

I charged up the stairs two at a time. Once in the deserted third floor hallway I drew my Glock, holding it low by my thigh. With my other hand I inserted the key as quietly as I could and turned it carefully until I was certain the door had unlocked. Slowly I pressed down on the lever-style handle, and then shoved it open suddenly, raising my weapon to a close ready position in front of my chest.

The room was dark and smelled of industrial cleaners and laundry. Leaning in, I felt for a light switch and snapped it on.

Once inside, I knew I was too late. Aside from the aroma there was nothing in the room to indicate anyone’s presence. Nothing in the trash cans, the mini-bar undisturbed. Drawers and closets empty. The bed was made with tight hospital corners, its pillows smooth and seemingly undisturbed, a complimentary mint resting on one.

“Damn,” I muttered. What the hell was going on? Was this guy taunting me? I didn’t have much time, though, before the clerk decided to call someone if she hadn’t already. I hurried back down the stairs.

After wiping the key surreptitiously on the tail of my blouse I handed it back to the clerk. “Sorry, false alarm. Nothing at all out of place. Where’s the parking garage?”

The woman pointed with a manicured finger at the elevator. “In the basement,” she said.

“Thanks.” I headed instead for the stairs and descended one floor. Within the small underground lot I immediately spotted the Audi. Looking closer, I saw it had been recently washed, perhaps even waxed. Peering in the immaculately clear windows, it appeared to be spotless. Then I noticed it wasn’t even locked.

As a cop I’d learned to always carry latex gloves, so I slipped a pair on and opened the driver’s side door to lean in. The smell of a recent upholstery shampoo assaulted my nostrils and a quick search turned up nothing.

A curiously courteous car thief, I thought. Got the car thoroughly detailed and left it to be recovered here. Forensics would find nothing, I was sure. More irrelevant information. A dead end.

Growling in frustration, I left the hotel without speaking further to the clerk and walked back to my office. I used the basement door. That reminded me again about getting the new automatic locking hardware installed. Now that I

had a nice ten-grand payday I could afford the locksmith.

Ten grand. That meant a G or two for the tables.

Tonight? No, not yet. One jones at a time.

It only took a few moments to finish cleaning the upstairs kitchenette despite having to wipe the drips off the polished hardwood floor around Mickey's chair. Messy didn't even begin to describe it. I'd just started the espresso machine when I heard a creak on the stair.

"Forget something?" I called as I turned, expecting to see Mickey.

Instead, a youngish man stood at the top of the stairs, holding a gun in his gloved hand.

Pointed at me.

That's never a good thing.

Chapter 15

Adrenaline surged but I froze, suppressing the cop instinct to evade, reach and draw on the gunman standing on my steps. Seeming calm, he made no move, just stared at me with clear pale eyes beneath longish dark hair. He wore a lightweight trench coat, not unusual in this weather, and had a high-end knit scarf concealing his lower face. Average tall, average looks – except for those bottomless gray orbs – Caucasian, with very light eyebrows. That clued me in to the fact that he had on a wig to cover what must be blonde hair.

“Who are you –”

“– and what do I want?” Part of a smile reached the upper half of his face, contrasting oddly with the slim revolver, suppressor pointed unwaveringly at my chest. “Just to talk, I assure you, but you need to divest yourself of your firearms first, so we can be civil.” English accent, though I wasn’t savvy enough about such things to place him better.

Slowly I slid my Glock from its holster and set it down on the counter. “You’re that bastard Audi driver.”

“And you the feisty Subaru. Put that into the freezer along with your holdout and sit down on the balcony,” he said, his aim never budging.

As I complied by taking the compact revolver from my ankle and setting both guns gently into the freezer my mind flared with memory. “You killed the kidnappers.”

“Brava. Well reasoned. Balcony.” He pointed. “Sit. I’ll get the coffee.”

I turned, keeping arms raised, and walked out onto the platform. Settling into one of the white-painted wrought iron chairs there, I folded my hands into my lap to still their adrenalized shaking. The rational part of my mind wasn’t terribly frightened. After all, he could have killed me already, and with the suppressor no one would have noticed. In the warehouse I hadn’t heard any shots.

Or maybe I had. I thought about the coughs and the thuds.

As the man rummaged in my kitchen I reached stealthily into my trouser pocket and drew out the two-shot .22 derringer I kept there. He stepped onto the balcony with two mugs in his hands, setting one in front of me. His gun was nowhere in sight, so I kept mine under the table.

"I'm trusting you with hot liquid, Cal. Please, just enjoy it and don't do anything to spoil the moment. I really have no desire to hurt you."

I nodded in tentative agreement as I took a sip of the brew, not revealing that I had a weapon available. He'd made my coffee black, as I liked it. His appeared to have been creamed. I hadn't even heard the fridge open. Eerie quiet, this guy.

"You know my name."

His eyes crinkled again. "It is on the door plaque."

"But you used my nickname, Cal."

"A lucky guess."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't much care."

"Touché. What's your name, nick or otherwise?"

The man sipped beneath the scarf, a two-handed trick, and then sat back without answering. Sounds of the street below echoed against the mishmash of classic San Francisco Victorians and more modern styles. Across the sidewalk an old woman watered plants on her balcony, an irrational act in this weather.

Nothing as strange as people, especially in a city.

"Call me Thomas," he finally said. "It's not my name, but it will do. Good coffee, by the way. Hard to get this side of the pond, outside of an upscale restaurant or speciality cafe." He put the extra syllable into that word, *spe-ci-A-li-ty*.

I found myself liking the sound of his voice despite the opening threat. A charming rogue, then. "It's an expensive machine. I like good coffee."

"Then we have more than one thing in common."

"Oh? What else? Fast cars and guns?"

"True, but not what came to mind. We both detest people who abuse little girls."

My blood surged with memories I'd rather forget, of men who tried to do things when I was much younger, with Dad away and Mom drunk or high, passed out on the sofa. Some things are hard to forgive, but I tried.

Lucky, I'm lucky. The words ran through my mind as a mantra, lucky it never got very far, lucky I was able to scream and get away, always with the fear hovering among the nightmares, relieved only when Dad had come back home and Mom's parties were banished again for a time.

"You're wandering," Thomas said, waving a diffident hand.

"Sorry. You're right." My voice tightened. "Very right. Kidnappers disgust me, but I wouldn't have put them down like dogs."

"No?" He stared at me until I dropped my eyes.

"I don't think so. Not...not in cold blood like that. What was it? Did your gang fall out, or the plan go wrong?" I raised my chin defiantly.

"Yes, it did. But it wasn't my gang, or my plan. I'm a contractor, not a blackmailer or kidnapper of *children*." He sounded sincerely outraged.

"Contractor. You mean *hit man*."

Thomas glanced away as if I'd said something distasteful. "Are you a *gumshoe*? A *private dick*?"

"I prefer *independent investigator*."

"And I prefer *contractor* or *cleaner*. A hit man is a thug for hire, a mercenary. I tidy up certain specific problems for a limited clientele. I won't do just anything, or anyone. I have a code."

"A code. How nice. And you get paid well, I suppose."

"You just took a ten-thousand-dollar check from a distraught mother. You're not going to cash it?"

I reddened and my eyes dropped, though the set of my shoulders remained defiant. "Point taken. But that doesn't make us the same. I did a *good* thing to earn it. I wouldn't have killed those people."

"Unless you had to. You have two righteous shoots under your belt."

"Nobody died, though. Most big city cops have a couple by the time they retire, at least in this country. Goes with the territory. But there's a difference between self defense and murder."

"I'm not going to debate terminology. That little girl is alive and safe because of *me*, mostly, and a bit of you. They were about to kill her and run when I took care of them. They heard the sirens and they saw you chase me into the warehouse. You put her at risk by calling the police, not me. You forced my hand."

I slammed my mug down, slopping coffee, and sat forward. "You didn't have to bring me *there*. You could have gone anywhere else. You could have driven up the freeway and tried to lose me again, but instead you led me right to them, and the cops too. And by the way, that was some pretty close timing on the bomb. You might have killed Talia."

Thomas spread his hands and inclined his head. "Poor planning on my part, I suppose." He sipped again, but did not seem in the least contrite.

I shook my head. "No. I think it was perfect planning. You used me and the cops to distract them, then popped them just like you intended to. Somehow this heist went wrong. Maybe they didn't steal everything they were supposed to, or maybe they didn't deliver it all and held some out. Or maybe they *were* going to kill the girl, I'll give you that. I'll never know, I suppose. Did your boss Houdini send you to, how do you English say, 'sort them'? Tie up the loose ends? The

girl goes home, the dead guys turn out to be dangerous felons with records as long as your arm, the case is solved and the incident gets featured on next season's America's Dumbest Criminals? But nobody ever finds the pills or money."

"You're forgetting something, dear. I'm a professional and they weren't. I could have done them in at any time with no fuss or mess. Then I could have set the place on fire, perhaps with a remotely triggered device rather than a timer, and then dropped the girl off on her own corner none the wiser."

Nonplussed, I stared at Thomas, running left-hand fingers around my ear to push my straight dark hair back, angling my head as I usually did to minimize view of the right side. "Okay." I stared some more, and he gazed back calmly. "Okay, well. You watched to make sure we got away."

The sun in Thomas' eyes came out again, but he said nothing.

"I still don't get why you didn't do it all yourself."

Thomas' nose crinkled. I really wanted to see the smile he hid. I guessed it was a heart-stopper. Unless maybe he had scars like mine?

"Perhaps I liked what I saw in my rearview mirror," he said.

I snorted. "Right."

"Don't believe me?" Thomas shrugged. "Then you'll have something to chew on for a while. Thanks for the coffee, but now I must be going." He stood.

I jumped to my feet, putting my hand in my pocket on the derringer. Questions still seethed in my head. "You can't just walk out."

"Whyever not?" Thomas stared pointedly at my hand as if he knew what I had there, and then looked into my eyes.

"I...I need information. The mother. What about Mira?" Keep him talking, keep him engaged.

"What about her?"

"She was in on it somehow."

Thomas raised one of those incongruous white eyebrows. "Oh?" Amusement danced in his eyes again.

"Yes. Something about her responses was off. And if it was me, my kid, I would have called the cops the next day, when she found out the heist hadn't happened. Only she didn't find out, because she only talked to the monitoring center for about five seconds, not long enough to really check to see if someone had opened the drug warehouse with her stolen identity like she claimed."

"That's it? That's all you have?" I could tell he was grinning at me beneath that scarf.

"Ten grand."

"Come again?"

“Mira said ‘ten grand.’ Most people would have said ‘ten thousand dollars.’ Who uses words like that?” I paused for his answer.

“Cops? Gamblers? The Mob? Or, people who have no lives outside of work? The ones who watch police shows, thrillers and organized crime dramas?”

I shook my head. “Maybe, but I don’t buy it. I think she was part of it somehow.”

Thomas cocked his head in apparent disbelief. “A mother using her own child like that?”

“A few years back a mother strapped her two kids into a Mazda and rolled it into a lake because her new boyfriend didn’t want a family.”

“Not this mother. She loves Talia, whatever her faults.” Thomas’s calm demeanor stirred slightly. “I’ll tell you something I shouldn’t, but you have to promise me you’ll leave well enough alone.”

I snorted. “A promise made at gunpoint is meaningless.”

“Do you see a weapon in my hand? Mine was just to make sure you put yours aside. You can walk out of here any time and you’ll never see me again.” He paused, then made a shooing motion. “Go on. Run along. Take your phone with you. Call the coppers. Or pull out your popgun and try to shoot me before I get away.”

I pressed my lips together and took my hand out of my pocket. “No thanks.”

“I figured. You want all the answers, but I’m not going to provide them. I’ll give you this, though, because I’d rather you didn’t dig further. You’re right. The plan did go wrong. The girl was never supposed to be part of it, but the crew wanted more leverage on the mother. She was going to get a cut for selling them the way in to the warehouse and deny all knowledge, but they wanted insurance so they took the girl.”

I leaned back against the doorframe, mind spinning. “Right. That fits. But Mira’s been sending all her extra money to her ex and if there’s no payoff to her...”

Thomas shrugged. “The check’s worthless. I doubt she has a thousand in her account, much less ten.”

“Crap.” The epithet thudded flatly.

“Indeed. *C’est la vie.*” He sidled toward the stairway, keeping me in sight. I suppose it was a trained habit; I had no intention of drawing on him.

“I wonder where the crew’s cash went,” I said with a cock of my head. “They must have collected when they gave Houdini the pills.”

“Yes...that is a mystery.”

I cleared my throat, lifting my chin. “Did you kill Bill?”

“No. That was the others being stupid and they’ve answered for their idiocy, don’t you think?” He turned to go.

“Wait, Thomas. Why did you do this? Why involve me?”

“I don’t want the authorities looking for the mysterious stranger that rescued the kidnapped girl, that’s all.”

“Bullshit. There’s something more.”

“Maybe you impressed me with your driving skills.”

“That was after you’d already started following me. Why even let yourself be seen?”

“A foolish impulse, I suppose. You’ve never had one of those?”

“Never,” I deadpanned, and he laughed.

“I could make a report about you,” I said.

“You won’t.”

“Why not?”

His face twitched beneath the scarf, perhaps the beginning of a smile. “Because you appreciate justice. Even if it’s imperfect.”

“Is that what this was?”

Thomas shrugged, backing down the steps. “You decide.”

“But why come talk to me?” I called.

“Toodle-oo,” was all he said, and then he was gone down the stairs and out the unlocked lower level door. I watched from the window as he fast-walked into the dimness.

I really needed to get that new hardware installed.

“Cheerio, gov’ner,” I breathed, and took the guns out of the freezer. Holstering the pistols the better for my body heat to rid them of chill, I shut the upstairs against the threat of further rain before putting my own mug in the sink and rinsing it, the ritual helping to calm me as excess adrenaline bled off.

His cup I slipped into a ziplock bag and then placed it in the rear of the refrigerator. He’d never taken his gloves off, so fingerprints were out, but DNA was the coming thing in solving crimes. Maybe his saliva would prove useful somewhere down the road.

Opening a cupboard, I brought out a bottle of wine, not even looking at the label. Though not much of a drinker, I grew up in California with Napa on my tongue and felt in need right now. Setting a wine glass on the table, I poured it full and then stared at the empty surface.

The check. The card. The bastard. He’d filched both of them.

Taking a long drink of my wine, I sat down at my kitchenette table and pulled out the photocopy of Mira’s business card I had made. I read it again, trying to fend off the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach at the hit man’s theft

of ten thousand dollars. Putting that aside with difficulty for the moment, I forced myself to think.

The photocopy of the card read, *Cole said you can help – PLEASE CALL RIGHT AWAY*. And what had Mira mentioned at her house? “Cole Sage was the only one who had connections to *people like you*.” Which was silly. Mira didn’t need any special connections to hire a P.I. And who would call me, a middle-class professional, “people like you”?

I stared at the copy of the card.

“I suppose in your business...,” Mira had also said. As if the P.I. trade were unsavory.

But what if that wasn’t what she’d meant?

All the little clues added up suddenly. It had been staring me in the face the whole time.

The card had not been meant for me.

People in your business. People like you. Thought you would be a man.

The card had been for Thomas. Thomas who, in his line of work, wouldn’t want direct contact with a client. Who wouldn’t keep a phone number for long. Who might have a dead drop somewhere that Cole would know about, maybe activated by an anonymous web address. That’s how it would be done.

And Mira hadn’t written any words on the card. Just the number.

So, instead of calling Mira, Thomas had added the plea for help and the reference to Cole in order to thoroughly pique my interest. Then he had put the card in my office night drop, directing me onto the case. Then he deliberately let himself be seen in the Audi – perhaps not the first time, but certainly the last – provoking me into following him and leading me to the girl.

I shook my head to clear it and gulped more wine. Too many loose ends. Too many questions. I hated both, but unless I somehow found Thomas again I wasn’t likely to get any answers.

I can always call Cole, I thought. It’s a good excuse to see what he knows about it, or how Mira knows him.

Might Mira be one of Cole’s conquests? No, Cole wasn’t really like that...I didn’t think. I could ask how he’s acquainted with Thomas, why he trusts him... meet Cole over coffee, maybe a light dinner. I’d put on a dress.

God, I hate dresses, I thought. Forget him. Just forget him. He’s as inaccessible as...

As Thomas?

Just my luck. All the genuinely interesting guys I’d met recently were out of reach – hooked up, anonymous, drunks, dead – okay, those last two overlapped – too young, too brash, too...something.

Was I too picky? Mom said so.

Glass in hand and half-empty bottle in the crook of my elbow, I descended the stairs to the main floor and my darkening office. Intending to throw back the curtains and enjoy what fading light made it past the drizzle, I placed the bottle and the glass on the desk and stopped, startled.

A neat, inch-thick pile of hundred-dollar bills sat in the exact middle of the desk calendar, bound with a rubber band. They didn't have the fresh-printed look of a bank stack. Before I even picked up the bundle I knew what it would contain.

Ten thousand dollars.

I sat down in the dimness, forgetting the curtains and staring at the pile for a moment before picking it up and riffling it. Well, I had earned it...though Thomas might be setting me up for the future. Taking his money might give him leverage. But I had bills to pay and poker to play, not to mention the body shop for Molly.

Feeling suddenly generous, I pulled ten Benjamins out of the pile for Mickey and slipped them into an envelope, put the rest into the floor safe, and then refilled my glass, feeling the wine filtering into my bloodstream.

Looking at the phone, I contemplated calling the cops, my new buddy Brody perhaps. I had enough on Thomas to cause him trouble, with a physical description and that accent to identify him – unless that was as fake as the wig – but he was right.

I wouldn't turn him in.

Why not? Not because of the money or his charm, his refraining from killing me or even because of a dozen loose ends I hoped he might someday tie up.

Because he was right. I do appreciate justice. Even if it is imperfect.

Chapter 16

Sitting on my office balcony sipping coffee, derriere in a cushioned chair and feet up on the rail, I gazed over Hill Street and across the roofs of the opposite row. The new morning sun had burned off the fog and I reveled in the magnificent view. One thing the City by the Bay never boasted was smog, unlike its bloated cousin in the L.A. basin to the south.

Three days had passed and Friday stared me in the face. I'd had time to mull over that frenetic day and concluded I'd not done too badly. I still had a boatload of questions that I knew would bother me for a while, but that was nothing new. When the next case came along, this one would go into the files, the old-fashioned paper ones.

Mickey said he'd digitize everything for me, but that would mean they'd be hackable. No, better to stick to manila folders.

I hadn't yet decided what to do about Luger's dinner invitation. The man was a creep, but a fascinating one who might be fun to get to know. I always did like to flirt with danger, and dangerous men, I admitted to myself.

A buzz at the front door brought me to my feet. I leaned over the rail and saw Jay Allsop and Tanner Brody in their cop-issue suits. With smooth-shaven faces, both seemed fresher than normal. I wondered if they'd cleaned up just for me. After taking one last drag and forcefully exhaling the smoke, Jay ground out a cigarette on my gray-painted wooden steps while Tanner chewed on a toothpick.

"You couldn't do that on the sidewalk?" I called from the balcony.

"Sorry," he said without any evidence of contrition. "You wanna let us in?"

"If you bring in my paper," I said, pointing at the rolled *Chronicle* at his feet.

Brody picked it up and waved.

I put my cup in the sink and took my time descending the stairs. You could never be too careful in these old, creaky Victorians. Ushering them in, I waved them to seats on my office sofa before sitting down in my own chair, the desk between us as a psychological barrier. Brody tossed the newspaper on my desk. I pushed it to the side for later.

"You here to harass me some more, Jay?" I said.

Smiling, Brody brought out his flip notebook as Allsop narrowed his eyes and spoke. "We're still looking into this Bill Clawson death. You said you were working on a case with him. We have questions about it."

"You know everything's confidential."

"I could get a subpoena. You're not a lawyer or doctor, you know."

I looked pointedly around the room as if searching for my identity. "Oh, yeah. I wondered why I had so few patients in this morning."

Allsop's face soured further. "Look, Cal, you know the drill. We need some information and if you want us off your back you'll give it to us so we can move on. If not..." He looked around my office in deliberate imitation of my own gesture. "We might have to get a warrant. Turn this place upside down, you know? Could get messy. And the city tax authority might need to take a look at your paperwork. See if there's anything that got missed."

"That's what I love about you, Jay. Your way with people. Straight from polite to threatening in one quick jump."

"Whatever gets the job done."

"Yeah, the job." I sighed, feeling a bit of perverse sympathy for Allsop. He really wasn't a bad cop. Not on the take as far as I knew, and he stayed reasonably near the straight and narrow. He was just such a gloomy and miserable son of a bitch. Brody's bright optimism was probably driving him crazy.

That cheered me up.

Oddly, I'd probably been a better match as a partner.

I supposed I could play hardball, twisting Allsop up, but that would be exploiting my superior bargaining position merely for the fun of stepping on his neck. That didn't seem smart. He was right, he could make my life miserable for a while. Better to build bridges than burn them, and though I'd probably never be a cop again I could get a lot out of a good working relationship with SFPD.

"Look, I'd like to help." I said reasonably. "Why don't you ask your questions? I'll tell you as much as I can, but I'll want to ask a few of my own. All off the record." I gave Brody a significant look.

"Non-attribution. Right," the rookie replied and grinned. Yeah, I think he'd drive me nuts too with all that cheerfulness.

Allsop nodded. "Okay. Did your case have anything to do with the drug heist at North Bay Distributors?"

I'd already decided to leave Mira and Talia out of it if I could. "Mm. Yes. Bill got wind of something going down. We staked the place out and saw a van enter and leave when they weren't supposed to. Chased it, but lost them."

"You're supposed to be some hot-shit driver, Cal. How could you lose

them?”

“Because I was trying not to be seen and let them get too far ahead, okay?”

“Why didn’t you report the heist?”

“That was Bill’s call. He suspected one of his guys, Lattimer, was helping, and wanted to conduct his own investigation.”

“You were obligated by law to report a crime,” Allsop snapped.

I rolled my eyes. “I worked with you for two years, Jay. Plenty of times you delayed a report when you had a good reason.”

“But once Clawson was dead you should have told us. Would have saved a lot of running around.”

I stared past him at the seascape watercolor on my wall, one my mother had done before she’d adopted abstract as her artistic preference. A sailboat leaned in a stiff breeze, gulls in the background. “Maybe so, but there were other considerations. Ones I’m not at liberty to talk about.”

Allsop made a frustrated sound in his throat. “Lattimer ran. Looks like he took a suitcase of stuff and abandoned the rest in his house. Bought a ticket for Colombia. Pretty much out of reach unless we charge him with a serious crime, and even then...”

“Extradition is a pain in the ass, I know,” I offered.

“You don’t seem all that broken up about Clawson.”

I shrugged, drumming my fingers idly on the arm of my chair. “I’m saddened, but we weren’t close.”

“Why’d he come to you, specifically? He was a good cop once, from what we heard.”

“I was probably the only P.I. he knew, or maybe he preferred to work with a woman. Wanted to handle things, just him and me. Catch them red-handed. A return to glory for the retired cop, you know.”

“But someone must have found out and offed him,” Brody said.

“Lattimer, no doubt,” I replied.

Allsop grunted, skeptical. “Very neat. But the drugs have disappeared and they’re filtering onto the street up and down the coast from Seattle to San Diego.”

“I might be able to help you there. I heard a name. Houdini.” I dug in my desk drawer for the printout of the news reports. Once I found it I got up to make a copy on my machine. I handed the pages to Allsop. “I’m sure Narcotics is all over it, but I got multiple sources that say he’s behind it. You might want to point out that it wasn’t just street candy that they took, but some high-end steroids too. I bet those will show up in the sports world pretty quick.” I was guessing, but it was a safe bet and would make them think I was helping them more than I really

was.

I deliberately didn't mention Luger. I had no evidence he had anything to do with the kidnapping and it was stupid to throw away a potential information source. He was scum, but no worse scum than whoever would take his place if I gave him up.

"Narcotics arrested a pharmacist that helped them get in and out without tripping any alarms."

I tried not to freeze, tried to stay casual as I thought furiously about what to say. Of course they would connect Mira to the crime. After all, it was her fingerprint on the scanner and her face on the video.

Or at least, it would seem so.

I cleared my throat. "You have the security tapes from Bill's call center?"

Brody shook his head. "Everything was wiped. Video, call logs, computer files...Lattimer was a hacker, you know? Had convictions for computer crime."

"Yeah," Allsop said. "Why would Bill hire a guy like that?"

"He had a soft spot for felons." I tried to think of what I could do for Mira that wouldn't implicate me further. Irony of ironies if she got busted for the crime she didn't actually commit because she was trying to save her daughter. Then again, she was almost certainly an accessory. Karma, maybe.

I decided to reveal one of my cards despite the risk. "You know about the triple homicide and fire in a Richmond warehouse Tuesday afternoon?"

"Yeah, I heard," Allsop said warily.

"If there was enough saved from the fire, check out the female victim and compare her to your pharmacist – height, weight, build. Take a look at the wig she was wearing. Look for a piece of silicone with a fingerprint on it...and I bet the tires on the van in the warehouse match the tracks you found on the floor of North Bay Distributors."

Brody scribbled fiercely in his notebook while Allsop's eyes narrowed. "How do you know all this?"

"I can't reveal my sources, but I do know that if your pharmacist was involved it wasn't of her own free will." Mira would probably crack anyway, but I'd done my best to divert PD's inevitable belief she'd done it. Cops always went for the simplest explanation because most of the time it was the right one.

But not always.

"What –"

I held up my hand. "My turn."

"Okay..." Allsop pulled out his smokes and looked a question at me.

I sighed and opened two windows, letting in a cross-breeze, and then shoved my almost-empty coffee cup over toward him as an improvised ashtray.

It was all I had handy.

Once he'd lit up, I said, "I want the reports on the warehouse fire and victims. Forensics, evidence, autopsies, the works."

"Why?"

I shook my head. "Just a hunch, right now. I promise that if I see anything important I'll pass it to you guys so you can show up Richmond PD. Make you look good to the interdepartmental working group."

Allsop looked away for a moment. "Even if I got it all, I can't give you a copy. A long look at it in my office is probably the best I can do."

"Deal." I bet Mickey could rig me up a good miniaturized digital camera, spy style. If not, well, my memory was pretty good when I wanted it to be.

"What about the car in Old Sac?" Brody asked.

"Did you find one?"

"Yes. Pricey AMG Mercedes, stolen out of Seattle. Clean as a whistle, no damage. Like all the thief wanted was a ride."

"I guess so."

Allsop growled, "What do you know, Cal?"

Half-truths were my defense again. "I spotted an Audi during my case. We determined it was stolen in Old Sac, so I was trying to figure something out. That's all."

"What was your case again?" Allsop asked lightly, like he was going to slip it past me.

I shrugged. "Just a missing person. No biggie. Now gentlemen, if there's nothing else?" By my tone I made it clear it had better be important. Give a cop leave to interrogate you and he'll go on a fishing expedition.

Allsop glowered for a moment. "No, not right now." They got up.

I held out my hand to Brody and he took it firmly. When I extended it to Allsop, he stared flatly at it for a moment, and then shook his head.

I lowered my arm. "Oh, and here I thought we were getting along so well."

"I can't forget what you did," he said.

"Yeah. I remember you backing me up in court, *partner*." That was pure sarcasm. Allsop had refused to testify during my lawsuit. Unlike a criminal trial, he couldn't be compelled over departmental objections that cited conflict of interest.

"You won, didn't you? You proved your case, got your payoff." He stared hard at me.

"I did, yes. Maybe because it was true and Stanger was dirty. She might have killed me. She did get the bomb tech killed."

Allsop turned away, admitting nothing, but I felt like I'd won the point.

Maybe he'd eventually come around.

I opened the front door for them. "See you. Go catch some bad guys."

"We'll be in touch," Brody said brightly, winking as he went by. I decided to like him because he wasn't sucking up to Allsop, but I shut the door firmly, a statement of finality. Then I retrieved a broom and dustpan to go back and collect the butt off my front porch, muttering all the while about dirty smokers. Yeah, I lit up occasionally, but I never left my messes for someone else to clean up.

Climbing the stairs to my kitchen, I dumped the contents of the dustpan and the dreck from my cup into the covered trash can, and then washed them both. Afterward, I got a fresh mug, refilled it and moseyed back downstairs, hoping for a relaxing morning.

After sitting down again, I pulled the rubber band off the *Chronicle* and dropped it into the receptacle on my desk organizer before unrolling the newspaper. The scent of the fresh newsprint wafted to my nose in the breeze reminding me of the paper route I'd had as a kid. Dad would help me assemble the inserts and roll them, and then off I'd go with my sack.

Three Dead In Richmond Warehouse Fire had already been reported in Wednesday's edition, earning a few column inches below the fold. Apparently the investigation had suppressed any hint of foul play as yet and I resolved to tip Cole Sage off in case he wanted to do a more in-depth piece.

My musings shattered as I noticed a front-page teaser leading to the business section, titled *Local Drug Distributor Takes Huge Loss*. Quickly I turned to the piece and skimmed along.

(SFC Staff) San Francisco – Following the disclosure of a warehouse pharmaceutical theft exceeding five hundred million dollars in retail value, North Bay Distributors, part of the Rankin Pharmaceuticals Group, has expressed confidence that law enforcement is pursuing all leads and will soon recover the majority of the stolen goods.

"Our inventory is fully insured by Lloyds, so stockholders need have no fear of revenue loss in the long term. We urge all investors to maintain their portfolios and not sell prematurely, locking in their losses. Rankin Pharmaceuticals expects a strong quarter and has more than enough cash reserves to absorb this temporary setback until these routine issues are worked out," said Harold Milray of public relations firm Starns and Milray.

However, *Chronicle* sources claim Lloyds has sent an elite investigative team to make inquiries about potential improper security procedures that may have led to the loss. One authority with close ties to the insurance industry

pointed out that, while Lloyds has never defaulted on a legitimate claim, they are “tough on those who substitute insurance coverage for due diligence.”

Legal experts speaking without attribution indicate that such large losses are usually settled for a fraction of the retail value after prolonged negotiations rather than through the courts.

Despite assurances of the relatively routine nature of the situation, the heist’s unusually high dollar value caused Rankin stock to lose more than forty percent of its asking price the day after the *Chronicle* broke the story. It has since regained more than ten percent and is expected to stabilize higher over the coming weeks for a moderate overall loss. Financial analysts at Stinwell and Pogue have issued statements that they expect a full recovery within three to six months, assuming next quarter’s figures fall in line with predictions.

There was more detail, but that was the gist.

I leaned back, sipping my fresh coffee and thinking about the money Mira had been sending her stockbroker ex, Dennis. Mickey said she’d been doing this since the divorce. After roughly two years, that meant easily two hundred thousand dollars had gone into a numbered offshore account.

Reaching for the phone, I dialed a day trader I knew, a guy I’d helped out of a jam once. “Jindal?” I said when he picked up the phone at his Transamerica Building office. “This is Cal Corwin.”

“Hey, Cal! Long time no hear. You got some more money to invest?”

“Last time you turned my five grand into three, so no, not today.”

“You gotta leave it with me longer. Setbacks happen. You have to ride them out. Play the odds.”

“Sounds more like poker than day trading.”

Jindal laughed. “Is there a difference?”

“You tell me.”

He laughed again. “What can I help you with?”

“Just information, off the record. If I had two hundred grand, insider knowledge and wanted to make the most money I could off this week’s Rankin Pharm situation, what would I do?”

“That ship has sailed, Cal. And where would you get two hundred grand anyway?”

“Not me, you dolt. Hypothetically.”

“You know something?”

“Nothing that will make you money, Jindal, but feel free to infer anything you like.”

I could almost hear the wheels turning in his head along with the chatter of

the cube farm around him. I'd visited it once, and unless you had one of the peripheral offices with their magnificent views, life sucked. Once again I was thankful for my own cozy office.

Eventually he spoke. "Okay, I pulled up the charts for the last week. It would be pretty easy to short the stock any time before the story broke because it was on a steady upward trend."

"Why does that matter?"

"Under SEC rules, you can't short a stock that's falling, only one that's rising overall."

"Okay. So, how much money could someone make?"

"With two hundred kay? Maybe...almost two mil in the short term and another twenty or so within six months if the predictions are true. That's a big *if*, though."

I choked for a moment, spewing coffee onto my desk and the newspaper open upon it. "Twenty million from two hundred thousand? How is that possible?" I asked as I grabbed for tissues and tried to blot my blazer and blouse.

"Leverage. An established investor or trader can borrow on margin, buy puts and calls with the money that bet the stock will move the way he thinks it will."

"What if he's wrong?"

"Then he loses it all, has to make it up out of pocket somehow, just like any other loan. Why do you think this job is so stressful?"

I rubbed my hands together to dry off the residual coffee. "Sounds a lot like gambling on a marker to me. Borrowing the house's money."

"Like I said – it is."

I mulled that over. "Okay, so he makes ten times his investment right away. Two million dollars when the stock plunges. Where's the rest come from?"

"From the rise in stock value," Jindal said. "Your hypothetical investor has two million in cash. When the price bottoms, he buys as much call action as he can, betting it goes up. Because he's got inside info, he knows this drop is only a temporary setback, right? Rankin will settle with Lloyds, and their underlying profit structure is sound. In three to six months that will rise by seventy-some percent if the analysts are right and, *voila*, there's your twenty mil."

"God. What a score."

Jindal chuckled. "That's peanuts. With insider trading, the *broker* might be in on it too. If so, he could leverage all the money in his accounts and make those trades without telling any of the investors. He gives them a nice high return for the year, something believable – say, twenty to twenty-four percent – and they go home happy, never knowing their funds were at risk and used to

make hundreds of millions, maybe, depending on how much the broker had under his control.”

“Wouldn’t that trigger an SEC investigation?”

“Cal, Cal, Cal. Even hundreds of millions are just a blip to the big trading houses like Lehman or Bear Stearns. They control hundreds of *billions* in assets, and one billion is a *thousand* million. Your guy is small potatoes. He can hide his trades in the noise. The SEC won’t even assign an investigator for less than a billion unless it’s a celebrity and they want to make an example out of her.”

Aghast, I stared at the receiver. “Thanks, Jindal. You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

Jindal’s voice turned hopeful. “You got any other tips, Cal? Something that might be happening tomorrow instead of last week?”

“I wish. Talk to you later.” I hung up, and then put my head back, staring at the ceiling.

Hundreds of millions of dollars, he’d said. Two hundred grand was Mira’s buy-in, I felt sure, the good faith money showing Dennis that her insider information wasn’t bullshit. That also meant this heist had been in the works for a long time, at least in concept. Could Mira have meticulously plotted and planned it, bringing Dennis in at the right time to handle the deal? They’d parted in hostility by all accounts, but there seemed no specific reason for the bitterness. My suspicious mind wondered if even the divorce was fake, a ploy to put distance between them for the scheme.

How much would they do, how long would they wait for money enough to be really rich?

Mickey had said Dennis controlled about two million in client money. If he used that much for leveraged puts and calls...two hundred million, assuming Jindal knew his stuff. Which he did. One way or another it would end up in the Caymans, I felt sure. Then, a few months to a year from now, Dennis, Mira and Talia, separately or together, would take permanent vacations to someplace without an extradition treaty and live happily ever after. If they didn’t rip off Dennis’s clients, perhaps no one would ever know.

I remembered the sign holder in front of Mira’s house, another confirmation she was planning on leaving. She didn’t need the money, but not disposing of the property might seem suspicious. After the heist, she might be watched, so she’d keep everything very normal, sell and rent a nice condo for a while, maybe quit her job and not take another. Dennis would buy high quality documents for the three of them and one day they’d simply...disappear.

My cop instinct was to drop a big old dime on them. One anonymous tip to the FBI’s financial crimes division and they’d be on the case. The interstate and

international transfers of funds put the ball in the Feds' court, and unlike the SEC they'd think a mere nine figures was worth looking into.

I thought about Talia, how she'd felt as she clung to me as we dashed from the warehouse. For a brief moment I'd felt like a mother, a possibility that seemed to recede as time went on. What would happen to her with two parents in prison? What did I care about the money they'd scammed from investors? Some mutual funds would take hits, but anyone properly diversified with a buy-and-hold strategy would be fine, would recover soon enough. Only traders like Jindal or big investors with narrow portfolios would get hurt badly. Somehow I couldn't find a lot of sympathy for some poor multimillionaire who might have to sell his private jet because he took a gamble and lost.

I knew about gambling, and I knew about losing. You're only a loser if you don't come back next time and win.

The one thing that rankled was Mira's check, the one that would have bounced. Cheating the lowly P.I. that saved her daughter seemed like a sleazy move for someone with millions on the way...so sleazy that I found it hard to credit. Why would a woman who'd meticulously planned this whole thing over the course of years screw the one person who could blow the whistle on her?

Unless she didn't plan on me being around at the end.

But what if I had tried to cash the check right away, dropping it off after our first meeting? I should have, but I'd been so busy. If I had, I might have learned it was worthless and everything might have blown up in her face.

What other explanation could there be?

And then I realized that I didn't actually know the check would bounce. I'd taken Thomas' word for it. What if the check was good? Why had the contractor taken it and left me ten grand in untraceable cash?

Untraceable. That was the key. For some reason Thomas was protecting me by severing the one connection that might permanently tie me to Mira. If the whole house of cards did come crashing down and the FBI or IRS went over her records with a fine-toothed comb, I'd be on the rack with no leg to stand on, to mix a metaphor. They wouldn't care about my ethics or any unwritten code; they'd nail me to the wall for not reporting the kidnapping, the heist, and every other illegal activity I may have witnessed.

At my prosecution they'd argue that by doing my civic duty I could have prevented everything that followed – the heist, the insider trading, Bill's death, losing Lattimer and maybe Dennis and Mira. They might even try to pin the dead thieves on me somehow. The Justice Department with the scent of guilt in its nostrils was a nightmare I wanted nothing to do with.

Folding the *Chronicle* reminded me of one more loose end I'd like to tie up.

Opening up my address book, I dialed Cole's number. Yesterday I'd finally wormed an admission out of one of the typists in the office pool that he should be back today.

The line picked up. "Cole Sage."

For a moment my throat seized up. There was no reason to fear speaking with him, but I'd been trying so hard to reach him for so long I froze.

"This is Cole Sage," his gravelly voice repeated.

I cleared my throat. "Yes, Cole, this is Cal Corwin. How was your jaunt?" I was proud of using that word. So sophisticated.

"Not bad. I got some information I needed. What can I do for you?"

"Meet me," I said impulsively. I hadn't been meaning to, but suddenly I wanted to.

"Is this urgent?"

I squirmed, not willing to stretch the truth today only to have it snap in half tomorrow. "Not urgent, but..."

"Then not today, Cal. Probably not this weekend, either. I have a lot of catching up to do."

Damn. I said, "I just got finished with a case that involves you, at least peripherally, but I really don't want to discuss it over the phone."

"Hmm. Maybe Sunday afternoon, then?"

Victory! "How about somewhere at the Embarcadero, about five?"

"You buying?"

I laughed. "I am, actually."

"Then it's a date."

My stomach got all warm and fuzzy at his words, even though I was sure he didn't mean that the way it sounded.

Pretty sure.

Damn hope-monkey. Get off me, you bastard.

"Cal?"

"Uh-huh. Yeah, it's a date. Meet in the lobby and we can decide on the spot."

"Okay."

"And Cole?"

"Yeah?"

I played my trump card to seal the deal. "You may not want to write it, but there's a story you're going to want to hear."

"There always is, Cal. There always is." Cole paused. "Bye, Cal."

"Bye."

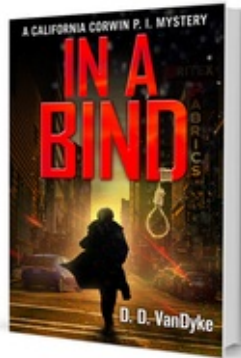
I put the phone down and smiled. Finally, things were looking up.

The End of *Loose Ends*.

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Mystery Series Book 2**

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In A Bind

by
D. D. VanDyke

Chapter 1

September, 2005

“Oh, California! If you want to attract a man, you have to pull your lower chakra *in*, not push it *out*.” My mother, Starlight Corwin – she’d had it legally changed from “Sandra” – sat lotus on her ancient sofa, the one I had never been able to convince her to get rid of. Hands pressed against her belly and back as she breathed deliberately in and out, looking like nothing so much as a more serene Yoko Ono clone.

Chloe and Kira, my mother’s fawn Pekingeses, watched with calm interest. Snowflake, my Russian White, leaped into my arms. I rubbed his head and he purred contentedly.

“Who said I wanted to attract a man? And aren’t you a Buddhist, Mom? Chakras are Hindu,” I said archly, as if I hadn’t had to put up with my mother’s eclectic amalgam of every mystic and New Age belief imaginable for my entire life.

“*I’m a Buddhist, I’m a Hindu, I’m a Muslim...*” Starlight sang airily to the tune of Berlin’s *Sex (I’m a...)*. “Buddhists know about chakras too. And call me Starlight. ‘Mom’ is a label that I eschew.”

“Eschew, huh? To paraphrase Sun Tzu: she who believes everything, believes nothing. Mommy Starlight, I gotta go.” I leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, placing Snowflake in her lap. As I did, my blazer fell open, revealing the holstered automatic on my hip.

“Tsk ts. You know I don’t like guns in my house.” Mother Starlight closed her eyes and tilted her head back, rolling it side to side.

I sighed. “Guns go with my job now and my profession before. You know, the one that I lost to buy you the house? And I’m not leaving them in my office

safe.”

“You’re not a pig anymore honey, praise the God and Goddess,” my mother replied. “You could get rid of them. All that negative energy and you put it right next to your body.”

With a pained laugh I said, “It’s not radioactive. It’s just a tool to protect myself and the only negative energy comes from the jerks this hardworking P.I. has to deal with.”

“Don’t come to me for healing when you get hip cancer.”

“Bye, Mom. And there’s no such thing as hip cancer.”

“You’ll see. I’ll try to ward you again.” She curled her hands into circles with her middle finger and thumb and began to chant. “*Om...Om mani padme hum...*”

I carefully locked the front door behind me. If I left it up to my mother it would not only stay unlocked but would probably stand open for every bum, doper and junkie who happened to wander by. Starlight believed the best of everyone. Except me, it seemed.

I call that selective memory, or maybe Mom just killed off all those brain cells before she gave up the hard drugs. Might have been the only good thing about Dad dying. For a little while, she became rational.

More than usual, anyway.

Turning to face the sloping San Francisco street, I descended the steps of our Victorian’s front porch and turned left. The three-block walk to my office was hardly enough to get my blood pumping, so I circled left again at the end of the block and took a zigzag path to eventually approach the building from the rear. Despite leaving the force two years ago the cop in me whispered in my ear: keep your eyes open, vary your route and take nothing for granted.

Another Monday morning. Monday was usually an interesting day, a day for cases to show up unexpectedly, I’d found.

Though, I mused, they could hardly be unexpected if I expected them on Monday. I should toss that noodle-baker to Mom. She loved all things philosophical and metaphysical. It would keep her entertained for hours.

September had brought sunshine even as it sent the girls and boys of summer back to school and I breathed deep of the fresh air, smelling wet concrete and the stubborn grass growing in the verges. I never understood how anyone could live down in smoggy L.A. if they could choose the City by the Bay and the fresh sea air of its setting. Sure it stayed chilly, but if warm weather was the goal, an hour’s drive over the coast range and into the sunny San Joaquin Valley to the east would do it. Me, I’ll take the dense cold fog and vibrant life of the Mission District any day.

Walking through the courtyard that formed a private parking lot in back of my office, I ran my hand along Molly's flank. The azure Subaru called to me and I patted her fender in affection. "Be patient, girl. Next Saturday we got a rally up in Hollister."

Shadows from the surrounding three-story buildings chopped the tarmac into slices of light and dark and the breeze brought the intermittent scent of java and pastries from Ritual Coffee Roasters. The aroma convinced me to turn away from my office and exit the courtyard to the east onto Valencia. A short walk brought me to the café where I picked up two tall lattes and six pastries – two for me, four for Mickey. Normally I only got him three, but for some reason today felt like four. I'd learned to yield to these flashes of insight, the ones that popped up every now and again ever since the bomb blast rattled my noggin and ended my career as a cop.

Just for a moment I caught sight of a half-familiar figure in the glass of the display case, and then it was gone. I racked my brain as I juggled the cup caddy, bag and door handle, scowling at the bum – sorry, homeless man – half-blocking the entrance.

On a whim I stopped, pulled out Mickey's fourth apple turnover and dropped it into his grimy hands. He didn't even thank me before he stuffed it in his face.

What a bum.

There, Mom. That ought to buy me some good karma, or maybe a little blessing from Saint Francis, all for under two bucks. Funny how Mother believes in every god except Dad's, the Big Guy Upstairs. She'd say the Catholic Church is The System and the Pope is The Man anyway, and it's her duty to Fight the Power or something.

No wonder I have a hard time with religion.

This time I approached my office from the front, climbing the steps to a door not so different from the house where Mother and I lived, though this had less gingerbread and sported a front balcony overlooking the street.

CALIFORNIA INVESTIGATIONS read the first line of engraving on the brass plaque and beneath it, *Cal Corwin, Licensed and Bonded*. It looked impressive. In this business, reputation and image can be important.

Slamming the door with my foot to make sure it locked bestowed the side benefit of waking my research assistant Mickey up – if he was here. He often gamed all weekend on the computer gear I'd bought for his work as it was better than anything he had at home and usually fell asleep in the wee hours of the morning. The loud bang gave him fair warning and sometimes saved me the trouble of investigating noises in the lower level, weapon drawn.

The Wizard is *IN* read the sign at the top of the stairs, so I extracted my turnovers from the bag and set them gingerly on my desk along with my latte before taking the rest to the basement door. “You down there, Mickey? I got coffee and pastries, but you better not be working naked again.”

“Just a minute, boss,” came the muffled reply, and I heard water run in the bathroom and the toilet flush.

Once I was sure I wasn’t going to walk in on something no rational human being should ever see, I descended the stairs and set the nectar of life and the baked goods on the table next to the setup’s big monitors and retreated. No point in trying to deal with Mickey before he woke up unless something urgent was in the offing. As far as I knew, nothing qualified.

That was the trouble, actually. I hadn’t had a real case in two months, not since I’d earned ten thousand dollars for recovering a kidnapped girl. I supported Mom, and Mickey couldn’t seem to keep any other job. With the cost of living so high in San Francisco – not to mention California’s sky-high taxes – if I’d had mortgages to pay we’d all be eating instant ramen three meals a day by now.

Fortunately the lawsuit against the City for the fiasco with the bomb, the blast that had cost me an eardrum, a bunch of skin on the right side of my head and some feeling in my right hand, had paid for the house and bought the office, all free and clear. Unfortunately there were still taxes, utilities, groceries, insurance, gas...and did I mention taxes? I love California, but I detest its dysfunctional bureaucracy.

To keep busy I’d done some skip tracing of bail jumpers, but that barely kept me and my unofficial employees – Mickey and the freelance muscle team that called themselves M&M – in coffee and pastries. I needed real work even if I had to scare it up somehow. I still had a few friends on the force that would throw me a bone now and again. If I didn’t get something soon, I’d reach out even if I had to eat some humble pie.

Back on the main level of my office I scooped up the contents of the drop box, which was also my mail slot, and then punched the button on my desktop computer. While it booted I browsed the mail. Sometimes a case showed up there, sometimes in email. Most common, though, was a phone call. In my experience, people bringing cases often had things to hide and were leery of committing details to paper, virtual or real.

This time, though, the case walked in the door. Knocked first, of course. Two sharp sounds, *rap – rap*. Maybe I need to put a *Come On In* sign on the door, but if I did, I couldn’t leave it locked.

Okay, I’m a woman of contradictions.

I buzzed the release and settled for yelling. “Come on in!” My hand rested

on the weapon on my hidden hip. I'd made a few enemies and it paid to be careful.

The green painted door opened and I stood, but I needn't have. I mean, when a dwarf walks through your door...or do we call them little people now? In any case, this person was undertall by quite a bit. I'm only five-six but I towered over her. Or him?

Trying to see past his stature, I sized him up. Pretty sure it was a him, despite the gold lamé dress, heels, wig and makeup. You'd think with my own scars I could look beneath the surface, but I admit I hadn't had much experience with little people.

Anyway he was black, African-American if you prefer, which was neither here nor there, though it did add to the oddity of the whole picture for me. The entire presentation was definitely outré, at least outside of Castro. Especially for broad daylight. Most of the drag queens came out at night.

"What can I do for you, sir?" I asked, dropping my hand and putting on my best customer-service face. That was difficult, as I still hadn't had my coffee or even a bite of the sugar bomb on my desk.

He stared.

I stared.

He looked tired, as if he'd been up all night.

"What..." we both started in unison.

I sat down, waving him forward. "Close the door please. Have a seat." Solving two problems at once, I shoved the corner of a turnover into my watering mouth. Damn, that pastry chef was good. Chewing created time and opportunity to break out of the awkward little spell that had seized us.

The small man shut the door and clomped across my floor in his heels to sit in a chair. I masticated a moment more, sipped my coffee and waited.

"Is Cal Corwin in?" he finally said in a clear falsetto.

"That's me. California Corwin, California Investigations," I said brightly.

"I thought you'd be..."

"A man?"

He smiled and winked. "I was going to say *taller*."

Oh, a charmer. I decided to like him for the moment. "Buddy, there are so many ripostes to that I can't even count."

Lamé guy shrugged and took off his wig, dropping it on the corner of my desk. When he spoke he had let go of the falsetto in favor of a deep Barry White voice. "When you're unusual, you need a sense of humor. You got one about *that*?" He pointed at the damaged side right of my face.

Surprised he had noticed. My straight dark hair usually hid the scars and

makeup did the rest. I turned away slightly and then cursed myself for doing so.

“On my better days, I guess. Now,” I took out a pad and pen, “you are?”

“Biggie Smallie.”

“You’re kidding.”

“It’s a performance name. Franklin Jackson.”

“Two presidents at once.”

“Franklin wasn’t a President.”

I scrunched up my nose. “Franklin Delano Roosevelt?”

Franklin laughed. “Got me there.”

“And what kind of performance?” I asked.

“Song and dance. Drag revue. Duh?” He pointed with both hands at his outfit.

“That’s it? Nothing more, like stripping or turning tricks? Better to lay it out now if I’m going to help you with whatever you want.”

A hint of anger flickered across his face. “Lay it out. Funny. But no, that’s all. When I hook up I don’t take money. I just like dressing up and performing – and before you ask, I’m straight as the Golden Gate.”

Skepticism must have showed on my face. “Look, Frank, I used to be a cop, which played hell with my sense of patience. Can we get to whatever brought you in here?”

“Yeah, let me tell it.” He ran his hand over his close-cropped hair. “Anyway, that’s what I do in the evenings at the shows around town. Aunt Charlie’s, Divas, Esta Noche, the Cinch, places like that. It’s a blast and pays a little, though putting up with the short jokes is a pain in the ass. The sex is good.”

I raised my better eyebrow.

“I mean, I meet a lot of women and some of them are open-minded. Even ti-curious.”

“Ti?”

“Yeah, like, tiny. Height-wise, anyway. You know, not everything on us little people is small.” He sent me a flirtatious smile.

“TMI, Frank. Let’s stick to the case. If there is one?” I stared at him over my coffee cup.

“Sorry. Bad habit of letting my mouth run away with me. These shows and the parties after, you know...I can say almost anything and they think it’s funny instead of rude. It’s one of the perks of being in character. They expect it.”

“Speaking of parties...why are you dressed for one early on a Monday morning?”

He stage-coughed as if embarrassed and showing it. “Had a gig last night,

at Lookout. Things got late, a little out of hand, and one of the ladies...you know.”

“She was *open-minded*.”

“Yeah. I didn’t make it home yet. My car got stolen.”

“And you like to shock people so you put that outfit back on.”

“Just a little, sure. It’s the showman in me.” He chuckled.

“So why are you here, Frank? Why didn’t you report the car to the cops?”

“Because of this.” Sighing, he took out his phone and punched up something, and then laid it on the desk in front of me. It was one of those new ones with a full-color screen that could display digital pictures.

“Ew. Is there actually a case here or do you get your jollies walking into random P.I. offices and showing people your porn?” I couldn’t call the photo anything else.

“So you get the picture? Okay, okay,” he said, holding up his hands as I stood with mounting irritation to throw him out. “It’s blackmail, all right? Here’s the text that came with it.”

Send \$1000 in cash every week or the pictures go viral, it read, and listed a box address in Chicago.

“So...pardon me,” I said, “but with the lifestyle you’re living anyway, how can this hurt you? Might even get you more business. They say all publicity is good publicity.”

“Look, Cal...can I call you Cal?” His dimples appeared and I saw how a certain segment of the female nighttime drag-queen-show-viewing populace would find him attractive. “I have to keep my day job and my side job separate.”

“I should think so. I can’t figure out why you’re engaging in all this risky behavior.”

“What, you’ve never taken risks for fun?”

He had me there. I guess I could understand his thrillseeking, even if his kinds of thrills weren’t mine. I nodded in sympathy. “All right. I get it. Go on.”

“This picture was taken last night and when I left the hotel around five a.m. my car was gone. When I went back to her room the woman in the picture had checked out. I killed time with breakfast at the hotel, looked you up and here I am.”

“Okay, Frank,” I said around another bite of pastry, “what’s your day job that this would be worth fifty Gs a year to keep quiet? You a priest or something?”

“No, special education teacher out in Granger’s Ford.”

That stopped me in my tracks. I mean, technically he hadn’t done anything wrong, or at least not illegal, though there might be some kind of morals or

community standard clause in his contract, but I got it. Perfectly rational, live-and-let-live adults turn into slaving, out-for-blood Puritans when they sense a risk to their kids. “That’s in the Sierra foothills across the valley, right? Small town?”

“Very small, at least in mind. I’d lose my job and probably never work again this side of the Mississippi, but I love my kids. I really make a difference. Even if I found the guy who has these pics and got a lawyer and an injunction, he could ruin me overnight. It would take years suing him to recoup the costs.”

“Look, Frank...my best advice to you is to get out ahead of the story. Go to the school board and come clean right now. Make it perfectly clear everything you do is consensual and doesn’t involve underage girls or anything illegal.”

“The drugs?”

“I wouldn’t mention that. It’s the only real weak spot in your defense. But the drag and the sex...if you’re up front and explain it to them, and maybe do a similar, less detailed *mea culpa* at a town meeting, you’ll get through this. Especially if you get a lawyer and show you’ll fight.”

“No way. My job is everything.”

“Should have thought about that before you got in too deep.”

“I didn’t come here for you to judge me,” Frank said angrily.

“Sorry. I still think you should fight through it.”

“No. This all has to go away.”

I sighed, my best advice defeated. “Okay. Why do you think it is a he? I mean, that is a *woman’s* derriere, right? She had to be complicit.”

“You’re right. Could easily be a woman, though the one I was with didn’t seem the type.”

“The smart ones never do. Are there more pictures? No, don’t show me.”

“Yeah,” Frank replied. “A couple more of the, uh, encounter, and some of me on stage that night.”

“Are the bedroom shots all from the same angle? Like it was an automatic camera rather than someone taking them?”

Frank flipped through the pictures on the screen. “Yeah, looks like it.”

“Hmm. Still no confirmed accomplice.”

“What about the car?”

I scratched my head with both hands, trying to stimulate my brain through the hair follicles. “Yeah, that would argue for someone else. What kind of car?”

“Two-year-old Camry.”

“Ugh. The most stolen car in America. Could it be a coincidence?”

“I dunno. There aren’t that many choices for little people. It was modified for my size and there are affordable kits for only a limited number of models.”

“You sure it wasn’t towed?”

Frank shook his head wearily. “Don’t think so. It was on a side street in front of a meter, but the sign on it said you can park there free on weekends. I called a few of the nearest towing yards anyway, but no dice.”

I pushed over a pad of paper and a pen. “Write down everything about it – tag number, year, make, model, details of the short people kit, exact location you left it, anything else. And your phone number. Take my card. I’ll need two thousand up front as a retainer and it’s fifty an hour plus expenses.” My rates were flexible, depending on what I thought clients could afford. For a schoolteacher I’d charge less.

Distressed, he replied, “I can get five hundred from an ATM today. My bank is local to Granger’s Ford. No branches in the City.”

“Okay, get me the rest when you can. One more thing...why Chicago?”

He shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“None at all? Seems like an odd place to have the money sent. Are you from there? Got contacts there?”

“Nope.” Frank shook his head. “Born and raised in San Jose, got my degree from State...maybe it’s just a long way away and they don’t figure I’ll go there to check it out.”

“Maybe. Probably some kind of reposting drop anyway. If I have to fly out there it’s going to cost you.”

“Better than paying blackmail. As you said, a thousand a week is over fifty a year. I’d rather take out a loan and pay you.”

I grunted. “Good for both of us. Just remember, I’ll need more than five bills. I have a research assistant to pay and if I need muscle I have to lay out for them too. I’m assuming you want the pictures back and a guarantee they won’t be publicized, but I’m not sure that’s possible as they’re digital. I’ll do the best I can, but it will depend on what kind of leverage I can find on whoever did this. We can’t go to the cops right away, because eventually this will get on the police blotter and those are public records. Even if I manage to clean everything up, you don’t want official paperwork lurking in some file if you can help it, I’m thinking.”

Frank put his head in his hands. “Look, Miss Corwin, I’m just a guy in a bind here. I’ve never been involved with any criminal activity, never had anything like this happen. I have no idea what to do except trust you to fix the situation.”

Oh, boy. That hit me in a soft spot, the part of everyone who ever wanted to be a cop and help people get justice. I had an idea how violated he felt right now, wanting a professional to make it all better. Well, I guess that was how I earned

my living so I opened my mouth and did what I always do. I promised a little too much.

“Frank, you get me the cash and I’ll get you some answers. At least we’ll have something to hand to the police if it comes to that, or if I get lucky we might be able to make the situation go away.”

“Thanks, Cal. You’re a real lifesaver. Any chance you and me...”

“No,” I retorted automatically. “I make it a firm policy never to get involved with clients. You know, like with teachers and students,” I went on with sudden inspiration. “Ethics, and all that.”

“Oh, sure.” Frank blinked and swayed in the chair. “Hey, is there anywhere around I can get a room? Cheap, clean hotel or something?”

“You don’t want a ride back home? I’m going over to Granger’s Ford to poke around anyway.”

“No, I’m wiped out and I already called in sick. Just what I need, old Annie the snoop to look out her window and see me sneak into my own house after getting out of a gorgeous and desirable woman’s car on a weekday when I’m supposed to be already at home.”

“Give it a rest, Frank.”

Frank shrugged and smirked as if he knew that the compliment felt good to me no matter how cheesy. “If my car doesn’t turn up maybe you can run me out early tomorrow morning?”

“I’m not a morning kind of gal, Frank, but we’ll see.” I almost asked him why he couldn’t rent a car, and then remembered his stature and the special equipment he needed.

I gave him the address of the misnamed Five Star Hotel a few blocks away, told him to call Mickey if he needed any local help, and then steered him toward the nearest ATM.

Once he’d trudged out I went down to the lower level where my assistant made his abode. One side of the large room, the less disgusting side, sported a semicircular arrangement of screens and computer gear. The other held an old sofa and loveseat, a couple of chairs and a blizzard of junk food wrappers, empty soda bottles and cans and some pillows that clearly needed a Maytag introduction. Once every month or two I had to threaten to pull the graphics chips out of his computers – I mean, *my* computers, as I had bought them, after all – to get him to clean the place up.

Mickey squatted like a frog in a rolling office chair, shaggy and overweight. Yeah, he was a nerd’s nerd and had his foibles, but boy, could he find things out when he was motivated.

“Wazzup, boss?” he asked, not taking his eyes off the frenetic game action

on the screen.

“I have a case, I think. Need you to start with this.” I handed him a sheet of paper with pertinent facts copied from Frank’s notes plus some I’d added. “See if that Camry has shown up anywhere – towing yards, police blotters, anything. Then a quick rundown on the client. Franklin Jackson, special-ed teacher out of Granger’s Ford. Try to find the physical location of this box address in Chicago. Let me know when you run out of dirt to dig in.”

Holding out his free left hand, Mickey kept mousing around the screen with the right, firing frantically at his pixilated enemies. I put the paper into his palm and left. No point in micromanaging him. He’d be useless until he finished his current quest or whatever it was, but after that he’d do good work as long as there was food, cash and coffee.

Something caught my eye out the window that faced the courtyard behind my office. A woman, tall, redheaded and slim, in slacks and a windbreaker, lit a cigarette near Molly. She seemed to glance my way before turning to stalk off between buildings. Something about the way she walked bothered me, like her feet hurt perhaps. Fairly sure I had never laid eyes on her, but still...

Short of chasing her down there wasn’t much I could do. It might mean nothing or she might be trying to work up the gumption to walk into my office with a case. It was Monday after all. For now, I had to get started on Frank and his minor problem.

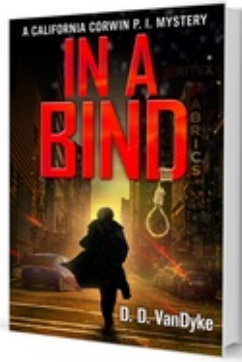
And it was minor. Not to him, I was sure, but in comparison to a kidnapped girl, a murdered ex-cop or a bomb the situation was tame. Stuff like this happened every day when I was on the force. Usually the information got out no matter how hard you tried to lock it down. I’d given Frank the benefit of my wisdom, but like most blackmail victims, they didn’t want to listen. So, I’d have to try it his way.

As a cop I’d had my ways of taking care of things and of course the thin blue line still did. *Policing* was often a lot easier and more effective than *law enforcement*, and by that I meant that some things are better taken care of unofficially, off the books.

Now that I was even farther from those books, I could engage in my own version of policing now and again. A twisted arm, a payoff, a word in the right ear...when the goal was to suppress information, methods like these might work. If it came to law enforcement...well, at some point I could just dump it in the lap of SFPD and forget about it.

Closure? That was a luxury in this business.

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