

In this world anyone can

# BECOME a KILLER

A photograph of a long, straight asphalt road stretching into the distance under a clear blue sky. The road has a yellow center line and white edge lines. On the right side of the road, there is a yellow diamond-shaped road sign with a black squiggle symbol. The landscape is arid with sparse desert vegetation and large, light-colored rock formations in the background.

KEN DONALD

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## Chapter 1

When the bullet smashed into his skull and exploded, obliterating the soft tissue of his brain, John Traynor had been in a good mood. And why not? After all, he was about to become a very wealthy man. The electricity company was willing to pay for the privilege of erecting a wind farm on his land, and that meant he would be a man of leisure for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, the explosive bullet changed things. He was now neither rich nor poor. He was just a heap of elements, waiting to be recycled and put to some other use. Such is the finality of death.

If John had had the time to ponder his demise, he might well have cursed his bad luck. He'd spent the last three years fighting the planners and protesters, doing their best to ruin his plans. How dare they? It was his land and he could do what the hell he wanted with it. Even some of his friends in town said the huge turbines would be a blight on the landscape, but what the hell did they know? It was progress - get used to it. Besides, he'd have enough money to buy another farm - maybe even travel the world. He wouldn't be the one staring at the damn things.

Now that his life had been extinguished, John's son Michael would take over the farm, and Michael was a different man to his father. Every morning he would sit on the porch of the farm, drinking his first coffee of the day, and admire the uninterrupted view of the mountains in the distance. When John was finally laid to rest, Michael would contact the electricity company and tell them he was not prepared to sign the contract, waiting expectantly at their head office. He had no interest in desecrating one of the most beautiful valleys in Southern California. Wind *farm*? Why didn't they call it by its proper name? A wind *factory*, consisting of mammoth steel towers that had no business existing in one of the few unspoilt corners of the State. So, much to the relief of the local inhabitants, the wind farm would no longer be built.

And all because of a single bullet, filled with mercury, designed to make a man's head explode into a million pieces.

## Chapter 2

Detective Madison Culver sat in her car, parked outside the main gates to the Traynor farm, cursing her partner. But this was nothing new. She knew that she couldn't rely on Bradley, and the fact that he was now more than twenty minutes late only confirmed that. As far as she was concerned, his former partner had died because of his incompetence. But she hadn't shared her feelings with her superiors – feelings made all the worse because Bradley's former partner had been her father.

While she waited, she recalled the time she and Bradley had sat in her car together, staking out the address of a suspect in a bank robbery. Bradley had fallen asleep, clearly not concerned with the fact that he was on duty. Not long after that, he began to whimper. Madison had looked across to the passenger seat of her car in total disbelief. The man had started crying and was mumbling to himself.

“A ... cute ... little squirrel.”

Tears erupted, and Bradley began to bawl. Madison had elbowed him in the ribs, and he'd jumped in his seat, momentarily unaware of his surroundings. He'd looked over to her, clearly embarrassed, and did his best to wipe away the evidence of his tears. Madison had said nothing.

If Madison had only known, it wasn't the first time it had happened. He'd had the same dream before, in a doctor's waiting room, and he'd finally woken to find himself being stared at by those around him. The words ‘little squirrel’ still echoed around his head, so he knew he must have uttered them.

But the onlookers in the waiting room hadn't seen what he'd seen - a little squirrel, covered in blood.

Bradley's car appeared in Madison's rear-view mirror, interrupting her thoughts. He got out and ran to her car, as if this could make up for the twenty minutes he'd kept her waiting. He leant against her door and she looked up, spotting a crusty stain on the front of his jacket. He noticed her staring and looked down to see what had grabbed her attention. He shrugged, took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the stain, making it worse.

“You're late,” said Madison.

Bradley looked at his watch, as if he didn't believe her.

“Only twenty minutes.”

“Late is late.”

“Sorry.”

Bradley gave a boyish smile, clearly hoping that would be enough to deserve her forgiveness. She didn't give him the satisfaction of smiling back. Instead she nodded at her passenger door.

“Hop in. We can take my car. Leave your car here – together with your jacket.”

As she watched him make his way back to his car and do as instructed, she had to remind herself that Bradley had been a detective while she'd still been in uniform, handing out speeding tickets.

It took them just over five minutes to reach the sprawling farm buildings that constituted the Traynor estate. Two patrol cars and a white van were already parked on the sweeping, gravel driveway. The forensic team had beaten them to it, thanks to Bradley's tardiness. There was an uncharacteristic chill in the morning air and Bradley shuddered when he got out of the car. Madison was wearing a dark grey fur-lined jacket, and Bradley briefly considered asking her if she had a spare but thought better of it.

He looked out across the field to the right of the property, where a patrolman from the Sheriff's Department was erecting a barrier of tape, warning people to stay away from the crime scene. A tech-guy in overalls was searching the ground surrounding the body. Bradley headed in his direction without saying a word and Madison shook her head, cursing.

“I guess I'll go inside and talk to the family then,” she said with as much sarcasm as she could muster, but it was lost on Bradley and he simply waved a hand in acknowledgement.

Bradley stopped a few feet from the murder scene, knowing better than to get too close and end up accused of contaminating the area. The man in the overalls smiled and waved.

“Hey, Pete, how's it hangin'?”

Bradley had to squint to make out the man's face, partially hidden by the hood of his plastic suit.

“Murray, is that you?”

“Yeah, man, wait there.”

Murray got up off his knees and made his way towards Bradley, managing to tear a piece of the tape the patrolman was carefully tying to a tree. The

officer swore, but Murray didn't notice.

Murray went to shake Bradley's hand but realised he was still wearing his latex gloves. He quickly tore the one from his right hand and pumped Bradley's fist.

"I haven't seen you since Culver bought it during your last case. You know, the one where..."

"Yeah, I know the one," said Bradley, not letting Murray finish, but the ballistics expert didn't take the hint.

"Boy, that was a rough one. You never caught the guy, did you?"

"Not yet."

"Not yet? I thought they took you off the case when Culver handed in his chips."

"Yeah, well, we'll see about that."

Murray was tempted to ask what he meant, but Bradley's scowl told him to drop it.

"What were you looking for?" Bradley asked, changing the subject and nodding at the ground where Murray had been crouching on his knees.

"Bullets."

"Did you find any?"

"No. And there's no sign any other shots were fired. So, whoever killed the poor bastard got him first time and it was a head-shot. The guy must be good."

"What makes you say that?"

Murray gestured to some trees in the distance.

"That's the only place where a shooter could hide. That far away, you'd have to have a pretty good aim, even in the still morning air."

Bradley gestured towards the house.

"Unless the shot came from there."

Murray shook his head.

"Maybe, but I doubt it. Traynor's head is a mess, but he fell like a stone and I figure, from what's left of the exit wound, that the bullet came from the trees.

"Have you searched over there for casings?"

"Not yet. That was going to be my next job."

Bradley looked over at the body. The left-hand-side of the head was missing.

"When you said his head was a mess you weren't kidding, were you?"

"It's a bit too early to tell, but I reckon the bullet was altered to explode on

impact.”

“Jesus. This guy really meant business.”

“Yeah. And, like I said, he knew what he was doing.”

“So, what are you saying? Professional hit-man?”

“Yeah, maybe. Or military, maybe.”

“To kill a farmer? That’s a bit of overkill, don’t you think?”

“Hey, that’s not my department. That’s why they pay you the big bucks.”

Bradley smiled and pointed at the trees.

“That’s the funniest thing I’ve heard all day. Let me know if you find anything over there before you leave. I’ve got to get back to my partner.”

“You mean Madison Culver. Hell, man, if she was my partner, I’d never leave her side.”

“You’re a married man, Murray.”

“Not any more. Divorce came through three weeks ago.”

Murray held up his ringless finger to illustrate the point.

“Join the club,” said Bradley.

“Jesus, man, has Kath left you?”

“Other way round.”

“Hell, man, why? What about the baby?”

“What can I tell you?” said Bradley, wishing he hadn’t got into the conversation. “Life’s a bitch.”

Murray watched Bradley make his way to the house and noticed his old friend wasn’t wearing a jacket, despite the cold. Maybe the detective really was losing it, just like the guys downtown said.

The patrolman manning the front door acknowledged Bradley with a nod of the head and, having little else to do but stare into space, opened the door for the detective. Bradley thanked him, a gesture that was much appreciated by the uniformed officer. Most of the plain-clothes pricks he came across ignored the boys on the coal-face.

Bradley was confronted by an empty hallway. It had a tiled floor, covered in liberal quantities of dirt. A row of muddy boots under a wooden staircase testified to the cause. Bradley quickly examined his own shoes and decided they were sufficiently clean to remain on his feet. Voices could be heard emanating from the rear of the house, and he headed towards them.

The voices belonged to his partner and to what he assumed were the wife and son of the murder victim. Mother and son clutched one another, clearly



seeking comfort through human contact. They were sitting on a ridiculously large sofa that appeared to swamp them, and Madison was taking notes, as she resided on an armchair that looked more like a throne. Bradley had to stop himself from letting out a laugh. Madison spotted him and decided to make the introductions.

“Mrs Traynor and Mr Traynor, this is my partner, Detective Bradley.”

Bradley coughed to clear his throat. He resorted to the stock-phrase he used in such circumstances.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Mother and son glanced in his direction for a brief second, barely acknowledging him. Bradley took the opportunity to examine them. In ninety percent of cases, murder victims were killed by someone close to them. In this case, the dead man’s wife and son appeared devastated by the recent turn of events, but Bradley knew that didn’t mean anything. Murderers can look devastated, too. But he decided to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume they had nothing to do with the man’s death.

“Mrs Traynor, can you think of any reason why someone would want to kill your husband?” he asked.

Madison let her notebook drop into her lap in frustration and gave her partner an angry look.

“We’ve already gone through this, Detective Bradley.”

“And what was the answer?”

“The answer was no, Detective,” said Doreen Traynor, and this time she stared him in the eye.

The son shifted uncomfortably.

“Unless ... unless it was one of the protesters.”

“Protesters? You didn’t mention anything about protesters,” said Madison.

“Protesters against what?” asked Bradley, beating his partner to the question and adding to the long list of things that made her disappointed in him.

Doreen shook her head and the son took up the story.

“Dad was planning to allow a wind farm to be built on our land, and some of the locals were against it. He even received a couple of threats.”

“Who threatened him?” asked Madison, before Bradley could jump in.

“If he knew, Dad didn’t say. They were just phone calls.”

“Did he say whether the caller was a man or a woman?” asked Madison.

“A man.”

“We’ll check the phone records.”

Mrs Traynor let out a humourless laugh.

“You’ll be wasting your time. This happened years ago, when the electricity company first approached us.”

“Why don’t people want the wind farm?” asked Bradley.

Michael Traynor looked as if he were about to say something, but hesitated. Bradley decided to prompt him.

“Mr Traynor, you were going to say something?”

“The company was planning on erecting fifty turbines, each over two hundred metres tall. They would have dominated the valley.”

“You said the company *was* planning. Does that mean the wind farm won’t go ahead now?”

“No, it won’t.”

“Is that up to you?” asked Bradley.

“Yes. My father has left the farm to me in his will, so it’s my decision.”

Bradley and Madison couldn’t help but share a look and Traynor noticed.

“Does that make me a suspect now?”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Doreen. “Michael was with me when we heard the shot.”

“Calm down, we’re not accusing anybody. You said ‘shot’. Did you hear only one?”

“One shot,” said Madison, raising her notebook in the air to illustrate the fact that she’d already covered the important facts.

Just then, Murray entered the room, momentarily breaking the tension. He pulled Bradley to one side and whispered in his ear. Madison couldn’t hide her annoyance at being left out.

Bradley turned back to face Michael Traynor.

“You ever serve in the military, Mr Traynor?”

“No, why?”

“No special reason. How many neighbours do you have here?”

“Three,” said Madison, tapping her notebook to let Bradley know he was on thin ice.

“All farmers, like you?” asked Bradley.

“Two of them are.”

“What about the other.”

“We heard a guy recently bought the property to run some kind of retreat.”

“A retreat? What kind of retreat?”

“It’s called *The Meadows*. Google it. That’s all we know.”

“Okay, I think we’ve got enough to be going on with. We’ll leave you in peace and get back to you if there’s anything else we can think of.”

As the two detectives left, Madison could barely contain her anger at being side-lined.

“What’s with the hurry to leave all of a sudden?”

Madison waited for her partner to answer as he made his way to her car, expecting him to come up with a lead he felt worth following up.

“On the way here, I spotted a diner. Let’s get something to eat. I’m starving.”

## Chapter 3

Madison drove in silence as she followed Bradley's directions to the diner. Once she had parked, Bradley reached for his door, but Madison grabbed him by the arm.

"When we get back, I'm going to ask for another partner."

Madison braced herself for a torrent of anger that never materialised.

"Okay, but can we get something to eat first."

"That's all you've got to say?"

"What else is there to say? Besides, I told you, I'm starving. You should never switch partners on an empty stomach."

Bradley grinned and tried to elicit a smile from his partner, without success. He shrugged, got out of the car and headed for the diner. A few minutes passed before Madison grudgingly followed on behind.

She had to admit that the diner looked welcoming. It was bright and clean, with a long counter from behind which a pretty waitress offered them a brilliant smile. Incredibly, the place was empty of customers.

"Sit where you like, honey, you're the first customers of the day," said the waitress.

She gave Bradley a wink and Madison scowled. She sure as hell wasn't jealous but, for all the girl knew, Madison could have been Bradley's girlfriend or wife. Her dislike of the waitress only grew when the teenager emerged from the counter to reveal she was wearing a short skirt that showed off her shapely legs. She leaned on the table they had chosen in the corner of the diner.

"You guys cops?"

"What makes you say that?" asked Madison, starting to regret her decision to join Bradley.

"We mostly get farmers coming in here, not customers dressed like you two. And we heard about the shooting."

As she spoke, the young waitress chewed gum and swivelled her hips, grinning in Bradley's direction. She ignored Madison.

"What's your name?" asked Bradley.

"Cheryl."

"Well, Cheryl, you'd make a hell of a detective. You're right, we're cops. Why not try and join up? I'll put in a good word for you."

“Not a chance. Guns scare me. Talking of which, where are you hiding yours, handsome?”

Bradley still hadn't retrieved his jacket from his car and pointed to his pockets.

“I hid my gun and badge because I could tell you were a sensitive soul.”

The waitress looked under the table.

“Don't let that thing go off by accident. It would be a crying shame.”

Madison had finally had enough.

“Miss, would you mind if we ordered. My partner has got to get home to his wife and new-born baby.”

Cheryl's smile dropped and she sneered at Madison.

“I guess you keep your gun in your bag, right, lady? Doesn't leave much room for your make-up, I expect.”

Bradley grinned. Madison never wore much in the way of make-up. But, then again, she didn't need to. Her Mexican roots had blessed her with jet-black hair, large brown eyes, and thick, luscious lips. The waitress, on the other hand, had liberally decorated her face to make herself look older than her eighteen years. Madison decided to ignore the jibe.

“Just coffee for me, sweetheart.”

Cheryl didn't bother taking down the order and turned to Bradley.

“What about you, honey?”

“I'm taking an early lunch and I'll let you choose for me. You're clearly a woman of taste.”

Bradley and Cheryl smiled as they looked into each other's eyes. Madison feared she might be sick.

Cheryl finally retreated to her counter, but not before giving Madison a look that could kill. The pretty detective wouldn't have been surprised if Cheryl decided to spit in her coffee. When they were alone, she quickly got down to business.

“What did the forensic team have to say?”

“You mean Murray?”

“Is that the guy who whispered in your ear?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. What did Murray have to say?”

“He said he thinks the guy was killed with one shot.”

“That fits with what the family told us. Anything else?”

“He said the shot was fired from the trees, close to the road.”

“How does he know that?”

“Angle of fire. And he thinks he found a flattened spot, in the undergrowth, where the shooter must have been waiting.”

“No bullet casing?”

“No. Murray thinks the guy must have taken it with him.”

“What about the bullet?”

“Rigged to explode on impact.”

“So, we have no way of knowing what type of gun was used.”

“No. But, from that distance, it must have been a high-powered rifle. And a fairly sophisticated one at that.”

“Is that why you asked if Traynor had served in the military?”

“I was just fishing, I guess.”

Cheryl arrived with their order. Madison’s coffee was dumped on the table, and she gently placed Bradley’s steak and fries for his approval.

“You read my mind, Cheryl.”

Cheryl beamed, while Madison rolled her eyes.

Madison tentatively sipped her coffee and decided it tasted okay. With luck, Cheryl hadn’t had time to add any rat poison. She watched Bradley wolf down his steak.

“Kath not feeding you?”

“She’s too busy feeding Charlie.”

“I suppose your son has to come first,” said Madison, just for something to say.

“Who said he’s my son?”

Madison sat, staring at her partner in shocked silence, unsure whether he was being serious. Eventually her voice returned.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No.”

“You mean, he’s not your kid?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

Bradley spoke with his mouth full and continued devouring his steak.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“You’re not prying. Partners need to get to know one another if they’re going to work together. We’re still partners, right? I mean, until we get back to the station?”

Bradley was pointing his fork at her chest while he waited for an answer, putting her on the spot.

“Look, Bradley...”

“Call me Pete.”

Another shock. As far as she was aware, no one else in the department called her partner by his first name. Part of her wanted to change the subject, but her curiosity was getting the better of her.

“Who’s Charlie’s father?”

“An insurance salesman who lives about three blocks away. And get this. His name’s Charlie. She named the baby after the guy who fucked her. How’s that for a kick in the balls.”

“What a bitch.”

Without thinking, Madison touched Bradley’s arm.

“I’m sorry, Bradley, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Don’t sweat it. I’ve moved out. We did nothing but argue, anyway.”

“Why ...” Madison began, but stopped herself from finishing the question.

She felt like she was getting drawn into something that was none of her business. Bradley continued to eat, unfazed.

“Go ahead. Ask me anything you want. We’re partners.”

Madison couldn’t tell if he was using the word ‘partner’ deliberately to tease her. She decided to take him at his word.

“Why didn’t she just run off with the insurance guy?”

“He doesn’t want anything to do with her. Can’t say I blame him.”

“But what about Charlie? Doesn’t the guy want to see his son?”

“From what I can gather, he couldn’t care less.”

That ended the conversation and they both sat in silence. Bradley finally finished his steak and ordered apple pie and cream. Cheryl brought his coffee and she even topped up Madison’s mug. While Bradley tucked into his pie, Madison decided to ask another question while she still had the chance.

“The other day, when we were on stake-out, you fell asleep and started blubbing, did you know that?”

Bradley suddenly looked embarrassed and shifted in his seat.

“Blubbing? Really? Well, I guess you can’t control what you dream about when you’re asleep.”

Madison almost dropped the subject but decided to press on.

“The thing is, you kept muttering about something.”

“Muttering? About what?”

“A squirrel.”

Bradley dropped his spoon into his dish and sat back as if he’d been shot

in the chest.

“Let’s go.”

Without waiting, Bradley got up from the table and headed out of the diner.



## Chapter 4

Bradley was leaning against the car when Madison emerged from the diner, having paid Cheryl for the pleasure of being scowled at.

“You owe me twenty bucks.”

Bradley reached for his wallet and handed over the cash without saying a word. Madison was confused.

“Did I say something to upset you?”

Bradley stared at his feet.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What about partners sharing everything?”

Bradley let out a sigh.

“Maybe some other time, when I’m not eating.”

Madison decided not to press it, and they drove in silence until they arrived at Bradley’s car.

“What’s the plan now?” asked Madison.

“I thought I’d check out one of the neighbours.”

“Which one?”

“The guy with the retreat.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Let’s just say I’m intrigued.”

“I’ll check the other two.”

“I thought you were in a hurry to get back and switch partners.”

“Don’t be cute.”

“Do you want to meet up in town when you’re finished?”

“Why?”

“I thought we could pay a visit to the offices of the local newspaper,” said Bradley.

“What for?”

“They usually report on controversial constructions in the area. Maybe one of the reporters might have some useful information. Seems a shame not to make use of all their legwork.”

“That’s if they reported on the wind farm.”

“It’s worth a try. Besides, it’ll give you a chance to ask me some more questions before you make a decision about dumping me.”

“Look, it’s none of my business.”

Bradley shrugged, looked at his watch and headed for his car.

“Will I see you in town? Yes or no?”

“Yes, I guess.”

“Good. I’ll meet you outside their offices at two.”

Before Madison had a chance to respond, Bradley was in his car, tapping *The Meadows* into his Satnav. When he sped off, Madison’s car was engulfed in a cloud of dust.

It took Bradley ten minutes to find the entrance to *The Meadows*. The gates were closed and there was an intercom, located on a stand. Bradley lowered his window and pressed a button. A woman’s voice emanated from the speaker.

“I’m sorry, Dr Freeman isn’t receiving patients for another two weeks.”

“I’m not a patient.”

“Who are you?”

Bradley reached into his pocket and pulled out his badge, before holding it up in front of the camera he’d just spotted next to the speaker.

“I’m a detective with the San Diego Police Department and I need to speak with Dr Freeman.”

There was a pause before the speaker erupted again.

“What is this regarding?”

Bradley felt like punching the intercom. Instead, he took a deep breath.

“That’s between me and Dr Freeman. I’d appreciate it if you could open the gate right now.”

There was another pause, and Bradley was just beginning to think the faceless woman would leave him there to stew, when the gates silently glided open.

The property was further from the main road than the Traynor farm, and it took Bradley a few minutes longer to reach it. The building was far more impressive than the murdered man’s home and it was in the style of an English country mansion. The lawns surrounding it were flat and perfectly manicured, offering a sweeping vista of the mountains beyond. Bradley quickly noted that the proposed wind farm would have completely obliterated the panoramic view. But that wouldn’t be a problem now.

A flight of steps led to two large oak doors, one of which was open, where a strikingly beautiful woman waited to greet the detective. Bradley noted that

she was mixed race – her Asian features giving her an exotic look. She wore a tight black dress that stopped just above her knees and was low-cut enough to reveal an impressive bosom. Her hair was as dark as Madison's, but she had a readier smile. She was also very young. Twenty perhaps, maybe even nineteen.

"Hello, Detective. What did you say your name was?"

She held out a slender hand and Bradley happily reached for it.

"I didn't. But it's Detective Bradley."

"Welcome to *The Meadows*, Detective Bradley. Gregory is in his study, if you'd like to follow me."

Gregory? Not Dr Freeman, he noticed. Bradley had assumed the girl was an employee. Maybe he was wrong. He only had a brief glimpse of the large hallway, before he was led to yet another impressive room. One wall was lined floor-to-ceiling with wooden shelves filled with books, and Bradley tried to make out a few of the titles. But his eyesight wasn't up to it. The room had the feel of a gentleman's club, with large leather sofas and an impressive desk that could have easily been shared by two people. The man behind it stood up to greet him.

Bradley took in the details. Sixties, probably. Slim build. A little under six feet tall – an inch or two shorter than himself. Short grey hair. Swept back. Clean-shaven. An impressive tan. But it was the eyes that dominated. They were so dark they were almost black. The eyes bored into him and held his attention. 'Mesmerising' was the word that summed them up best.

The strikingly beautiful girl walked over to the doctor, and at first Bradley thought she was leaning in to whisper in his ear. Instead, she reached up and kissed him passionately on the lips. Not an employee, then. Unless she was a hooker. When she'd finished eating his face, she introduced Bradley and the doctor nodded towards the door. She left them alone. Bradley noted the doctor hadn't reacted to the girl's attentions and couldn't help thinking it was a shame. If she'd kissed Bradley like that, it would have taken a month to wipe the smile from his face, even if she was a hooker.

The ungrateful doctor didn't offer to shake Bradley's hand but simply pointed to a chair on the other side of the desk. When he sat down, Bradley felt like he was in a boardroom, being interviewed for a job.

"How can I help you, Detective?"

"There's been a shooting and we're making enquiries in the local area, hoping someone might have seen or heard something."

"I can't say that I have. Shooting did you say?"

The doctor's words were unhurried, and the tone of his voice possessed a soothing quality. Bradley had already performed a search on his phone, and he knew Dr Freeman was a psychologist. He could imagine the hypnotic eyes and calming voice working a treat.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you, but one of your neighbours has been murdered in the early hours of this morning."

"Dear God."

The words were clearly chosen to convey shock and amazement, but the doctor's voice betrayed him. The tone remained calm and unruffled. He was either unsurprised or didn't give a shit.

"The victim's name was John Traynor. Did you happen to know him?"

"I'm afraid not. I've only recently moved into the area."

"He owned the farm across the way," said Bradley, nodding at the window with a view of the majestic mountains in the distance.

"Oh."

"So, you hadn't heard about the wind farm?"

"Wind farm?"

"Yes. Mr Traynor planned on allowing an electricity company to build a wind farm on his land – right smack over there," said Bradley, pointing at the endangered view.

"Really? Well, we've got to do something to halt global warming, haven't we?"

"That's a very commendable attitude, Dr Freeman. Unfortunately, a lot of your fellow neighbours didn't quite see it that way. They thought the farm would be an eyesore and ruin the landscape – maybe even devalue properties in the area."

"Yes, I suppose there's that, too."

Freeman sat motionless, his face giving nothing away. Bradley glanced across at the rows of books lining the wall.

"You're a psychologist, aren't you?"

Bradley noticed the doctor hesitate for the first time before he replied.

"Yes, how did you know that?"

"The Internet."

"Ah, yes, we have very few secrets nowadays, I'm afraid. Still, I expect it makes your job a lot easier."

"Not necessarily. And this place is going to be some kind of retreat?"

"That's right."

“Business must be good.”

The doctor’s thin lips pressed together before he spoke.

“I don’t like to think of it as a business. I help people with their problems.”

“Your website said you are an ‘Evolutionary Psychologist’. You’ll have to forgive me, I’ve never heard the term before.”

“It would surprise me if you had. We’re a rare breed. What it boils down to is this. Modern humans evolved as a species over two-hundred-thousand years ago, and for ninety-nine percent of that time we have wandered the earth as hunter-gatherers. But much of what is expected of us today is a far cry from the lifestyle for which we were designed.”

“I see. And that’s why half of us are basket-cases.”

“I would say ‘half’ is a somewhat pessimistic figure, and ‘basket-case’ is hardly a medical term. I assume you mean people with psychological problems.”

“We all have problems, to varying degrees.”

“Very true, Detective. For instance, the job of being a policeman simply did not exist until a few hundred years ago. Humans are not psychologically equipped to deal with the worst of society, day in and day out. It takes its toll, I’m sure.”

“Sometimes.”

“Yes,” said Freeman, warming to his subject. “And humans have nearly always existed in groups of a hundred or so, where transgressors were easily caught and punished. But now, men like you must contend with cities of millions of people, where criminals can hide with impunity. It is a heavy burden to carry on your shoulders, Detective.”

Bradley was impressed. It was as if Freeman could see inside his head. He decided to try and turn the tables.

“What about you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“According to your reasoning, being a psychiatrist is no more a natural state for us cavemen than being a policeman. We’re not designed to listen to other people’s shit all day long.”

For the first time Freeman smiled, although his facial expression verged on turning into a grimace.

“I’m impressed, Detective, and I would love to continue this discussion, but I’m afraid I’m rather busy. So, if there’s nothing else ...”

Bradley took the hint and got up to leave. The beautiful girl magically

appeared, and Bradley guessed she had been listening to their conversation. He smiled, and she smiled back. He wanted to ask her what she was doing with a sixty-year-old man. But then he looked around at his opulent surroundings and thought he had the answer. Freeman was rich, and pretty girls sometimes used their looks to get what they want.

This time, when he approached the gate it opened automatically. He was about to drive through, when he was forced to slam his foot on the brake to avoid a car, racing towards the property. The two vehicles narrowly avoided a collision, but the other car didn't stop. On instinct, Bradley reached into the compartment in his driver's door and grabbed his binoculars. He turned in his seat and managed to get a look at the other car's licence plate.

When he turned back to find his notebook, he realised the gates were about to close and slam into his car.

"Shit!"

He hit the gas pedal and made it through just in time. Reaching for his notebook, he wrote down the number before he forgot it. Maybe he was being overly suspicious, but it never hurt to cover all the bases. Something about Dr Freeman didn't sit right, and whoever was driving the other car clearly wasn't keen on using the intercom at the main gate.

When he got back to the city, he'd run the licence and find a name and address for the reckless driver who nearly totalled his car. And, while he was about it, he'd run a background check on Dr Freeman.

Maybe he'd get lucky.

## Chapter 5

The offices of the local newspaper weren't as impressive as Bradley had been expecting. They were brick-built and not much bigger than a large domestic home. Madison was waiting in her car, as instructed. Bradley looked at his watch. He was ten minutes late. He guessed her mood wasn't about to improve, and he reached over to his glove compartment before making his way to her car.

"Mint?"

Madison stared at the box of mints and then at Bradley.

"Is that supposed to make up for keeping me waiting?"

"No. I'm just trying to be nice."

He treated Madison to the same warm smile he'd used on Freeman's pretty girlfriend. This time it wasn't returned.

"What's the plan?" asked Madison.

"I thought we'd go in and try to find the reporter who covered the wind farm story."

Madison looked across at the modest two-storey building.

"Shouldn't be a problem. It hardly looks like the New York Times."

Unlike the Freeman residence, there was no intercom. The two detectives made their way up the stairs unhindered, until they came to a door that had a sign saying: 'Reception'.

They entered and were presented with a counter, upon which was placed another sign: 'Please Wait Here. Someone will attend to you'.

Behind the counter were eight desks, only three of which were occupied. A man and a woman were furiously hammering away at their keyboards. A third man was reclining in his chair, fast asleep. So was his computer. Bradley wondered if this was because the overweight reporter had finished for the day, or if it was because his ample stomach precluded access to his keyboard. There was no bell, so Madison tried to grab someone's attention.

"Hello!"

It worked. The woman was about to leave her post but was beaten to it by her male partner. The one that was awake. He approached, wide-eyed, clearly impressed by Madison's charms. He ignored Bradley.

"Hello. Can I help you?"

He smiled and she reciprocated. He had already achieved more than

Bradley. Madison flashed her badge and the young man examined it, clearly impressed.

“We’re looking for someone who might have reported on the protests against the proposed wind farm.”

“Are you investigating the Traynor killing?”

The young newspaperman finally acknowledged Bradley with the briefest of glances.

“Yes.”

“Do you think one of the protesters might have shot him?”

“We don’t think anything at the moment. We’re just trying to be thorough.”

“Hank covered the wind farm story,” said the youngster, pointing at sleeping beauty. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather just talk to me?”

Bradley decided to move things along.

“We’d like to speak to Hank. Provided, of course, he’s not too busy.”

Madison’s admirer looked at his watch.

“Hank doesn’t like being woken up before three.”

Bradley wondered if a warning shot with his gun would get Hank’s attention but decided against it.

“I’m sure Hank will understand, under the circumstances. Unless, of course, a man getting his head blown off isn’t a big deal around here.”

“I’ll go wake him up.”

“Good idea.”

Hank didn’t wake up until the third nudge. He opened one eye, to see who’d had the temerity to disturb him at such an ungodly hour.

“What!”

The youngster almost retreated at the sound of Hank’s roar, but found the courage to point in Bradley and Madison’s direction.

“These detectives would like to speak with you.”

Hank opened his other eye and stared suspiciously at the visitors. Somehow, he found the energy to rise from his seat and make his way to the counter.

“What can I do for you?”

Madison got to the point.

“What can you tell us about the protests against the proposed wind farm?”

Hank looked at the two detectives in turn, his mind clearly working overtime.

“Do you think one of the protesters killed Traynor?”



“It’s just one of the leads we’re pursuing at this time.”

“That’s a bit unlikely, isn’t it? Killing someone just because they’re going to put up a few windmills?”

Bradley didn’t like his theory being ridiculed and stepped in.

“Those windmills would have slashed house prices in the area. We’re talking thousands of bucks. I’ve known people to kill for a lot less.”

“I guess. There were a few threats, nothing serious.”

“How did you gauge public opinion?”

“Whenever there was a town meeting about the wind farm, I’d tag along. And I visited a few of the locals and asked them for comments.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve just spoken to a couple of the neighbours. They said they’d spoken to someone from the paper,” said Madison.

Bradley kicked himself. He’d forgotten to ask Madison how she’d got on while he was visiting Dr Freeman. Suddenly, he had a thought.

“I guess Dr Freeman hadn’t moved into *The Meadows* when you were checking out the neighbours.”

“No, he was here. I spoke to him. I managed to catch him when a local team of builders were working on his place – before he turned it into a fortress.”

“I just spoke to him and he gave me the impression he knew nothing about the wind farm.”

“I don’t know what I can tell you. I spoke to the guy and asked him a bunch of questions. I don’t see how he could have forgotten.”

Madison watched Bradley as he rubbed his chin. She’d noticed it was a habit he had when he was lost in thought. Bradley brought the visit to an end.

“Thanks, Hank, you’ve been a great help. We’ll let you get back to bed.”

## Chapter 6

Madison waited until they were outside before she tackled Bradley. She wanted some answers.

“Is this Dr Freeman a suspect?”

“Do you mean, is he the shooter?”

“Well, hell, what else are we talking about?”

“He didn’t look much like a sniper to me.”

“So, why the interest?”

“There’s something about him that doesn’t sit right, and for some reason he said he knew nothing about the wind farm. I don’t like being served bullshit.”

“So, you think he might have hired someone to kill Traynor?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“To stop the wind farm?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s a bit far-fetched, isn’t it?”

“I’m just putting it out there. In the meantime, I’ve got a couple of leads I need to follow up on.”

Madison wasn’t going to let him get away with that.

“What leads?”

“Look, I’d rather not say. They’ll probably turn out to be nothing.”

Madison stepped back and placed her hands on her hips, shaking her head. Bradley thought she looked even sexier when she was angry.

“You’d rather not say? Are we partners or not?”

“That’s up to you.”

Madison walked off in disgust and headed for her car. Before she got to the door, Bradley shouted after her.

“Would you trust a sixty-year-old guy who dates a nineteen-year-old girl?”

Madison turned to face him, and her large brown eyes bored into him. Bradley felt a stirring in his groin. He was disgusted with himself.

“Are you still talking about Freeman?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you meet this nineteen-year-old?”

“Yeah.”

“Was she pretty?”

“No, she was gorgeous.”

“Were you jealous?”

“A lot.”

Madison opened her car door and threw her bag inside.

“Bradley, I’m going back to the station.”

“When you get there, will you ask for a new partner?”

“At the moment I’ve got a partner who refuses to tell me what he’s up to, has a fucked-up home life, cries about squirrels, and is jealous of other people’s sex lives. I can’t think why I’d ask for a new one.”

Madison got in her car, slammed the door, and sped off, sending gravel flying in Bradley’s direction.

“Good point,” he whispered to no one in particular.

On his way to San Diego, Bradley decided to call in the licence plate. The dispatcher announced the car was registered to a Mr Robert Summers in Del Mar.

It was November but still mild. It was one of the reasons Bradley liked living in Southern California. He picked up a coffee to go and drove by way of Torrey Pines, one of his favourite spots. He headed for the cliffs at La Jolia and was just in time to catch the sunset. The sight of the sunlight reflecting off the ravines with the ocean in the distance raised his spirits. He sipped his coffee and did his best not to think about toy squirrels covered in blood.

The home of Robert Summers was an impressive cliff-top house on the outskirts of Del Mar. It was a two-storey affair, with the upper bedrooms built into the roof. There was a double-garage, outside which was the car Bradley had seen at *The Meadows* earlier that day. He parked across the street on a slope, and he was able to see into the front room. A man was busy turning on the lights, now that it was getting dark. Bradley got out of his car and locked it out of habit, before making his way to the front door of the property.

The guy who answered the door looked annoyed at being taken away from lighting up his house. Bradley guessed he was in his late twenties, or early thirties. Bradley also guessed the guy would be attractive to the opposite sex. He was tall, well-built, tanned, and had medium-length light-brown hair. He wore a suit. Maybe a surfer who’d finally had to grow up and work for a living.

“Can I help you?”

Bradley already had his badge in his hand.

“My name’s Detective Bradley. I think we met earlier today when your car nearly collided into mine at *The Meadows*.”

“*The Meadows*?” You mean Freeman’s place?”

“That’s the one.”

The man at the door suddenly looked even more miserable.

“Have you followed me all the way home, just so you can charge me with reckless driving?”

“Relax, I just want to talk to you.”

“What about?”

Bradley glanced up and down the street.

“Could we talk inside?”

“I guess.”

Summers led Bradley to the kitchen at the rear of the property. Bradley noticed a large balcony, overlooking the Pacific. He was immediately jealous. Since his marriage had fallen apart, he’d been forced to live in a one-bedroom condo.

“I was just going to make myself some coffee. Would you like one?”

Bradley didn’t, but he accepted the offer.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

He always found a hot drink a useful prop, in case the person he was questioning was eager for him to leave. Fortunately, Summers appeared to have lightened up, now that he knew he wasn’t going to have his licence taken away from him. While Summers brewed coffee, Bradley got to the point.

“Why did you visit Dr Freeman today?”

“Why? Am I being accused of something?”

“Look, this will all be over a lot quicker if you just answer my questions. If it makes you feel any better, it’s Dr Freeman I’m interested in.”

Summers slid a mug of steaming coffee along the kitchen counter until it reached Bradley. It smelt good and Bradley was suddenly glad he’d accepted his host’s offer. Summers was suddenly all smiles.

“If you’re after Freeman, I’ll help in any way I can.”

“I take it you’re not a fan of the doctor.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“So, why turn up at his house?”

“I didn’t go there to see him. I was looking for Theresa.”

“Theresa?”

“Yes, my fiancée. Well, my ex-fiancée, thanks to Freeman.”

“She wouldn’t by any chance be the strikingly pretty girl I met at *The Meadows* today.”

“Pretty doesn’t do her justice, does it? She’s the most beautiful girl I’ve ever met. And we were looking forward to getting married, until she started going to see Dr Freeman.”

Summers spat out the name, as if the sound of it on his lips made him feel sick.

“See? I understand that Dr Freeman is a psychiatrist. Are you telling me Theresa visited him as a patient?”

“Yeah, every week for about four months, until he cured her.”

“What was troubling her, if you don’t mind me asking.”

“It was nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Well, not nothing. I just mean she wasn’t a psycho or anything like that. She just had a phobia about spiders. Arachnophobia, I think they call it.”

“Was it bad?”

“Kind of. If she ever saw one in a room she couldn’t go in until I’d checked it out. Same with her shoes. Every morning I had to examine them inside and out before she was willing to put them on.”

“And Dr Freeman cured her.”

“I guess he did,” said Summers grudgingly.

“So, why is she still visiting him?”

Summers suddenly looked away, as if he was too embarrassed to look Bradley in the eye. The detective decided to keep up the momentum.

“Are they having an affair?”

Summers poured the remains of his coffee down the sink and slammed his empty mug on the counter.

“Yes, they are,” he said through gritted teeth.

“These things happen, I guess.”

Summers looked the detective in the eye.

“Would you put those two together?”

“No. But he is a rich and successful man.”

Summers shook his head.

“No, it wasn’t like that. *Theresa* isn’t like that. Everything was fine until he started treating her. Whenever she came back from a session with Freeman, everything I did seemed to annoy her. All she could talk about was how wonderful Dr Freeman was. I swear he turned her against me.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Who knows what these psychiatrists do when they start messing with your head?”

Bradley was suddenly reminded of the doctor’s mesmerising eyes and the way he seemed to pick up on Bradley’s insecurities. He could see how a girl like Theresa might end up like putty in his hands. Summers interrupted his thoughts.

“You said she might be attracted to him because of his money.”

“It happens.”

“But that’s just it. When Theresa was being treated, he worked out of a small office in the centre of San Diego. It was nice, but nothing like *The Meadows*.”

“Are you saying he only became wealthy over the last few months?”

“I can’t be sure, but back then he lived in an ordinary house in the suburbs with his wife and a couple of dogs. Now he owns a sprawling mansion and a stable full of expensive cars.”

“How do you know all this?”

Summers looked away for a second time and hesitated. Bradley realised the man needed some encouragement.

“Mr Summers, you’ve been very helpful. Believe me, you’re not the one who is under investigation here.”

Summers stared into the empty sink and suddenly looked up, meeting Bradley’s gaze.

“When I suspected Theresa and Freeman of having an affair, I followed him home one night.”

“Just curiosity?”

“Something like that.”

“Not jealousy? Are you sure you weren’t thinking of teaching him a lesson?”

“I thought about it, but I’m not a fool. I love Theresa, but if I’d ended up in jail it wouldn’t have brought us back together. Anyway, if you suspect this guy of something, it might be worth looking into his finances. Maybe he’ll be the one who ends up in jail.”

“I’ll certainly look into it.”

“Do that. And check into what happened to his wife.”

“I presume, now that he’s with Theresa, his wife left him.”

“You could say that. She threw herself in front of a moving train.”

## Chapter 7

Bradley drove to Broadway, San Diego, where the headquarters of the San Diego Police Department was located. He didn't feel like going back to his empty condo. On his way, he had stopped off in town to visit a book store that was open late during the run-up to Christmas. He'd bought a book on evolution. A sort of guide for dummies. When he'd spoken with Freeman, the detective had been acutely aware of his ignorance on the subject. He wanted to learn more, but wasn't looking forward to ploughing through the book, no matter how concise it was. He sat at his desk in the office he shared with eleven other detectives and thumbed through the pages.

The coffee machine in the corner of the office beckoned. Usually he tried to avoid the tempting brew so late in the evening, but tonight he needed it. Somehow, he knew he wasn't going to get to sleep anyway.

He switched on his computer and began searching. He had access to police files but for the moment he would rely on the Internet. Nowadays, everyone could become a detective. It was just a pity it couldn't tell you who the bad guys were.

There was little on offer about Dr Gregory Freeman. Apart from a few papers he'd written while working as a researcher at UCLA, there was his website, advertising his new retreat. Prices for treatment were exorbitant. Clearly, he was only interested in attracting wealthy clientele. There was nothing about his personal life.

Bradley searched the department's computer system and found no signs that Dr Freeman had ever been involved in criminal activity. The same was true of Robert Summers. He couldn't perform a search on the man's fiancée because he'd neglected to ask Summers for her last name. He brought up the website of The San Diego Union-Tribune and looked through their archives. It took him just under five minutes to find what he was looking for.

Mrs Hilary Freeman, wife of Dr Gregory Freeman, was planning to visit her sister in Palm Springs, and she had been patiently waiting on platform three of the Old Town Station, when she decided to throw herself in front of a moving train. Witnesses – and there were several – insisted she jumped and was definitely not pushed. She had committed suicide, pure and simple. But Bradley knew that suicide was never pure, and hardly ever simple. He'd once had the misfortune of being called to a suicide on a railway line. The result

wasn't pretty.

Bradley stood up from his desk and stretched. The harsh ceiling lights reflected off the windows and he stared at his reflection. His mind whirled with thoughts of suicide, gun victims, love that can simply vanish, and mesmerising black eyes that laid your soul bare.

He needed some air.



## Chapter 8

Theresa Lee stared at her exceptionally pretty face in the mirror. Of course, she didn't think she was beautiful. To her, the mirror highlighted many imperfections. For an instant, a memory came out of nowhere. It was of Robert's smiling face, as he knelt in the restaurant on the coast, holding out a ring, proposing. She knew the image should bring a smile to her perfectly shaped lips, but it did not. She frowned, and the outward manifestation of her sudden unhappiness forced her to turn away from her reflection.

What was wrong with her? She'd only done what had to be done, hadn't she? Robert was young and handsome, but he wasn't to be trusted. Whereas Gregory provided stability and could cater to her materialistic needs. But why was that important? She had never considered herself to be a materialistic person. She wanted children and she had to consider their future, but, then again, that didn't sound like her, either. Confusion threatened to turn to panic. She needed help.

Gregory was sitting in his study in his favourite chair, reading a newspaper and sipping expensive coffee. Classical music played quietly in the background. He hadn't noticed Theresa standing in the doorway, and she found herself staring at her new partner, hesitant to voice her concerns. Would he become angry if she disturbed him with her problems? She knew all too well how his calm demeanour could suddenly shatter, to reveal a darker side.

But her confusion and the panic in the pit of her stomach were both growing at the sight of him. He was not an unattractive man, especially for his age, but hardly her type. And, of more concern to the fragile nineteen-year-old, he only showed her affection when he wanted sex. The rest of the time he was almost cold. As if he were a stranger. She summoned every ounce of courage she possessed and tapped the door with her slender hand. She needed his help.

As predicted, he failed to hide his irritation and threw his paper into his lap. He sighed deeply and looked in her direction. As always, his stare both frightened and fascinated her at the same time.

"What do you want?"

The words were bereft of warmth. Theresa wanted to cry but managed to compose herself. Freeman prided himself on his ability to read what he called 'micro-expressions', and he instantly knew that Theresa was on edge. It was time for another session. He got up from his comfortable chair and held out his

hand.

“Sit here, Theresa. Let me help you.”

The facade of the psychiatrist had returned. His voice had become softer – more comforting. Theresa did as she was told. It was always so easy for her to do what Gregory asked. It was only when she resisted that fear began to ravage her body.

“You know what to do, Theresa. Make sure you are comfortable, close your eyes and breathe deeply.”

While she complied with his instructions, Freeman admired her legs. She was wearing one of her shorter skirts. He felt a stirring in his groin and no longer regretted the interruption. He walked over to his desk and retrieved a small bag from the right-hand drawer. He pulled up a chair and sat at Theresa’s side. On the coffee table, he laid out the contents of the bag.

Theresa had opened her eyes and stared at the bottle of liquid, before watching Gregory tear open a package, revealing a fresh syringe.

“Do you have to use that?”

Freeman’s eyes darted in her direction and, for a second, he failed to hide his irritation. She had not followed his instructions. But he knew he must remain calm.

“You know it’s all part of the treatment. I’ve told you before, this will simply help you to relax.”

Theresa nodded reluctantly. She wanted to relax, but she felt sure that whatever it was Gregory injected into her body, it was causing her nightmares when she slept. If only she didn’t need his help so badly.

The warmth spread up her arm, as the contents of the syringe made its way into her bloodstream. She knew what would happen next. She would enter a state like falling asleep. It was almost as if she were dreaming, but she could control her dreams and lead them in a direction of her own choosing. But, as always, it was Gregory’s soft voice that would guide her imagination.

“All you have to remember, Theresa, is that you are a young and desirable woman. Your sole purpose on this earth is to procreate. But, unlike a man, with his numerous opportunities to father a child, you only have one egg that can be fertilised. This is the legacy that evolution has left you. So, you must choose the father of your child with care. Do you understand, Theresa?”

Theresa nodded.

“I understand,” she said.

“Fortunately, you have chosen wisely. I am healthy, and I have the wealth

and means to provide for your offspring. By making love to me, you are fulfilling your destiny. Robert was a young man with a wayward eye. He would have cheated on you and left you to raise your children on your own. You have made a wise decision in leaving him, haven't you, Theresa?"

"Yes, I had to leave him."

"One last thing, Theresa, before you awake. It is very important to continue taking the tablets I gave you – the ones I disguised as contraceptive pills to foil prying eyes."

"Yes, I understand. I need to keep taking the tablets."

"Good, Theresa. Now, when you awake, you will feel the need to kiss me, in gratitude for what I have done to help you. And you will have a burning desire to become the mother of my children. You will go to the bedroom and wait for me. Do you understand, Theresa?"

"I understand."

"Remember, you will awaken at the count of three. One ... two ... three."

Theresa opened her eyes and felt blissfully calm. She kissed Gregory and, without a word, headed for the bedroom.

As Freeman watched her leave, he almost felt sorry for Robert Summers. He had the man's fiancée at his beck and call.

## Chapter 9

Bradley had no explanation for what he was doing. He had simply kept driving, as if he were determined to leave all his problems behind. He examined the large single-storey building, set in generous grounds, with its own swimming pool nestling among a host of palm trees.

It had taken him over two hours to get there, even though traffic had been light, and it was already ten-thirty at night. The address he'd pulled off the computer had said Palm Springs, but the woman's home was east of the town, in a place called Paradise Lane. Bradley couldn't help thinking it sounded like the place to be. The Joshua Tree National Park was within striking distance, and Bradley decided that if he was wasting his time, at least he could visit the desert. Maybe find somewhere peaceful and take a nap. The thermometer was still hitting seventy, despite the late hour, and maybe he'd catch a glorious sunrise. Anything to keep him sane.

Lights emanated from the property. Someone was still awake. But he knew he had no business turning up at the woman's home unannounced. His only plan was to flash his badge and hope for the best. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. It all depended on how street-savvy his victim turned out to be.

He rang the doorbell and waited. The ornate wooden door had a hatch at eye-level, covered by a metal grill. After a few minutes it opened. A woman's eyes peered at him from the other side.

"Yes?"

Bradley held up his badge, so it could be seen by the woman on the other side of the door.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am to bother you this late at night. But I think you might be able to help me with a case I'm working on. I'm a cop, but there's nothing to be concerned about."

"Does this have anything to do with my sister?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Your ID – it says you're from San Diego. My sister lived there until she ... anyway, that's the only connection I can think of."

"Well, you're right, sort of."

"What to do you mean?"

"Can I come in, so we can talk?"

"Shouldn't you have a partner with you?"

The woman was wrong, but Bradley decided arguing with her was a bad idea. He took a step back so that he was in the light and she could get a good look at him.

“I’ll be honest with you, Ms Renton, I was at a loose end and decided to head over here on a whim. But if you want to turn me away, I quite understand. It’s nearly eleven and I’m way out of line disturbing you at home like this.”

There was a pause while the eyes examined him.

“That sounds refreshingly honest.”

“I try to be.”

There was another pause, and then Bradley heard a bolt sliding back. The door opened, and an attractive woman in her twenties stood in the opening, a drink in her hand.

“Call me Linda.”

“Are you sure it’s okay to come in?”

“Sure, why not? The lounge is through there.”

She opened the door and gestured for him to enter, spilling her drink in the process. Bradley made his way to where he was directed. The lounge was large, but homely. Two comfortable sofas dominated the room, next to an impressive open fire. There was a generous supply of cushions scattered about and numerous women’s magazines lying here and there. From somewhere, his hostess had produced another glass and a bottle of wine.

“Drink?”

“Why not?”

She poured a generous measure, but then clutched the glass to her chest.

“Say, aren’t you supposed to be on duty?”

“At the moment I seem to be making up my own hours. Besides, I deserve a drink. That’s if it’s still on offer,” said Bradley, staring at the glass.

Linda quickly relented and passed it over.

“Sure.”

Bradley took it and they touched glasses.

“To your good health,” said Bradley, smiling despite his tiredness.

“To unexpected visitors.”

Linda pointed to one of the sofas, gesturing for Bradley to sit. He placed his half-empty glass on the coffee table and took the weight off his feet. Bradley thought it was the kind of room where you wanted to kick off your shoes and chill out, and it took a lot of effort to sit up and remain focused. His hostess took the sofa facing him, and they stared at one another across the

table.

Freeman's sister-in-law had long, blonde hair, tied back in a ponytail. She wore little make-up and was obviously naturally pretty. She was dressed casually, in a T-shirt and jeans. Bradley thought she looked great.

"What case are you working on?"

Linda's question interrupted his observations, and he noticed she had slurred her words. He guessed she wasn't sipping her first glass of the evening.

"I'm investigating the shooting of a farmer near Pine Valley, outside San Diego."

"Was he killed?"

"Yes."

"When did this happen?"

"This morning."

"What can that possibly have to do with my sister's suicide?"

"Nothing, I guess."

Linda laughed and rested her head in one of her hands. Bradley laughed too.

"Your badge said your name is Detective Bradley. What's your first name?"

"Pete."

"Well, Pete, have you just come here to keep a lonely woman company and finish off her wine cellar?"

Bradley wondered why his heart skipped a beat when she had said she was lonely. He finished his glass and began to explain.

"After the shooting, I visited one of the farmer's neighbours – a Dr Freeman."

Linda's smile instantly deserted her, and to Bradley it felt as though the convivial atmosphere had been sucked out of the room. He waited for her to respond, but instead she got up and headed for the door. For one awful moment, he thought she might ask him to leave. To his relief, she made her way to an oak cabinet in the corner of the room. She came back with an unopened bottle of bourbon.

"I need something stronger. Do you care to join me?"

Bradley thought it would be churlish to refuse. Besides, he decided that bourbon would hit the spot right then.

"Sounds good to me."

Linda poured two healthy measures and handed him his second glass of the evening. He didn't want to be kicked out of the house and chose his words carefully.

"I take it you're not exactly enamoured with Dr Freeman."

Linda gave out a short laugh. But it was forced and humourless.

"You could say that."

"What have you got against him?"

Linda downed the rest of her bourbon and immediately poured another.

"The bastard killed my sister."

Bradley realised he'd killed the mood and they both sat in silence, nursing their drinks. He'd read the report on Hilary Freeman's suicide, and he presumed that Linda meant the good doctor had driven his wife to suicide, rather than physically pushed her on to the railway line. One thing was sure – he was intrigued to know what his drunk hostess was getting at.

"Witnesses said Hilary threw herself on to the line. At the time, her husband was treating a patient in his office, downtown."

"Patient? I'd laugh if Hilary's death wasn't so tragic."

Bradley quickly realised he was missing part of the picture and he wanted to know more. He leant forward, reached for the bottle of bourbon, and filled Linda's glass. He didn't want her too drunk to talk, but he needed to keep the revelations coming. He hoped the alcohol would act as a lubricant.

"Linda, why don't you start at the beginning?"

"That could take all night."

Bradley was determined not to be too pushy. He didn't want to stop her from opening up.

"It's late. If you need to get some sleep, I can come back another time."

"Sleep?" She spat it out as if it were a dirty word.

"Do you have trouble sleeping, Linda?"

"You could say that."

Bradley held up his glass and took a healthy swallow of the bourbon.

"Me too."

"Kindred spirits, meeting in the night?"

Bradley hesitated to answer as their eyes met. They shared the moment in silence.

"I hope so, Linda. I certainly need one."

“What about your wife? Can’t you talk to her?”

“My wife?”

Linda nodded at his hand and he eyed his wedding ring as if he was seeing it for the first time. He wondered why he hadn’t taken it off yet.

“If I told you I’m divorced, would it sound like a pick-up line?” he asked, and he removed his wedding ring and put it in his pocket.

Bradley was pleased when Linda laughed. He liked it. He wanted to hear her laugh more often.

“I suppose it would depend on whether it’s the truth.”

Perhaps it was the bourbon and the lack of sleep, but Bradley decided to share his personal life for the second time in one day. At the very least, he hoped it would encourage her to reciprocate.

“We argued all the time. She fell pregnant. Problem is, the kid’s not mine.”

“And you left her? What will you do now?”

Bradley liked her directness. In fact, he was beginning to like a lot of things about Linda Renton.

“Well, at the moment I’m driving across the State in the middle of the night and disturbing kind folks like you – anything to avoid going home.”

“Don’t worry, you’re not disturbing me.”

They drank their bourbon and shared another moment. It suddenly dawned on him that he and Kath had never shared moments where words were unnecessary.

“What did you mean when you said Freeman killed your sister?”

“You’ve met him, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you think of him?”

“Well, aside from the fact that he lied to me, I thought he was a creep.”

“Creep’s the word. But he didn’t used to be like that – you know, when he and Hilary first married.”

“But he changed?”

“It all started when he got that research grant up at UCLA.”

“What exactly was he researching?”

“He was investigating the use of hypnosis to treat patients.”

“I’m no expert, but that’s quite common, isn’t it?”

“You’re right. But Hilary went into his study one day and found some papers. She told me it looked like his funding was coming from the military.”

“The military?”



“Yes, and that’s not all. One time, Gregory went down to his study in the middle of the night, thinking Hilary was asleep. She followed him and listened at the door. She could hear him talking to himself.”

“I don’t think that’s a crime. At least I hope not. I do it myself.”

“It wasn’t like that. Hilary said it was as if he were giving himself instructions.”

“You mean, like self-hypnosis?”

“Exactly.”

“Each to his own, I guess.”

“There’s something else.”

“Yeah, what?”

“Hilary managed to creep back up to the bedroom before he found out what she was up to. She got back into bed and waited, but she heard a door open and a noise in the back yard.”

“Someone else was there?”

“No, it was Gregory. But Hilary saw him putting something in the trash. She waited until he’d gone to work the next morning and decided to see what he’d dumped there in the middle of the night. Luckily, she was wearing gloves to protect her hands, because she found a syringe.”

“Gregory’s a drug user?”

“As far as I know he wasn’t until he went to UCLA.”

“So, you think the drug-use was connected to his work at the university?”

“You tell me. You’re the detective.”

Bradley rubbed his chin, thinking.

“There’s a guy in Robbery who used to work for Military Intelligence. I seem to remember him saying the army used to test drugs on volunteers, back in the sixties. Perhaps they’re doing it again.”

“Maybe.”

Bradley sipped his drink while he processed his thoughts.

“Did Hilary ever say Freeman tried to hypnotise her?”

Linda smiled.

“You really are a detective, after all.”

“Thanks. So, unless I miss my guess, you’re saying Freeman hypnotised your sister and somehow got her to jump in front of the train.”

Linda reached for a box of tissues sitting on the coffee table. Bradley felt like kicking himself.

“I’m sorry, Linda. This must be very painful for you.”

Linda wiped mascara from the corner of her eye.

“It’s okay. It’s just that this is the first time I’ve really been able to talk about it with anyone.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I think the guy is up to no good, too.”

“You said someone was shot. Do you think he did it?”

“Until now, I couldn’t see how.”

“You mean he has an alibi?”

“Yeah, he does.”

Bradley paused, and he waited until Linda looked him in the eye before he shared his thoughts.

“But what if he drugged one of his patients and got the poor schmuck to do his killing for him?”

## Chapter 10

Henry Buller was tired of his accountant giving him grief. Okay, five million dollars was a lot of money, but when you looked at it as a percentage of his net worth, it was chicken feed. Besides, he was the boss and he'd built his business interests up from nothing, while pencil-pushers like his accountant were sucking on popsicles in the playground.

What annoyed him most was the bean-counter demanding to know why such a large sum of money had been invested in *The Meadows Foundation*. He had no real answer. Not one that would stand up to scrutiny in a boardroom, leastways. What's more, as the accountant in red braces was eager to point out, it was unclear how Buller Industries ever hoped to get a return on its investment.

But none of that mattered. He considered the head of *The Meadows Foundation*, Dr Freeman, to be a friend. Hell, the man was a damn saviour. After the dreaded financial crisis a few years back, Buller had suffered a crisis of confidence and he'd shied away from the sort of deals that had got him to where he was today.

Initially, he'd been sceptical. He wasn't confident that hypnosis was the answer. Surely that just belonged on the stage in a half-assed freak show. And when Dr Freeman had suggested injecting him with a muscle-relaxant, he almost walked out of the man's pathetic little downtown office. But the treatment had worked, and Buller's business dealings were now back on track. The doctor had explained that he would need to continue his treatments and they didn't come cheap, but they were worth every cent. At least his next visit to the psychiatrist would take place in the more opulent surroundings of the man's new retreat. It would be interesting to see how his hard-earned millions were being spent.

Buller leant back in his executive chair and waited for the arrival of his accountant for their regular Monday-morning meeting. No doubt he'd bring up the little matter of the five-million-dollar investment in *The Meadows Foundation* and Buller would have to justify his actions all over again.

If only he could remember signing the damn money over in the first place.

When Sergeant Jim Foster found he had a rare moment to himself, he

headed to the office he shared with two other sergeants and poured himself a coffee. Someone had left a copy of the San Diego Union-Tribune on the desk and he decided to flick through its pages while he sipped his drink. On page six he suddenly stopped.

Half of the page was given over to the shooting of a Mr John Traynor, and a photograph showed the victim, before he was killed, proudly standing in front of his farm out near Pine Valley. For some reason, the farm and the land surrounding it seemed familiar.

Sergeant Foster decided to read the article. The man had been killed by a single bullet to the head from a considerable distance. As a trained sniper, Foster found this interesting. Could the poor farmer have been killed by someone trained in the military? It wouldn't be the first time it happened. Ex-soldiers, down on their luck, had occasionally been known to become guns for hire. The soldier offered a curse to the empty room.

"Jesus, I hope we haven't got some nut-job loose on the base."

Foster silently reprimanded himself for using such a term. If his fellow soldiers knew what he was going through, would they call him a nut-job?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder might not be dirty words any more, but he was a sergeant, training young recruits. He needed to set an example. He was damned if he'd tell the army that he couldn't hack it. So, like he'd always done throughout his career, he handled things himself. It had cost him a bundle, but he'd got the problem licked, thanks to Dr Freeman.

He couldn't believe the transformation. The nightmares had all but gone away, and he could concentrate on his job without zoning out any more. And to think that he'd nearly told Freeman and his damn needles to go to hell. The last thing he'd wanted was the medics on the base to suspect him of drug use. But the doctor had promised him he would make sure the needle marks didn't show. And, somehow, the weird guy had pulled it off. Thanks to the doc he was cured. The only thing that bugged him were the lapses of memory, but his new shrink had assured him they would pass with time.

For a second time, Foster examined the photograph of the proud farmer. Why the hell did the guy look so familiar?

## Chapter 11

Not for the first time, Madison couldn't help but wonder why she had chosen the life she had. She was young and attractive and, for the most part, got along with people. And yet, here she was, sitting alone in her apartment once again. As she forced herself to eat the meal that she'd thrown into the microwave moments before, she stared up at the photo of her father, taking pride of place on the wall of her dining room.

Her father Dan had been a cop and he'd raised her from when she was a little girl, right after her mother died of cancer. He'd been the centre of her world and she'd wanted to make him proud. And she had, right up to the moment when he'd been shot dead by a child-killer who was still out there, somewhere.

She treasured the photo because her father looked so happy. It was just a shame that he was standing next to his partner at the time – Pete Bradley. And now the cop who had let her father get killed was *her* partner. She decided that somebody in the department must have a warped sense of humour. Hadn't the idiots heard of the rumours? Bradley had held back and let her father face the killer alone with no backup. And now she had to stare at the coward's face every fucking day.

The guy just couldn't be relied on. She'd called him on his cell phone and got no reply. She'd even called him at home – same thing. It only served to fuel her dislike of her new partner, and it was affecting her appetite. She threw her fork into the half-eaten spaghetti and shoved the plate into the centre of the table.

“Screw him!”

The echo of her scream in her empty apartment only served to make her feel worse. To hell with it. She'd get a good night's rest, and the next morning she'd get to work on the case without the jerk's help, for what it was worth.

There wasn't a lot to work with, but she decided she'd concentrate on the military angle. When Traynor's brains were introduced to the outside world it was a hell of a shot. Maybe the killer was a trained sniper? But where should she start looking? San Diego was home to one of the largest naval bases in the world. Was there much call for snipers in the Navy? What about the Marines? Yes, that sounded more promising. It was a long shot but what the hell.

First thing in the morning, she'd head off to the Marine base. Maybe she'd

get lucky.

## Chapter 12

Without planning it, Bradley and Linda had spent the night together. They hadn't had sex but, when Bradley glanced at his watch, he noticed that it was early morning. It was as if two lost souls had found one another and neither wanted to let the other go.

When Bradley explained that he'd been planning on driving into the desert to watch the sunrise, Linda said she wanted to join him. The detective couldn't help feeling a stirring of excitement in his stomach. He felt like he was on a date with the hottest cheerleader in high school and they were sneaking off in his car to be alone. It made him feel young again.

The sunrise was spectacular. Linda had said she knew a place where the orange rays of the sun hit the desert's boulders just right. Her choice of location didn't let them down. They shared the beauty of the moment, until Linda turned in her seat and faced Bradley.

"Did you do this sort of thing with your wife?"

"Never."

"Why not?"

"We're different kinds of people."

"So, why did you marry her?"

Bradley finally turned to face his passenger.

"You're very direct. I think that's what I like about you."

"Are you trying to avoid my question?"

Bradley turned back to see the last few golden rays disappear as the sun inched skyward and lit the day ahead.

"We married young. I was a red-blooded twenty-seven-year-old and I couldn't keep my hands off her. But that feeling eventually wears off and you can be left with nothing else."

Linda frowned, as she tried to absorb Bradley's answer to her question.

"Are you saying you've changed now?"

"No. I'm still red-blooded. Let's just say I've developed a little more self-control."

Linda smiled and fluttered her eyelashes.

"Is that why you haven't made a pass at me? Or do you just not find me attractive?"

Bradley slid back in his seat so he could get a good look at his companion.

“I find you very attractive, but that’s not what’s important.”

“Tell me what’s important.”

“The important thing is that I can’t remember the last time I’ve enjoyed being with someone so much as I have with you. And I’d like to do it again. So, I’m not going to risk a promising friendship by coming on to you.”

Linda’s eyes glistened. Eventually, she found the words she was looking for.

“I think that’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me. I hope it’s not just a line.”

Bradley returned her stare.

“It’s not a line, Linda. I want us to be friends.”

“What happens when you’ve solved this case of yours and you don’t need me anymore?”

Bradley grinned.

“I can’t imagine not needing you, Linda.”

Linda suddenly looked serious and she sat up in her seat.

“Pete, can I ask you a question?”

“Ask away.”

“Before you take me home, would it be terribly wrong if I kissed you?”

“That could never be wrong.”

Linda leant into him and placed the palm of her hand on his cheek, before bringing her lips close to his. She allowed them to touch for only a few seconds, but Bradley felt an excitement that consumed his entire body.



## Chapter 13

As Sergeant Foster approached *The Meadows*, he glanced out of his car window and suddenly slammed on his brakes. The driver of the car behind was forced to brake hard, too, but still found the time to blast his horn and show his irritation. When it was clear that the idiot in front wasn't going to budge, he slowly drove around and lowered his window, ready to shout abuse at the other driver. But when he noticed the well-built frame of the soldier in the other car, he decided against it. Besides, there was something obviously wrong with the guy. The soldier looked out of it, as if he were on drugs. What was the country coming to, when even those meant to defend the place were spaced out?

As it turned out, Foster had not been aware of the other driver's presence. He was staring at the Traynor farm. It looked just like it had in the newspaper. The article had mentioned Pine Valley, but he just hadn't made the connection. That must have been why the place looked familiar. He'd simply recognised the farm having passed it before, on one of his visits to Dr Freeman. Yet something still didn't sit right. There was more to it than that. Ever since he'd seen the article, he had been doubting his sanity, and that was why he was paying his psychologist another visit.

Dr Freeman had said that he was one of his 'special' patients, whatever that meant. Not that he cared, just so long as Freeman was as good as his word. He'd told Foster he could drop by anytime he needed help, and he would waive the fee until the soldier could get the money together. Well, he needed help. That was why he'd called ahead, and he was pleased when Freeman's assistant answered the intercom at the main gate and allowed him straight in.

When he was finally settled in Dr Freeman's luxurious study, lying on an expensive leather couch, Foster was grateful that his men couldn't see him just then. He didn't like the idea that he needed to see his psychiatrist. It made him feel weak. A good soldier should be reliable and self-sufficient. Capable of dealing with anything that's thrown at him. But that was just it. He'd had everything thrown at him over in Afghanistan, and behind the uniform there was always a man, fighting to keep it together. Everyone had a limit, and after all the shit he'd seen, he shouldn't be too hard on himself. He just needed to get back on an even keel.

"What's the problem, Jim?"

As always, the doc's voice was soothing, and he had called him Jim. Even that small gesture felt good. Within the sanctuary of the retreat, he no longer needed to answer to the title of Sergeant Foster, with all the baggage that came with it.

"I'm still getting those memory lapses we talked about, Doc. And today, when I was reading the paper, I had a weird flashback."

"What were you reading?"

"It was an article about a shooting – you know, the one involving your neighbour across the way. Hell of a coincidence, huh?"

Freeman didn't say anything. There was only silence. This was so unusual that Foster decided to break the rules and opened his eyes. When he looked over to his psychiatrist, the man didn't notice. He was staring out the window, in the direction of the Traynor farm. Foster thought the man looked troubled. He'd been the usual calm, self-assured professional moments before. Foster just assumed psychiatrists must have their own problems, too.

Suddenly, Freeman seemed to snap out of it and turned his attention back to his patient.

"I think we're going to need a full session, Jim."

"No way, Doc, I can't afford it."

"This one's on the house."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

Freeman's ability to read another man's facial expressions continued to serve him well.

"Is there a problem, Jim?"

The soldier hesitated before responding.

"Do you need to use drugs?"

"Yes. I've told you, it's nothing but a muscle-relaxant. Its use is central to my methodology. It's harmless, and I will endeavour to make sure I leave no trace of a needle mark. Okay, Jim?"

Foster reluctantly nodded.

Once his patient succumbed to the effects of the truth serum, Foster used his tried and trusted techniques to put the soldier into a deep hypnotic state. Deep breathing, emptying the mind and releasing control – that was all the psychiatrist required of his patient.

"Jim, tell me all about this flashback you experienced."

Foster frowned, as if the act was an internal struggle. Freeman realised the

man needed further encouragement.

“Do not let it trouble you. The flashback, as you call it, is nothing but a dream we created together to help you release your fears, remember? So, don’t worry, you can tell me all about it. Dreams can’t hurt you.”

Gradually, Foster’s frown disappeared, and he breathed deeply. His spoke calmly and his words were measured.

“I parked my car a mile away from the Traynor farm and made my way to the woods on the edge of the property. It was dark. I was dressed like a hunter and my sniper’s rifle was disassembled and hidden away in my bag.”

“What did you do when you reached the wood?”

“I found an excellent position of concealment and buried myself in such a way that someone could have walked right past me and not known I was there. I had an excellent field of view towards the farmhouse.”

“What were you waiting for?”

“Don’t you remember, Doc? John Traynor always goes for an early-morning walk to inspect his land. I recognised him from the photo you showed me.”

“Go on.”

“Doc? The poor guy was shot for real, just like in my dream. How can that be?”

“Tell me what happened in your dream, Jim.”

“Like I said, Traynor appeared, just like you said he would. And I shot him in the head. Hell, the poor guy was a sitting duck. He didn’t have a chance.”

“Then what happened?”

“I’d placed a plastic sheet on the ground, where I knew the bullet casing would land. I retrieved the casing, dismantled my rifle, placed it back in my bag and headed for my car.”

“Did anyone see you?”

“It was still early and there was only a handful of cars on the road. Whenever one approached, I would retreat into the woods at the side of the road. No one saw me, you can count on that. But it wouldn’t matter if they did. It was just a dream.”

“That’s right, Jim, it was just a dream.”

“But who really murdered John Traynor?”

Freeman paused and let the question hang in the air. Instead of answering, he posed a question of his own.

“What does the word ‘murder’ mean to you, Jim?”

“I suppose it’s an unlawful killing.”

“Unlawful? And who makes these so-called laws?”

“The United States government, I guess.”

Freeman leant forward and whispered in the soldier’s ear.

“Have you ever killed anyone, Sergeant?”

“Yeah, sure, in the line of duty.”

Freeman took his time before pressing Foster any further. He had to choose his words carefully.

“Did you kill those people lawfully, Jim?”

Foster swallowed hard and his brow furrowed.

“Sure I did. I only shot men who were identified as legitimate targets.”

“And you were good at your job, weren’t you, Sergeant? You never missed.”

Foster’s body stiffened, as if he were trying to stand to attention while he lay on the sofa.

“Damn right, sir.”

“But your superiors let one of the targets get away, didn’t they?”

A layer of sweat began to form on Foster’s upper lip.

“They said they lacked the intel to sanction the shot.”

“And the target went on to kill your best friend. That’s what you told me, isn’t it?”

Tears fell down Foster’s cheeks and his head moved from side to side. This time, Freeman maintained the pressure.

“You know who gave the man in Afghanistan the order to kill your friend, don’t you, Sergeant? I gave you the intel, remember?”

“John Traynor gave the order.”

“That’s right. He was a terrorist who was secretly funding the Taliban. He was a traitor.”

“You mean he was a legitimate target?”

“Yes. But do not concern yourself with orders and legitimate targets. These are just words those in power use to control us. Remember what I told you about your evolutionary past. For thousands of years, strong men like you have been the ones in charge, not these weak bureaucrats in their suits. They wouldn’t last five minutes in the field against a man like you. Am I right, Sergeant?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Laws have only been around for a fraction of the time humans have

existed. They are meaningless. It is your destiny to take matters into your own hands and see that justice is done.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Sergeant, Mr Traynor had an accomplice.”

“An accomplice?”

“Yes. Another damn terrorist, masquerading as a detective in the San Diego Police Department.”

“He helped the Taliban to kill my friend, too?”

“Yes, Sergeant. Will you see that justice is done?”

“Yes, sir. I never miss a target.”

## Chapter 14

The following morning, Madison chose her outfit carefully. Her knee-length skirt was returned to the wardrobe and she chose a conservative, dark-grey suit with a white blouse. She tied her long, dark hair into a ponytail and applied a minimal amount of make-up. She possessed a pair of glasses with clear glass that she occasionally used whenever she was following a suspect and didn't want to be recognised. But, on this occasion, she left them in her bag. No need to go over the top, she decided.

Her reason for consciously dressing down was that she was about to visit the Marine base in the city. She was not being immodest, but she had visited the naval base on a previous occasion, with the result that she had drawn unwanted attention from a host of sex-starved sailors. Perhaps the Marines would turn out to be a different breed, but she didn't want to take any chances. She had a job to do.

She had phoned ahead, first thing in the morning, and her call had been answered. Apparently, the military never slept. She explained that she was investigating a murder that may have been executed by a trained sniper. No, she wasn't accusing anyone in the Marines, she simply needed technical advice from the experts. Her attempt at flattery clearly worked because the major who took her call offered to meet her himself, at nine a.m. sharp. Or perhaps it was her sexy voice that did the trick. She didn't care. Either way, she'd got what she wanted.

When she arrived at the base, it fulfilled her expectations. A double perimeter of razor wire, armed soldiers on duty at the gate, clipboards in hand. A young corporal offered her a broad smile and asked her the nature of her business. She told him she was there to see a Major Wainwright and the corporal asked her for some ID. He seemed impressed that she was a detective.

"Are you armed, Detective?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave your gun with me. I will give you a receipt and you can collect it on the way out."

Madison nodded in the direction of the base.

"Isn't this place full of weapons?"

The corporal ignored her question.

“I’m sorry, Detective, I have my orders. Could you come this way?”

Madison followed the corporal into a small building a short distance from the gate. A second soldier tried to get a look at her ass as she passed by, but she shot him a look that made him change his mind.

Once inside the office, the corporal asked her to sign a sheet of paper and held out his hand. Usually, she kept her .38 in a holster on her waist, but not when she was driving. It was too uncomfortable. She reached into her bag and retrieved her gun. It took her a few seconds to find it, and she hoped it didn’t make her look pathetic. The corporal took the .38 from her and locked it in a drawer.

“I’ll keep an eye on it and I’ll be right here when you get back.”

“That’s comforting to know,” said Madison.

She hurried back to her car, not giving the other soldier the chance to check her out for a second time.

“Third building on the left,” said the corporal, and with that he nodded at his partner, who pressed a button to open the gate.

“Thank you.”

Madison hit the gas and glanced in her rear-view mirror as she followed the directions she’d been given. The two soldiers on the gate were both staring after her.

By the time she’d reached the third building on the left and parked her car, an officer was already awaiting her arrival at the main doors. Madison estimated that he was in his fifties. Stocky build but still trim. Unlike the younger soldiers stationed at the gate, he wasn’t wearing a beret. His dark hair was peppered with grey and he wore glasses. He held out his hand and introduced himself but didn’t offer a smile.

“Would you like to follow me, Detective Culver?”

The major led her to a conference room. A large screen dominated the far end, and an oval table was surrounded by a dozen or so chairs. They looked surprisingly comfortable. Since this was the army, Madison had half-expected to find herself in a cold, brick building furnished with unwelcoming wooden chairs. She felt a little foolish.

“Please, take a seat,” said the major, indicating the nearest chair. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

Madison declined.

“I don’t want to take up any more of your time than is necessary. Like I said on the phone, I’m just after some technical advice.”

The major was still standing, and he pointedly examined Madison from head to toe.

“You said you’re investigating a murder?”

“Yes.”

“A shooting?”

“Yes.”

“And you think the gunman might have had some military training?”

Madison tried to hide her irritation. She’d been granted an audience with the major, and now he was simply firing questions at her.

“We don’t know. That’s why I’m here. I was hoping you might be able to help.”

The major folded his arms and sniffed.

“Don’t you have weapons experts in your department?”

“Of course we do,” said Madison. “But the gunman’s victim was a long distance away when he was killed. Some of our people think that the killer might have been a trained sniper.”

“How long a distance?”

“Over a thousand metres.”

The major just stared at her. She tried to move things along.

“Would you consider that a long distance?”

The major ignored her question.

“Do I have your assurance that you’re not here to snoop around, looking for suspects?”

Madison didn’t know what to say. The thought hadn’t even crossed her mind. She stood up and noticed that, in her heels, she was at least an inch taller than the major. She folded her arms, imitating the officer.

“Believe me, our department has enough suspects to worry about without having to go out looking for them.”

For the first time, the major grinned.

“Relax, Detective Culver. I’m just looking out for my men.”

“I’m not here to talk to your men. My appointment was with you.”

“I’m afraid I won’t be of much help. I haven’t been trained as a sniper.”

Madison failed to hide her exasperation.

“Then why am I here?”

The major stiffened.



“As a courtesy to your department, I’ve arranged for you to meet an expert. In fact, he trains our new recruits. He’s one of the best.”

Madison unfolded her arms and smiled.

“That is much appreciated, Major. Where is he?”

The major walked over to the far end of the room and reached for a telephone. Madison tried to listen in on the conversation but could only hear the odd word. The major re-joined her and gave her the good news.

“You’re in luck. Sergeant Foster has just returned to the base.”

## Chapter 15

When they had returned to Linda's house, Bradley looked at his watch.

"I guess I'd better make an appearance at the station or I could well get fired," he said.

"Don't take this wrong, Pete, but you look terrible. When was the last time you got any sleep?"

Bradley brought his hand up to his face and stroked the bristle on his chin.

"Shit. And there was me trying my best to impress you."

Linda let out a short laugh.

"Don't worry, you *have* impressed me. You're just a handsome man who looks tired."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Seriously, you can't drive in your condition. Crash out on the couch for an hour and I'll fix you some breakfast."

Before Bradley could refuse, Linda headed off to her bedroom and returned with a blanket and a pillow. The detective was struggling to keep his eyes open and decided her gifts looked very tempting.

"Sleep," said Linda, as she headed for the kitchen.

Bradley called after her.

"Okay. But wake me in thirty minutes."

He didn't hear her reply. He was fast asleep.

Linda brewed a fresh pot of coffee and searched her fridge for the bacon and eggs she'd bought the previous day. She was looking forward to preparing breakfast for the man in the other room and she couldn't help but wonder why. They might well have spent the night together, but the guy was a stranger. She knew she had been feeling vulnerable when the detective had turned up at her door, out of the blue, and she cautioned herself to tread warily. But she couldn't stop herself from becoming excited. She found herself being drawn to the man for no logical reason. But, then again, when were feelings and emotions ever logical?

Her thoughts were disturbed by the sound of sobbing. They were coming from the other room and she felt her heart-rate climb. Desperate not to make a sound, she inched towards the door and opened it a fraction of an inch so that

she could see the couch.

Bradley appeared to still be asleep, but now she could see tears rolling down his cheeks. His head moved from side to side, and he was muttering something to himself. Very slowly, she made her way into the room and approached him until she could make out what he was saying.

“Poor ... little ... squirrel. Blood ... everywhere ...”

Bradley’s breathing became more laboured.

“Bastard ... I’ll ... fucking ... kill ... you!”

Bradley suddenly sat up, bathed in sweat. Linda took a step back and gasped. Awake now, the detective stared at his surroundings, wide-eyed and unsure where he was. Linda couldn’t help but stare, and she watched as Bradley’s breathing gradually returned to normal. He rubbed his face and tried to compose himself.

“I’m sorry, Linda, I must have had a nightmare.”

“It’s okay. I was just worried about you, that’s all. I’ll go and pour us some coffee.”

Bradley felt embarrassed and wanted to leave. But before he could protest, she was heading for the kitchen. He decided to follow her.

“Linda. Don’t go to any trouble. You’ve done more than enough already.”

Linda ignored him and placed two steaming mugs of coffee on the table. She sat down and gestured for Bradley to do the same.

“What was the nightmare about?”

Bradley noticed how she didn’t waste any time and always got right to the point. He liked that about her. It was just a pity he couldn’t do the same.

“You don’t want to know, believe me.”

Linda placed her hand on his and gently rubbed it. She gave him a reassuring smile.

“Believe me, I do.”

Bradley was torn. He’d never talked about the nightmares with anyone. When Madison had pressed him, he’d been evasive. The sights and sounds in his head were tearing him apart. How was he supposed to spill his guts in front of a virtual stranger? But he wanted to talk, and maybe a stranger was just the thing. Someone who wasn’t there to judge. Without thinking, he found himself uttering words that had remained hidden until now.

“Four months ago, I was on a case. Child abduction. An eight-year-old boy called Timmy Brewster. Shy. Good as gold – that’s how his parents described him. He’d gone missing during a games fair. His mother had taken him as a

treat. She was frantic.”

“I can’t begin to imagine.”

“You have to work quickly on these things. Every minute wasted is another minute for leads to go cold. I got the organisers of the event to make an announcement, describing Timmy and asking people to come to the front desk if they’d seen him. A young woman turned up. She said she and her husband had seen him being bundled into a black van before it drove off. Her husband had even followed the van to another address in the city and called it in.”

“Did he identify the kidnapper?”

“No. The guy was wearing a jacket with a hood, covering his face. All the witness could say was that the guy was on the short side.”

“What about the van’s licence plate?”

“You should have been a cop, Linda. It’s a shame it wasn’t you following the van. No, the witness didn’t think to make a note of the plate.”

“Still, at least you’ve got a witness.”

“We *had* a witness.”

“Had?”

“Yeah, the guy and his wife got killed a couple of days after they reported the kidnapping.”

“Killed? How?”

“Hit and run. My guess is, it was the kidnapper covering his tracks, but I’ve got no way of proving that.”

Linda could hardly stand it. She wanted to know what happened to the boy. She waited for Bradley to tell the rest of the story in his own time. It was clear he was struggling.

“My partner and I headed for the address and, when we got there, the van was parked outside.”

“What did you do?”

“We needed to enter the property. We had no warrant, but there was probable cause. We called for back-up but couldn’t wait for them to arrive. Like I said, every minute counts.”

Bradley suddenly realised his throat was bone dry. He sipped the hot coffee to lubricate his mouth before continuing.

“My partner Dan was senior to me and coming up to retirement. He opted to knock the front door while I covered the rear. He said he’d give me exactly five minutes to get into position.”

Linda could tell that Bradley was struggling and she knelt beside him and

stroked his hand. He took a deep breath and carried on.

“When I got to the rear of the property, the back yard was surrounded by bushes. I swear they were two feet thick. You ask any house-breaker, fences are a piece of cake ... but thick bushes? Forget it. By the time I fought my way through, my arms and face were lacerated. When I looked at my watch, six minutes had gone by.”

Linda clutched his hand. “Go on.”

“I heard shots, but there was only one rear door and it looked as solid as a rock.”

“What about the windows?”

“Modern safety glass. It’s not like in the movies where the hero simply jumps through or fires a couple of bullets and the whole pane shatters.”

“What did you do?”

“I had no choice but to make my way back to the front of the property. I swear I jumped through those bushes like they weren’t there. Blood was streaming into my eyes, but I didn’t feel a thing until it was all over. Adrenaline will do that to you.”

“What did you find?”

Bradley swallowed hard. He felt like he needed a drink to give him courage, but Linda’s soothing words somehow gave him the strength to finish.

“As I made my way around the side of the property, I could hear the screech of tyres. By the time I made it out front, the van was gone. I remember thinking, if only we’d parked behind it and blocked the bastard in. I couldn’t help feeling that we’d screwed up bad.”

“What happened to your partner?”

“I drew my piece, just in case the person that got away wasn’t working alone. In the hallway there was a table knocked to the floor, like there’d been a struggle. Off to the right was another door to a small lounge. My partner was lying on the floor on his back. His jacket had come open and blood was oozing from his shirt.”

“Was he dead?”

“No. Not then, anyway. I grabbed a cushion and tried to stop the bleeding as best I could, while I grabbed my phone and called nine-one-one.”

“Did he say anything?”

Bradley grimaced as if he were in pain.

“He asked why I hadn’t come in the back way, like I’d promised. And then ... and then he said the kid was in the kitchen.”

Bradley shook his head as if he couldn't carry on. Linda tried to remain calm.

“What happened to the boy?”

Bradley leant back on the sofa and stared at Linda.

“Have you ever seen a body covered in bruises – I mean, literally covered from head to toe?”

Linda shook her head.

“The poor little guy had been used like a punching bag.”

Linda let out a gasp. But there was more.

“Tears still trickled down the little guy's face. Blood was seeping from a wound to his head. It was like he'd been dragged along the floor by his hair. His head was resting on a soft toy, as if he'd made himself a pillow.”

“A soft toy?”

“Yeah. His mother told us he carried it with him everywhere, but now it was soaked in the kid's blood. A cute, fluffy white squirrel.”

## Chapter 16

When Sergeant Jim Foster entered the conference room, he saluted the major and his eyes were immediately drawn to Madison. The pretty detective was used to the attentions of the opposite sex, but this time the attraction went both ways.

She had a natural flair for taking the measure of a person on first sight, and a myriad of impressions had taken root the moment the sergeant made an appearance. He was strong and capable, and yet there was a sensitivity lurking behind the pale blue eyes, shielded from those around him. But not from Madison.

She'd seen it before in her father's eyes. In all the years she'd known him, he'd never allowed himself to show any sign of weakness. He'd been the one constant in her life – dependable, trustworthy. But if she stared into his eyes, she knew there was fear too. Fear of the crazies he had to face day after day, being a cop, and fear for his family, knowing he couldn't protect them every hour of the day. And here was a man cut from the same cloth, of that she was sure.

"Sergeant Foster, this is Detective Culver, from the San Diego Police Department. She's investigating a shooting and needs our help. I've told her we'll assist in any way we can. She's in need of our expertise and I've told her you're the man."

Foster neither swaggered with pride nor tried to feign modesty. He just accepted the compliment. She liked that. He held out his hand and she took it. It was warm and strong. His grip was firm. He was a man you could depend on – like her father.

"Well, I'll leave you to get on with it."

The major left the room, leaving the two of them standing, facing one another. There was a moment's awkward silence, until Madison gestured to a couple of the chairs.

"I'll try to be brief, Sergeant Foster. I'm sure you're very busy."

"No problem," said Foster, taking a seat and facing her across the table. Madison pulled a notebook from her bag and placed it on the table, a pencil poised in her hand.

"Like the major said, I'm investigating a shooting – on a farm over in Pine Valley."

Foster didn't move or make any comment, but she couldn't help but spot an almost imperceptible widening of the eyes. She noticed these things. It was what made her a good detective. For some reason, the soldier seated opposite her was surprised by this piece of news – maybe even shocked. He'd done his best to hide it, but she'd seen through the tough mask the man wore. She decided to let it go for the moment, but it would continue to bug her until she discovered what his reaction meant.

"A shooting over a distance?" he asked.

"Why do you say that?"

"I'm trained as a sniper. If the murder had happened at close range, you wouldn't need my expertise."

"I guess you're right. What makes you think I'm investigating a murder?"

"I don't know. I just assumed. Am I wrong?"

"No."

"The victim was killed by a single bullet from a distance of more than a thousand metres. Would you say that's a long way?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"The record is over three thousand metres, but that was in ideal conditions."

"What conditions would those be?"

"When you set up a shot, there are a lot of things to take into consideration. There's the topography of the land, for one thing, and then there's the wind direction and velocity, the temperature, the altitude and the angle of elevation."

"I didn't realise it was that complicated."

"Not a lot of people do. And then, of course, there's the weapon."

"Could you make the shot with a good hunting rifle?"

"It would have to be a damn good hunting rifle, and you'd need a good deal of luck to make a shot first time. Personally, I use an M40A3."

"I take it that's pretty sophisticated?"

"Yeah. Not to mention expensive, and I'm not rich. Fortunately, the army provides our weapons, free of charge."

"So, you're saying the gunman more than likely used a sophisticated rifle."

"Yes. Especially if conditions weren't ideal."

"To make the shot we're talking about, do you think the shooter would have to be trained as a sniper?"

"It would certainly help. Either that or the guy would have to be an



enthusiastic amateur with an opportunity to get in a lot of practice.”

Madison looked down at the top page of her notebook, full of the technical information with which she'd just been provided. Useful, but nothing that would solve the case. Even so, her trip hadn't been wasted. She was attracted to Sergeant Foster, and she hadn't felt attracted to a man for a very long time. More importantly, she now had a question that needed to be answered – a question that could well have something to do with the murder she was working on.

Why would an apparently random citizen like Sergeant Foster, react the way he did at the mention of a shooting in Pine Valley? Madison was determined to find out.

## Chapter 17

Madison might have harboured a secret desire to meet up with Sergeant Foster again, but, at least for tonight, she had another date. If you could call it that.

Chuck Patterson was in his forties, and even with thick-soled shoes he was almost a head shorter than Madison. Although she worried it made her appear shallow, Madison never dated men shorter than herself. It just didn't feel right. But in Patterson's case, she was willing to make an exception.

Not that his lack of height was his only fault. He sported a large bald patch on the top of his head, and Madison couldn't help wondering why the man didn't realise his paunch was made even more obvious by his choice of ill-fitting shirts. Buttons threatened to pop under the strain, and onlookers were often treated to unsightly glimpses of hirsute belly. But Patterson had one important thing going for him, at least as far as Madison was concerned. He had headed the Internal Affairs investigation that had cleared Bradley of any wrongdoing, the day her father was killed.

Besides, it wasn't a date. Not really. Against her better judgement, Madison had agreed to accompany Patterson to a family gathering. Some cousin of his was getting married, and he wanted to make an impression. The IAD officer had decided, in his infinite wisdom, that Madison Culver would certainly do that. In return, Patterson had said he would tell her everything his department had come up with. If she impressed him, he might even get her a copy of the case-file. Like he was doing her a favour. Madison had consented to the arrangement, provided the obnoxious officer stuck to her one ground rule - he kept his wandering hands to himself.

As it turned out, the wedding was quite a pleasant affair, held in a pretty white church in the suburbs of the city. One of Patterson's relatives had clearly done well for himself and owned a home with a considerable amount of land, a few miles outside San Diego. A vast field played host to a large marquis, where the two hundred or so guests could party to their hearts' content, without fear of disturbing the neighbours.

Although Patterson had kept his side of the bargain - no groping and staying sober - many of his male relatives were unencumbered by such rules. More than once, she had found it necessary to resist the amorous advances of other guests. Much to her chagrin, the wives and girlfriends of the offending

men scowled at her as if it were her fault. One drunk uncle had been so forward, Madison almost wished she'd brought her gun to the proceedings.

But, eventually, late into the evening, she managed to get some quiet time alone with Patterson in the corner of the tent – to discuss the all-important case, she reminded him. Nothing else.

“Why did you clear Bradley?”

“Jesus, Maddie, great straight to the point, why don't you?”

She hated being called Maddie but let it slide. She'd spent the whole day on Chuck's arm, just to feed his ego, and now she wanted answers.

“I've fulfilled my end of the bargain, Chuck. Just tell me what I want to know.”

“I'll tell you how it went down, but I doubt it'll be what you want to know. Hell, Maddie, don't get me wrong. I'm no fan of Bradley's, but if you think he got your old dad killed, you're barking up the wrong tree. Don't make it personal, sweetheart.”

God, the man was detestable, but right now he was all she had.

“Just tell me what you dug up.”

“That's what I'm trying to tell you. We dug up shit. Bradley went to cover the back, as per your old man's instructions. I checked the place out myself. No wonder the poor bastard was cut from head to toe – it's like a jungle out there. And as for forcing an entry through the rear, forget about it. Unless you happened to be carrying a battering ram, it'd take you a hell of a lot longer than a few minutes to break in. By then, it would have all been over.”

Madison couldn't help but feel frustrated.

“That's just it. It *was* all over by the time he turned up. And he let the guy who killed my father get away.”

“The way it looked to me, Bradley was too busy calling nine-one-one and plugging your father's leaks.”

Madison shot him a look that said he was crossing the line, and he tried his best to look contrite.

“I'm sorry, Maddie, I'm just telling you what happened, like you asked. Maybe if they'd disabled the van and forced the guy to skip out of there on foot, they might have caught up with him, but there was a time-issue. They had reason to believe the kid was in there. Which he was.”

“But the kid was dead,” said Madison, knowing she was reaching for straws.

“Yeah. But they had no way of knowing that.”

“Why didn’t they wait for back-up?”

“Bradley said it was your father’s call.”

“He *would* say that, wouldn’t he?”

“Maybe, but he also said he agreed with him. They needed to get in there. Look, I can’t see why you’re busting his balls.”

“Partners are supposed to look out for each other. My father faced the killer alone and Bradley didn’t cover his back.”

Chuck looked over to the other end of the tent, where one of his elderly female relatives was on the dance-floor, making a fool of herself. He simply shrugged and Madison could see that he’d lost interest. She decided to try a different tack.

“He keeps bursting into tears.”

She suddenly had Chuck’s attention and he returned her stare.

“Who?”

“Who are we talking about? Bradley.”

Chuck grinned.

“What are you saying? He just starts crying for no reason?”

“When we were on a stake-out, he fell asleep and started bawling. I think the guy’s unhinged.”

“This time I might agree with you. After your father got ... you know, Bradley was itching to find the killer. When we told him that he was off the case, the guy freaked out. Threw a chair clear across the room and broke a computer. Guy should have been suspended, but the captain gave him a break.”

Madison could see some of the Chuck clan heading towards them and she wanted to get out of there. It was time to wrap things up.

“Did you get me the file?”

Chuck shook his head.

“Don’t push your luck, Maddie.”

She was about to protest, but Chuck raised his hand before she could start.

“Take it easy. I’m not giving you the file, but you might want to head over to my office during my lunch break tomorrow.”

“Why? Have I got to take you out for lunch, too?”

“Maybe some other time. Tomorrow I’ll be out of the office.”

“So, why should I go there?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you might be looking to borrow some stationery. And maybe you might look in my desk drawer and find something interesting.”

Chuck had Madison’s attention.

“What if I did?”

“If you did, maybe you could take a peek, and put it back where you found it. That way, I’d know nothing about it.”

Madison couldn’t believe the guy had come through for her. She got out of her chair while the going was good. Some of Chuck’s relatives were staring in their direction and she decided he deserved a reward. She leant down and gave him a warm kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks, Chuck. I’ll see you around.”

She began to move away, when Chuck called after her.

“What was Bradley crying about?”

“How would I know? He was asleep. The only thing I could make out was something about a damn squirrel.”

“You don’t say. Maybe it’s just a coincidence.”

“What’s just a coincidence?”

Chuck paused before answering, enjoying the attention.

“The kid. When they found his body, he was clutching a toy squirrel.”

## Chapter 18

Bradley stared up at the glass edifice that was The First Union Bank, a stone's throw from San Diego's marina. The place was called Banker's Hill. Bradley couldn't help thinking the name kept things simple and wondered why everyone didn't follow suit. Maybe they should change Broadway to Cop's Hill. He didn't have an account at the bank, and even if he did, he would have nothing to put in it. He was about to look up a woman with whom he'd very nearly had an affair, but not for that reason. He needed her help and she owed him a favour. A big one.

One day, her teenage brother Zack had suddenly got it into his head that he wanted to visit a friend of his, who'd recently moved with his parents over to Long Beach. But he was broke, and he decided to hitch-hike. He started his adventure on the coast road at Solana Beach and, within thirty minutes he struck it lucky. Or so he thought. A guy in his thirties picked him up in an old Ford Mustang and, much to Zack's delight, asked him to take the wheel.

Everything went well until they were pulled over by the cops near Oceanside. The officers informed the two men that they'd been stopped because their muffler was low and striking the road when they hit a bump. It was bullshit. They just thought the mis-matched pair looked suspicious and needed an excuse to pull them over.

Drugs were found, the serious kind, and the owner of the car tried to make out that *he* was the hitch-hiker and the car belonged to Zack. The Oceanside cops were all for throwing them both in jail until the mess was sorted out. That was when Zack remembered the name of the cop who'd come to give a talk at his school a few weeks back. He told the cops that Pete Bradley was a friend of his who worked for the San Diego Police Department. He would vouch for Zack, he assured them.

Zack was given the go-ahead to call his 'friend' and when he got through, he quickly described his predicament. Instead of rebuking the teenager for wasting his time, Bradley took pity on the youngster and drove out there to smooth things over and return him to his family. Zack's sister Sadie was particularly grateful. She made it very clear she was interested, and her timing was perfect. He'd just had the mother of all arguments with Kath and he was looking to be consoled. But he resisted.

Sadie's office was impressive. She was the assistant manager. Bradley

noted that she was just as tall as he remembered – over six feet in heels – and just as painfully thin. She was made for the cat-walk and Bradley wondered why she'd never chosen that route. But, by the looks of the office, she was doing okay.

“It’s good to see you, Pete. What can I do for you? Need a loan?”

Sadie signalled for Bradley to take a seat on an expensive leather sofa by the large window, overlooking the marina. She deserted her executive chair and joined him. Bradley noticed she was wearing a conservative, grey jacket and skirt, but it couldn’t hide the fact that her slender legs went on forever. She crossed them as she sat down.

“A loan would be nice, but I’m here in an official capacity.”

Sadie held up her hands in mock-surrender.

“I swear, I haven’t raided the vault in weeks.”

Bradley laughed politely.

“I’m struggling with a case I’m working on and I was hoping you might be able to help me.”

“How exciting. Of course I’ll help you, Pete, if I can.”

“I’m investigating a psychiatrist called Dr Gregory Freeman, and he’s recently come into a great deal of money. It would really help me if I knew where it came from.”

For the first time, Sadie’s smile dropped.

“I’m afraid you need a warrant for that kind of thing, Pete.”

“I know. Problem is, I haven’t got enough evidence to convince a judge to provide me with one.”

“Gregory Freeman, did you say?”

“Yeah.”

“The name doesn’t sound familiar.”

As she spoke, Sadie made her way to her desk, sat down and began tapping away on her keyboard. She shook her head in frustration and returned to the sofa to explain what she’d been looking for.

“I was hoping he had an account with us, but he doesn’t. It was a long shot. Do you know how many banks there are in San Diego?”

Bradley gathered by her tone that there must be more than a few.

“I suppose it’s not quite as simple to search accounts in other banks on that thing,” said Bradley, nodding at her computer.

“No. Not with personal accounts, anyway.”

“What about corporate accounts?”

“That’s different. Companies are obliged to publish financial information. Why?”

“This Dr Freeman has set up a retreat over in Pine Valley, called *The Meadows*. I suppose it could be registered as a company.”

Without commenting, Sadie made her way back to her desk and her fingers danced over her keyboard for a second time. Bradley stood up but resisted looking over her shoulder.

“I really appreciate you trying, Sadie, but the last thing I want to do is get you into trouble.”

“Anything for you, Pete. Besides, it’s our little secret, right?”

“Sure.”

Sadie spent the next fifteen minutes working her magic and Bradley used the time to watch the boats come and go in the marina. When the tapping of her long fingernails finally stopped, he turned to face her. She was grinning from ear to ear.

“*The Meadows* has only one investor of any significance. Buller Industries.”

“How significant?”

“Nearly five million.”

Bradley let out a low whistle.

“Do you know anything about this Buller Industries?”

“Not much. I’ve heard that Henry Buller runs the place with an iron fist. He’s not quite a billionaire, but he’s getting there.”

“Do you do any business with him?”

“Not directly. But I’ve had lunch with one of his executives. The guy let it slip that a while ago his boss nearly had some kind of a breakdown.”

Bradley instinctively rubbed his chin, while he digested this new piece of information. Breakdown? Where does someone go when they’re having problems like that? A psychiatrist, maybe?

“You said ‘had’ a breakdown. Does that mean he’s okay now?”

“I don’t really know, but that was the impression I got.”

“Investing in a retreat? From what you’ve heard about the guy, does that sound like something he’d do?”

“Not really. As far as I can gather, Buller’s company usually sticks to what it knows best. A retreat doesn’t sound like much of a money-maker to me.”

Bradley stared out of the window, lost in thought. Sadie’s voice snapped him out of it.



“I hope I’ve been of some help.”

“Yes, you have, Sadie, more than you’ll know.”

This caused her to smile. She hoped she’d gone some way to repaying the debt she felt she owed. Bradley suddenly had an idea.

“Let me take you to lunch to say thank you.”

Sadie continued to smile.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Just give me a minute to finish up here. I know a great place right around the corner.”

As they made their way along the street, Bradley hoped the place wasn’t too expensive. To his relief, it was a small restaurant that sold freshly-caught fish from the marina. It was run like a take-out, but there were a few tables and chairs on the sidewalk. A chalkboard listed a few simple dishes at reasonable prices. He let out a sigh of relief.

Bradley didn’t notice the silver car parked across the street. It blended in with all the others, except this one was occupied by a man in uniform. Sergeant Jim Foster watched the detective laughing with the tall, thin woman accompanying him, as if he were sharing a joke. Strange, he didn’t look like a terrorist. But then, he was just the money-man. Keep laughing, he thought, while you still can. Your days are numbered.

## Chapter 19

Madison was angry. The lieutenant had chewed her out as if it were her fault that Bradley hadn't been seen for days. She tried to get into her superior's good books by telling him about her visit to the Marine base and what she'd learned. But he wasn't impressed. She and Bradley should be working together, he'd said, not doing their own thing. In the end she'd walked off in a huff. You find him, she'd said, and I'll gladly work with him.

Fortunately, her argument with the lieutenant gave her an excuse to head over to Chuck's office during his lunch break. When she got there, the place was empty. Apparently Internal Affairs wasn't expected to keep someone on duty during the lunch-hour. Nice work if you could get it. But she was relieved. It meant she could open the drawer of Chuck's desk without being watched. As promised, the file was there.

She looked around and spotted a door that led to a small side-room. There was a table with a coffee machine, together with the obligatory honesty-box. She felt in her bag for some coins, threw them into the box, and helped herself to a drink. In the far corner of the room was a photocopier. She placed her coffee on a shelf next to it and opened the file. If someone came in, she would pretend she was just doing some paperwork.

Madison read as quickly as she could, even though the file was disappointingly thin. Her frustration grew, as it became clear that the report simply confirmed what Chuck had already told her. Finishing her coffee, she headed back into the main office and returned the file to Chuck's drawer. She stood there, wondering what to do next. She didn't relish the thought of returning to her own department to face the lieutenant and, on impulse, left the building and headed for her car.

The file had contained the address of the building where the killer had taken the boy, but she hadn't needed it. She knew the address by heart and had even visited the site before. It was where her father had died. But she found herself driving there again. If anyone were to ask her, she would not have been able to explain why.

When she arrived, the only thing that had changed was the notice in the front yard, advertising the fact that the place was no longer for rent. Madison wondered whether that was because the owners had managed to find a new tenant, or because they'd given up trying. Sometimes, when a place became a

murder scene it put people off living there.

A guy in a suit suddenly emerged from the front door. He straightened a plant-pot, sitting on the step. Madison couldn't help wondering why. The plant was dead. He took a step back and examined the front of the building. He clutched a large bunch of keys in his hand. Madison had a hunch she knew who he was. She got out of her car and headed over.

"Are you the realtor?"

The young man turned to look in her direction and his face lit up.

"Yeah. Are you the one moving in?"

"No, why? Are you expecting someone?"

The man tried to hide his disappointment.

"Yeah. My partner handled the paperwork. I couldn't remember if we rented the place to a man ... or a beautiful woman."

The man grinned, pleased with his line. Madison fished her badge out of her pocket and held it up.

"You're a cop?"

He sounded incredulous. She was used to it.

"Yeah."

The man thought for a moment.

"That's right. A kid got murdered here, didn't he?"

"Yes. And a police officer, too."

"Didn't know that."

That pissed Madison off. Her father died in the line of duty, and the guy renting the place where he got killed didn't even know about it.

"So, you finally got someone to take the place on."

"Yeah. It cleaned up pretty good, considering. The guy ... you know, the killer ... took pretty good care of the place.

"I'm pleased for you."

Madison let her sarcastic reply hang in the air, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Left the place just as it was. Apart from the locks, of course."

"The locks?"

"Yeah. The guy had every lock changed. Nice job too. Must have got a professional in. I wonder why he did that?"

"He's a murderer, remember? He probably didn't want anyone walking in on him unexpectedly ... you know, like a realtor or something. Then he would have had to kill the poor schmuck."

The guy in the suit swallowed hard.

“Gee, I never thought of that. Close call, I guess. You still haven’t caught the guy then?”

“No. As you know, you were happy for the guy to pay cash and it turned out his ID was fake.”

The realtor failed to realise his organisation’s practices were being criticised.

“I’m surprised you’ve not come up with anything. I thought you guys didn’t hang around when it came to putting cop-killers away. They should get snuffed out, if you ask me. Like they do down in Texas and places like that.”

“I’ll pass your thoughts on to the governor.”

Madison headed back to her car before the realtor could think of a reply. She reached into her bag for her phone and searched for locksmiths in the area. There were three less than a ten-minute drive away. Worth a shot, she decided.

To Madison, the first locksmith she visited looked like he was in his nineties, but he was a real gent. He said he’d owned his little shop for forty years. No, he hadn’t replaced the locks at the place she was interested in, but he said he knew who did. It was a young guy who worked part-time at a shoe-repair place, ten blocks over. Madison thanked the man for his help. He smiled and winked, offering the opinion that she was too pretty to be a police officer.

It was so busy, Madison had to park a few minutes’ walk away from the shoe-repair shop. As she approached, she noticed a small guy standing outside, smoking. Even from a distance, she could tell that he was a bundle of energy, unable to keep still. She stopped and pretended to look in a nearby shop window, so that she could watch him without drawing attention to herself. She was just curious. It was in her nature, and it was what made her a good cop.

Every now and then, the guy would squint, screwing his eyes up tight. His hands and arms were always on the move. He was constantly shuffling from one foot to another and swapping his cigarette from either hand. At first glance, she’d put his strange behaviour down to nicotine withdrawal, but now she could see there was more to it than that. While she decided what to do next, the man took one last draw on his cigarette, threw it on the sidewalk still lit, and headed into the shoe-repair shop.

Madison hurried over and followed him in but, once inside, she was greeted by an overweight woman, standing behind a counter. The nervous man was nowhere to be seen.

“Can I help you?”

The woman had her hair tied up in a severe bun and didn't favour Madison with a smile.

“Yes, I'm interested in having some new locks fitted in my home. Do you offer that kind of service?”

Instead of replying, the woman simply turned and called out towards a door to her rear.

“Kyle. You're needed out front.”

Kyle emerged a few seconds later. It was the nervous smoker. Madison showed him her badge. On the drive over, she had intended to ask about the work that had been done at the property in question. Having seen Kyle in action, she decided a subtler approach was in order. Madison noticed that the woman behind the counter had disappeared into the rear of the shop the moment she'd flashed her badge.

“I'm asking around the area, trying to find out who replaced the locks on a property on Canyon Road, over in Serra Mesa.”

Kyle Rudd continued to twitch, and if Madison hadn't seen his act out on the street, she would have thought he was nervous talking to the cops.

“Sorry, can't help you. I don't cover that area.”

“Are you sure? Could you check your records?”

“Look, lady, I don't need to check my *records*. I've never been there, okay?”

Madison nodded.

“Well, thank you for your help. That's all I needed to know.”

She left the shop and walked away, making sure not to look back. She didn't know if the guy might be watching her and she didn't want to make him suspicious. Once she was safely seated in her car, she took a breath and tried to figure out what to do next.

The guy had lied to her. Of course, people lie to the police all the time, simply out of habit. But this was different. Her gut told her the nervous little guy was hiding something. The old man had said he'd seen Rudd working on the place on Canyon Road. Working in the same profession, he'd just assumed that Rudd had been called out by the owner. But what if it hadn't happened that way? What if Rudd had rented the property himself, under an assumed name? What if the key-cutter who couldn't sit still was the killer?

Madison started the car. She had work to do.

## Chapter 20

Lieutenant Harper might have been upset when Madison walked out on him in the middle of a conversation, but that was nothing compared to the anger he felt towards Bradley, when the detective finally deigned to show his face. To make matters worse, Bradley decided to pester his superior the moment he walked through the door.

“Lieutenant. I need a warrant, requesting Freeman to reveal the identity of his clients.”

“And a good morning to you, Detective, kind of you to join us.”

Bradley tried his best to play down his recent absence.

“You know how it is, Lieutenant. You have to follow up leads before they get cold.”

“Don’t give me that shit, Bradley. You know the procedure. You check in and you tell us where we can find you ... oh, and you work with your partner. Stop acting like a P.I. and try remembering who pays your wages around here.”

“Sorry, Lieutenant, it won’t happen again.”

Harper had seen those words coming a mile off. It was the detective’s stock answer. The trouble was, it *always* happened again.

“Why doesn’t that inspire me with confidence?”

“So, what about that warrant?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m deadly serious, Lieutenant.”

“Well, let me see if I’ve got this right. Even though you have no evidence to speak of, you suspect this Dr Freeman of having something to do with Traynor’s murder.”

“That’s right.”

“And the fact that the guy has an alibi doesn’t bother you?”

“No.”

“Let me guess. You think he paid a hit-man to do his dirty work for him.”

“Not exactly.”

“Okay, let’s skip over that for the moment. What’s the guy’s motive?”

“Traynor had given the go-ahead for a wind farm to be built on his property.”

“And?”

Bradley hesitated before replying. Even he had to admit his theory sounded

a little lame at this point.

“The turbines would have loomed over Freeman’s property.”

“And you think that’s a motive?”

“Less than two months ago he paid three million for his place, and a realtor I spoke to said that the wind farm would have knocked at least a third off the re-sale value.”

“I don’t buy it. But, let’s say for the sake of argument that I do. Why do you need a list of his patients, for God’s sake?”

Bradley knew what he was about to say was going to sound flaky, to say the least, but he pressed on.

“I spoke to someone close to him. Apparently, he uses hypnotism as part of the treatment of his patients.”

Before Bradley could explain the details, Harper let out a harsh laugh.

“Ha! You’ve got to be kidding, Bradley. Look, I’m no expert, but even I know people can’t be hypnotised to do anything against their will. You’ve really lost the plot, Detective.”

“He uses mind-altering drugs.”

Even to Bradley, he knew it sounded like he was reaching for straws.

“You expect me to get a warrant based on that? Psychiatrists act like they’re priests in the confessional. Freeman will most likely claim we’re in danger of upsetting his fragile little nut-jobs. A judge won’t go for it. Not with what you’ve got.”

When he’d arrived, Bradley had been ready to have a stand-up argument with his boss. But now his confidence had deserted him. The problem was, he knew Harper was right. Unfortunately, there was worse to come.

“I’m taking you off the case, Detective.”

Bradley couldn’t hide his surprise.

“What the hell?”

Harper held up his hand to stop any further protest.

“Don’t give me any grief, Detective. I’m assigning you to a desk until I know I can rely on you. Since the shooting on Canyon Road, you’ve stopped being part of the team.”

Bradley wanted to argue his case, but he knew it was a waste of time. The Lieutenant’s mind was clearly made up. Instead, he had another idea.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant. I know I’ve not been myself the past few months. I think I need a break.”

“Have you got any vacation time owing?”

“I’m owed a week, Lieutenant. I promise to use the time to get my shit together.”

Harper was secretly relieved. He’d expected Bradley to put up more of a fight, and the thought of getting the detective out of his hair was appealing.

“Okay, Detective, you’ve got it.”

Bradley felt guilty. He hadn’t even considered how his decision would affect Madison. But his mind was made up, and fifteen minutes later he was leaving the building and making his way to his car.

If the Lieutenant thought Bradley was just going to drop the case, he was wrong. But what his next move was going to be was a totally different matter. He looked up at the clear blue sky and took a deep breath to help clear his head.

And all he could think of was Linda’s pretty smile, and the touch of her hand on his.



## Chapter 21

Foster was confused. Relieved, but confused. The nightmares had eased up and sometimes he could go for a week without waking up in a sweat. And, thanks to Dr Freeman, the flashbacks to Afghanistan that once sent him into a downward spiral had become manageable. Instead of overwhelming him, they now only surfaced as distant memories. Vile memories, but only memories, nonetheless. They no longer dominated his life and he could function as an instructor of the new recruits in his charge.

In fact, life had improved to such an extent, that he had even begun thinking about his personal life. Something that would have been unthinkable even a month ago. Specifically, he thought about Detective Madison Culver. She was gorgeous to look at, yes, but that wasn't the reason for his sudden infatuation. It was because, despite the reason for their meeting, he was totally at ease in her company. It had been years since he had felt anything close to the way he did with Madison, and he couldn't explain why.

For the tenth time, he removed the card she had given him from his wallet. On it was her cell phone number. Call me any time of the day or night, she had said, if he thought of anything else that might help her with the case she was working on. He recalled the smile she had treated him to when she had said it.

Unfortunately, he had nothing to offer her. But he wanted to call her anyway. He wanted to ask her on a date, but it had been so long, the thought of doing so made him incredibly nervous. More nervous than he'd been the first time they shipped him off to Afghanistan.

But it was the confusion fogging his brain that made everything far worse. He was confused because the Traynor farm felt so familiar. He could almost picture himself there, taking the shot. And there was the confusion he had felt when he realised that he had been following the detective called Bradley.

The intelligence he had been given stated that the man was funding terrorism. In fact, he'd been indirectly responsible for the death of his friend. But where had the intelligence come from? It was as if he had been assigned a covert mission, without any recollection of being briefed. All he knew was that Bradley had to be stopped. If that meant he had to analyse the detective's movements and choose a time to take him out, so be it.

Foster had to admit that the man didn't look like a terrorist, but that didn't mean a thing. He was a money man. The one and only time he'd followed the

target thus far, he had ended up outside a prestigious bank. Bradley had eventually emerged in the company of a woman who looked like a super-model. Everything about her, from the way she looked to the way she was dressed, said she was rich. Maybe the detective was getting help. No matter – his days were numbered.

Foster decided he needed a distraction to help remove the fog that threatened to envelop him. And what better distraction could there be than a beautiful woman whose company he enjoyed?

He refused to prevaricate any longer and took out his phone. He took a deep breath and punched in her number. The worst that could happen was that she would say no. Time to take the bull by the horns and go for it.

When Sergeant Foster had called her, Madison felt a mixture of emotions. She'd been elated, because she couldn't deny she was attracted to the soldier with the strong face and sensitive eyes. But she was nervous, too. And it wasn't just because it had been so long since she'd been on a date. No, it was because she couldn't help feeling that Foster was hiding something. Something about the shooting of Traynor.

As she made her way to the restaurant Foster had suggested for their assignation, she tried to put any misgivings she had aside. Having a suspicious nature came with the territory of being a cop, she reminded herself. Foster had clearly been nervous when he'd called to ask her out. She'd found it endearing that a man who faced danger as part of his job could be fazed by asking a woman out for a meal. She was flattered, and his nervous demeanour had only made her like him more. Some men found dating hard.

But why had he been tense when she mentioned the shooting of Traynor? It just didn't make any sense.

Madison decided that Jim had chosen the restaurant well. It offered food catering to all tastes and, although certainly not cheap, it was not overly pretentious. The tables offered privacy, and the subdued lighting added to the relaxed atmosphere. Her date was already waiting for her at their table and he was the perfect gentleman. Not only did he stand up to pull out her chair, he immediately complimented her on how she looked. Madison liked the way he said it. It wasn't an act.

They began with the obligatory small-talk. What a nice place. Did you have any trouble finding it? Thank you for asking me. How's your day been? Do you manage to get off the base often? How's the case going? Eventually, the bottles of wine brought to their table helped the two diners to relax and conversation became more intimate. There was a question Madison had been longing to ask.

"Have you ever been married?"

"Yes. We divorced five years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Madison, because it sounded like the right thing to say. Under the circumstances, she was afraid her words wouldn't seem sincere.

"That's okay. I'm over it now. But it was rough for a while."

"Do you mind me asking why you separated?"

"It might sound like an excuse, but it's hard not to blame army life."

"Did she resent you being away a lot?"

"That was part of it. But it was when I came back that things really took a turn for the worse. You see, I'd served as a sniper on my last tour of Afghanistan and I killed a lot of the enemy. In one forty-day period I shot over sixty Taliban fighters."

"My God."

Foster quickly held up his hand.

"I'm not telling you that to brag. But when I came back, some idiot thought my success might look good in the paper – you know, boost the image of the Marines. Trouble is, they not only printed my name, but my wife's name and where we lived. They might as well have put targets on our backs."

"You think the Taliban might have sought revenge here, in the US?"

"Our intelligence boys certainly thought it was a possibility. Anyway, it got too much for Naomi and she fled back to her folks in New York. We still call one another, now and then, but whatever we had is over."

Madison reached over and touched Foster's hand.

"I'm so sorry, Jim. That must have been terrible."

Her words were heartfelt, and Foster appreciated them. He desperately wanted to change the subject.

"What made you become a cop, Madison?"

"That's easy – my father. I was an only child and I was a daddy's girl. He was my hero and I wanted to make him proud."

"He *was* your hero?"

"He was killed in the line of duty three months ago."

“Oh Jesus, Maddison, I’m so sorry.”

Foster looked around the restaurant, desperately searching for inspiration. The evening wasn’t turning out as he’d hoped. Madison saw that he was struggling and tried to lighten the mood.

“What a pair we make. Why don’t we just order up some razor blades and get it over with?”

Foster instinctively let out a laugh, causing some of their fellow diners to look over. God, he liked this woman. She faced danger as part of her job, like him. And, like many soldiers in combat, she used dark humour to get through it all. He needed someone like Madison in his life. Very much.

“Life’s a bitch and then we die. Isn’t that what they say?” said Foster, following her cue.

“On the bad days it feels like that, I guess. I suppose you just have to hold on and wait for the good days to come along and pick you up.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I guess you have to face death before you can really become a philosopher.”

And with that, Foster raised his glass. Madison did the same and they stared into one another’s eyes, savouring the moment.

“Did they catch the guy who killed your father?”

Madison’s face dropped, and Foster inwardly cursed his own clumsiness. He quickly tried to backtrack.

“Forget I asked that. Let’s talk about something else.”

Madison shook her head.

“No, it’s okay. I don’t mind talking about it. No, the guy got away, but I’m working the case myself and I think I’m getting close.”

Foster suddenly felt a knot forming in the pit of his stomach. It took him a moment to realise its cause, because it was a feeling he’d never really experienced before. Not like this. He was concerned for Madison’s safety. He wanted to protect her. The thought of anything happening to her was physically painful. He tried to think of something to say.

“Do they let you do that? Work a case involving the death of someone so close to you?”

“The department doesn’t know. I’m doing this on my own time.”

“I’m sorry, Madison, I know this is none of my business, but isn’t that dangerous? Don’t you need someone watching your back?”

“It didn’t do my father much good.”

Foster detected the anger in her voice and kept his lips firmly closed. He

hoped they could drop the subject before the date was completely ruined. Madison just looked into his sensitive eyes and did her best to reassure him.

“Sorry if I sound bitter. I try not to be, but sometimes it’s difficult. You see, I blamed my father’s partner for a while.”

“But you don’t anymore?”

“I don’t know. I spoke to a guy I know from IAD and he thinks my partner’s blameless.”

“IAD?”

“Internal Affairs.”

“Hold on. You said *my* partner. I thought we were talking about your *father’s* partner?”

“They’re one and the same. Somehow, both of us ended up with Bradley.”

“Bradley?”

“Yeah. Pete Bradley. A legend in his own lifetime.”

Madison watched as Foster looked away, his eyes widening for a brief second, as if he were in shock. It was the same reaction he’d had when she’d told him about the shooting of Traynor. Foster did his best to smooth over his slip-up by reaching for his drink, but it was too late. Madison could read people’s faces too well.

She smiled and reached for her own drink, as if nothing had happened. What was she going to do? She was attracted to the man – that was undeniable. And part of what drew her towards him was his honest and open demeanour. So why did it feel like he was holding some dark, deep secret from her? It didn’t fit.

Part of her wanted to invite him to her home and feel his strong, naked body next to hers. She wanted to lose herself in his sensitive eyes. Should she succumb to her desires and allow this man into her life? Should she sleep with him? Her stomach tightened at the thought.

Would she be sleeping with the enemy?

## Chapter 22

One hundred and fifty-two minutes, exactly. That's how long it took Bradley to make the drive from San Diego to Palm Springs. And for every minute that passed, the detective found himself feeling better and better. He was escaping. Escaping a failed marriage, a case that was going nowhere, and a workplace where nobody liked him. And every mile, every yard and every inch that he covered brought him closer to Linda.

He wanted to see her because it felt like the world was against him and he loathed himself. He wanted to do what was right, but it hadn't worked out like that. He'd let the department down, he'd let his partners down, and he'd even let his own family down. What a scumbag. So, he was driving to Linda's home. Being with her felt good.

He'd called ahead, and Linda was waiting to greet him on her front porch. She was smiling, as if she were overjoyed to see him. It made him feel warm inside, but guilty as well. Surely, he didn't deserve this. Her smile was enough to lift the weight of life from his shoulders. She had cooked for him, too. There was candlelight and soft music, and there was wine. It was as if she were trying to seduce him. He appreciated what she had done, but it was all unnecessary. Her smile was enough.

"You needn't have gone to so much trouble."

Linda looked up, as she poured him a second glass of wine.

"No trouble."

"You're very kind. Especially since I made such a terrible house-guest the last time I was here."

"What do you mean?"

"If I remember right, I not only woke you up with my stupid nightmare, I think I must have monopolised our conversation. Coming over, I suddenly realised I hardly know anything about you, apart from the fact that your sister married Freeman."

"What would you like to know?"

"Have you ever been married?"

"I'm only twenty-seven."

"I got married at twenty-seven."

"Oh yeah? How did that work out for you?"

Linda played with her wine glass and offered him a cheeky grin. Bradley

laughed.

“You got me. Okay, let me try another question. What do you do for a living? I mean, how do you afford this lovely house?”

“That’s two questions, but I’ll let you off. I guess they’re related. I organise holiday packages and conferences.”

“Here? In Palm Springs?”

“Yes. We have some great hotels and spas here. And then there are all the activities on offer – golf, hiking, horse-riding, you name it.”

“You’ve sold it to me. I might book a holiday myself. As of now, I’m on leave.”

“Aren’t you on the case anymore?”

“Not officially.”

“Officially?”

“I’m not going to drop it. I still think Freeman’s a good suspect. Problem is, I’m the only one who does.”

“Don’t forget me.”

Bradley smiled and made a crude attempt at flirting.

“Believe me, I can’t.”

Instead of acting coy, Linda smiled back and accepted the compliment, like he knew she would.

“What I mean is, maybe I can help. What’s your next move?”

“I don’t think I have one. I asked my lieutenant if he could get a warrant, requesting Freeman give us a list of his patients. He refused. Said it would be a waste of time. He’s probably right. A judge would most likely agree with Freeman that anything he’d discussed with his patients is privileged information, unless we could prove someone’s life was at risk.”

“But he lied to you.”

“That’s not enough. He could just turn around and claim he misunderstood the question. Besides, even if he did know about the proposed wind farm, accusing him of arranging Traynor’s murder is one hell of a leap.”

“Wind farm?”

“Yeah, that’s why Freeman had Traynor killed. He was going to build a wind farm right next to *The Meadows*. Sounds far-fetched, right?”

“Are you starting to doubt he’s guilty yourself?”

“No, I’m not. I still think he’s as guilty as hell.”

“Good.”

Bradley sighed.

“Unfortunately, what I think doesn’t matter anymore. Not without any proof.”

“Well then. It’s lucky I’m here to help you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll get you Freeman’s list of patients. Then, maybe we can nail the bastard.”

At first, Bradley hadn’t known what to say. Naturally, he was excited at the prospect of being able to get the proof he needed to arrest Freeman, but he had been caught off-guard. What on earth did Linda have in mind? When she shared her plan with him, he was determined to persuade her that it wasn’t a good idea. He just had to make sure that he let her down gently.

“There’s no way I could protect you.”

“Who says I need protecting? I’m his sister-in-law. He won’t suspect a thing.”

“Let’s say, just for the sake of argument, that he agreed to see you as a patient, that doesn’t mean you’ll get a look at his client-list. If he’s got any sense, it’ll be safely hidden away somewhere. More than likely, it’ll be on a computer, tucked away behind a password.”

“We won’t know if I don’t try, will we?”

Linda was starting to get defensive. So much for letting her down gently.

“I can’t let you do this.”

“Look, Pete, I know you’re only trying to look out for me, but I’m determined to do this. If our theory about him using hypnotism to get people to do things against their will is right, he could’ve killed my sister. I have to know the truth.”

Bradley sat back and stared at his empty wine glass.

“You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?”

“You bet I am. Are you in?”

“If you’re determined to go through with it, you know I am. The problem is, there’s not a lot I can do if something goes wrong. I can make sure you’re wired and listen in, but it’s a question of getting to you in time if there’s a problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“If we’re right, this guy has already had two people killed. What’s to stop him making you the third?”



“It won’t come to that.”

Bradley admired her confidence, even if it wasn’t shared. But what if she pulled it off? He’d be one step closer to solving the case. The woman sitting across from him had shown him nothing but kindness and he was about to let her face a suspected murderer all alone.

What a scumbag.

## Chapter 23

Madison turned on to her side to watch Foster's chest slowly rise and fall, hoping she hadn't just made the biggest mistake of her life. After an intense hour of lovemaking, the soldier was out for the count and sleeping peacefully. In fact, it was the most relaxed Foster had felt for a very long time, and it was down to the beautiful detective who had thrown caution to the wind and invited him to her bed.

As for Madison, she was still trying to calm the stirrings in her body after their recent union. She knew in her heart that they had shared something special. There had been the physical excitement, but also the emotional connection they shared. It had become clear that they both had an intense need to connect, and they had clung to one another, almost in desperation.

But now the doubt she had quashed, threatened to raise its ugly head once more. It had been so long since she had allowed a man into her life, and yet she had fallen into bed with a virtual stranger. And this stranger, sleeping in her apartment, was hiding something from her. There was no doubt she had feelings for him, but she could not let her guard down. Perhaps that was why she had willed herself to remain awake. She was torn and didn't know what should she do? Give herself to this man unconditionally, or sleep with a gun under her pillow?

Foster opened his eyes and caught her watching him. He smiled and brought his hand up to her face, tucking a loose strand of her hair behind her ear.

"Can't sleep?"

He had caught Madison by surprise, and she hoped he couldn't see her blush in the early-morning light.

"Just thinking."

"What about? Us?"

Madison felt embarrassed and lied.

"No. The case I'm working on."

Foster laughed.

"I was that good, huh?"

Madison smiled.

"Don't take it personally. I'm just a very dedicated police officer."

"Well, it's comforting to know that there are people like you out there,

keeping me safe.”

This time it was Madison’s turn to laugh and she rubbed her hand across his muscular torso.

“I can’t imagine a big strong boy like you needs much protecting.”

“Now you’re teasing me.”

“Maybe.”

Madison rested her head on his chest, and he stroked her hair as he spoke.

“Which case were you thinking about? The official one, or the unofficial one?”

Madison decided it was best to head for safer ground.

“The unofficial one.”

“Are you getting anywhere?”

When Madison didn’t reply, Foster began to apologise.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be asking you about your work. Police business, and all that.”

“No ... it’s okay. I’m pleased you’re interested. As a matter of fact, I already have a suspect.”

Foster sat up in bed, causing Madison to look up.

“Jesus, Madison. You think you might know who killed your father?”

“Maybe.”

Foster’s breath left his body.

“Madison. Speaking as one who knows, I admire your coolness under pressure. If I knew something like that, I’d be aching to settle a score.”

His words got Madison’s mind racing. *Settle a score?* It had been easy to forget, making love to this man, that he had killed many times in the line of duty. Suddenly, she was hit by the power of those five little words to absolve a killer from guilt – *in the line of duty*.

Regardless of the legal niceties, Foster had killed again and again. He had shot men, under orders, for his country. It was kill or be killed, wasn’t that what they said? But killing someone in the US, without the blessing of your government, was a whole different ball game. You were no longer a hero, but a murderer. Only a tenuous line, built on words and interpretation, separated the two.

The question was, had Foster crossed that line?

## Chapter 24

Bradley had almost laughed when senior colleagues in the department shared stories from the good old days. Back then, anyone ‘wearing a wire’ was forced to undergo the indignity of having a cumbersome contraption strapped to their body. Nowadays, modern technology made the whole process a lot more comfortable and, more importantly, safer.

This became abundantly clear when Linda joined Bradley in the home of a friend of his, in downtown San Diego. Hoffman was a gadget freak, and since losing his job as the manager of a *Radioshack*, he had gone into business for himself. He sold his wares on-line, and he had chosen not to waste his money on premises to store his products. Consequently, every corner of his small apartment was packed to the gills with boxes and packages of various sizes. If there was a system in place, whereby any required item could be retrieved quickly, Linda decided it was not immediately apparent.

“I can go as small as you want, Pete, and the battery will still last for hours. It’ll all depend on how far you want the gizmo to transmit.”

Hoffman stood in one of the few empty spaces that could be found, his hands on his hips, happy to share his expertise. Linda guessed he was over six feet tall, which she couldn’t help thinking was unfortunate, considering the living space available to him. His hair was neatly-groomed, to the point where the parting looked as if it had been created using a ruler.

Bradley was determined to play it safe. She might not have seen it his way, but Linda was risking her life.

“Let’s keep it as small as we can. I’ll make sure I’m no more than a few hundred yards away when I receive the transmission.”

“Will you be able to get that close?” asked Linda.

“I’ll make sure I do.”

Bradley had already cased Freeman’s retreat, and knew its extensive grounds were surrounded by high fencing and protected by CCTV. But he decided it was best not to mention that right now.

Hoffman was picking up one small box after another and quickly discarding them. This went on for several minutes until he found what he was looking for.

“Ah, here it is.”

He took a box-cutter and tore through some plastic packaging to get to its

contents. He held up what appeared to be a small brooch. It had the image of a cat on the front.

"The microphone is hidden right here, in the cat's eye. See?"

"Not really," said Linda.

"Good," said Hoffman proudly. "That's the idea."

"We'll take two," said Bradley, pulling out his wallet.

"Forget it, Pete. These are on the house. I owe you."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. But if you feel like returning them once you're done, I won't complain. Why do you need two, by the way?"

"Just in case one fails."

"This baby won't fail, believe me."

"Okay, I'll take your word for it."

Hoffman reached over for another box and pulled out what looked like a small radio.

"This is the receiver. It'll fit in your jacket pocket and there's an earpiece, so you can listen in while you're on the move."

"Great."

"Why do you need this stuff, Pete? You and this lady going undercover?"

"Something like that."

"Doesn't the department usually provide you with this sort of thing?"

"Yeah. But we're sort of working freelance, if you know what I mean."

Hoffman didn't, but he knew better than to pry any further.

"Well, I hope it all works out for you folks," said Hoffman, offering a broad grin.

"Thanks, pal. And I'll be sure to bring these gadgets back in one piece," said Bradley, holding up the electronic wizardry Hoffman had graciously provided.

"I hope you and the little lady come back the same way," said Hoffman, hoping to inject a little humour into the proceedings.

"Sure," said Bradley, forcing a smile.

He didn't find the joke very funny.

Bradley had insisted that Linda followed his car in her own SUV. He didn't want her visit to *The Meadows* to arouse any more suspicion than necessary. He'd also persuaded her to call Freeman and arrange the meeting in advance.

The last thing he wanted was to go through the charade of a visit, with all the risk it entailed, only to find the guy wasn't at home.

They parked at the side of the road, a short distance away from the main gate of Freeman's retreat. Bradley joined Linda in her SUV. She was wearing a smart, cream jacket, with the brooch firmly attached to her left lapel, and he thought she looked gorgeous.

"Are you sure you still want to go through with this?" asked Bradley, giving her one last chance to pull out.

"Yes."

Linda tried to sound confident, but Bradley noticed her hand was shaking when she touched the brooch for reassurance.

"Look, Linda. If you change your mind for any reason, or you think something is wrong, just make some excuse and get out of there."

"I will. Don't worry, it'll be fine."

"Okay, we'll stick to the plan. Good luck."

Bradley kissed her on the cheek and made his way to the back seat. He lay down on the floor, hidden from view.

Not giving herself time to have second thoughts, Linda started the car and pulled away. A few minutes later she pulled up at the main gate and pressed the button on the intercom, announcing her arrival. Within seconds, Theresa's voice could be heard, coming from the speaker.

"Yes?"

"Hi. It's Linda Renton. I'm here to see Dr Freeman."

"Of course, Linda, Gregory's expecting you. Come on in."

The electronic gates opened, and Linda made her way along the impressive driveway. The collection of ornamental bushes was just where Bradley had said it would be, three hundred yards from the property. She brought the car to a stop and Bradley leapt from the rear door, before hiding behind one of the larger pieces of greenery.

As she continued to make her way to the property, she spoke into her brooch.

"Can you hear me, Pete?"

She looked in her rear-view mirror and saw a hand waving from behind the bush. It was the signal they had agreed. She'd promised to turn around if the gadget concealed in the brooch hadn't worked. So far, everything was going as planned.

Theresa's smiling face greeted her on the steps, in front of the retreat's main doors. The girl looked so sweet, Linda should have found the gesture comforting. But then she remembered what Pete had told her. This was Gregory's new girlfriend.

*Girl* was the right word. Theresa couldn't have been mistaken for anything else but a teenager. And, just like Bradley, Linda couldn't fathom what on earth she was doing with Gregory. But then she remembered why she was there. The bastard had hypnotised her. Just like he hypnotised Hilary, before she jumped to her death. The thought gave her the resolve to get the job done. She'd find the client-list so that Pete could nail the bastard to the wall.

Theresa gave no indication that she knew who Linda was, and escorted her to Freeman's study as if she were just another patient. When they entered the room, Freeman was standing at its centre, his arms by his side, waiting.

It had been nearly a year since she had seen him last, and Linda was surprised at how well he looked. He was wearing what appeared to be a very expensive suit, and he had cultivated an impressive tan. He was still gaunt, and she thought he had developed a few more wrinkles, but his eyes were as mesmerising as they'd always been. Hilary had found them attractive, but as far as Linda was concerned, they just gave her the creeps.

"It's good to see you, Linda. I must admit, I was rather surprised to receive your call."

The calm and soothing voice that should have felt pleasant to the ear, only sounded fake and insincere to Linda.

"I hope you didn't mind, Gregory, but I need your help."

The words almost stuck in her throat.

"Of course. Please, come and sit down."

He pointed to his expensive leather recliner and turned to Theresa.

"Could you bring us both a cup of lemon tea?"

"Certainly, Gregory."

Linda watched Theresa's pert behind as she made her way to the door of the study.

"Pretty assistant, Gregory. She looks very young."

Freeman shrugged as if it didn't matter. Linda waited for him to admit that she was his mistress, but he simply changed the subject.

"How can I help you, Linda?"

Linda avoided using the foot-stool accompanying the chair and tried her

best to sit upright. She took a deep breath.

“It’s a little difficult to talk about, but I’m having trouble coping with Hilary’s death.”

Freeman smiled. To Linda, it did not seem to be an appropriate reaction.

“That’s quite understandable, Linda. Grieving is a complicated process. Especially when the person we have lost took their own life.”

Linda thought of Theresa’s lithe, young body heading off to make lemon tea, and decided Freeman was handling his grief pretty well.

“The thing is, I didn’t know who else to turn to. I know you’ve worked wonders with many of your patients and I thought you might be able to help me. Especially as you understand the cause of my problem.”

Theresa chose that moment to return with the lemon tea. When she passed a cup to Freeman, he did not even acknowledge her. But she continued to smile and placed the second cup on a small table within Linda’s reach. Freeman stared at Linda, saying nothing until Theresa had left.

Bradley remained where Linda had left him, behind the rockery adjoining the driveway. He wanted to get closer to the property, but he had spotted at least three cameras, covering the manicured lawns and gravelled paths that surrounded it. He just couldn’t risk it. Luckily, he was close enough to pick up what was being said in Freeman’s study. He estimated that it would take him no more than a minute or two to make it to the front door if something were to go wrong.

So far, everything had gone as planned. He thought that Freeman didn’t sound suspicious of Linda’s sudden visit but, with his monotone voice, it was hard to tell. The small-talk and polite exchanges appeared to have stopped, and he pressed the ear-piece of his receiver deeper into his ear. He thought he could hear footsteps and the clatter of crockery.

“What is that?”

The question had come from Linda. Bradley strained to hear the reply. Just then, a sudden noise erupted from the corner of the grounds. He looked out from behind his hiding place and saw a man wheeling out a lawn mower from an outbuilding. The mower’s engine sprang into life and Bradley pressed his hand over his other ear, desperate to listen to the sounds emerging from his ear-piece. But it was hopeless.



“It is merely a relaxant, Linda. I use it all the time with my patients. This,” he said, holding up a syringe and a bottle of clear liquid, “together with my use of hypnosis, can work wonders, believe me. Any grief you feel will become a thing of the past. All you will be left with are pleasant memories. Imagine that!”

For a moment, Linda almost forgot why she was there. Gregory was effectively promising to remove her anguish and mental pain in a single session of treatment. No wonder he had patients queueing up to have him work his magic. It beat the hell out of Valium. Linda didn't know what to do and decided to stall.

“Before we start, I need to use your restroom. I don't think I'll be able to relax properly otherwise.”

“Very well,” said Freeman, failing to hide his irritation. “It is across the hall, under the stairs.”

Linda quickly stood up and left the room, closing the door behind her. Theresa was nowhere to be seen, but she thought she could hear movement coming from upstairs. At the rear of the hall was another door that had been left open. She headed towards it.

It led to yet another study, although it was a great deal smaller than the one she had just left. In the centre of the room was a writing desk and chair, and Linda assumed that it was used as a reception area. On the desk was a laptop, and she tapped a finger on the touchpad. The screen asked her for a password, and she groaned in frustration.

Undaunted, she opened one of the drawers. Inside was an appointment book and her spirits soared. But just as she was about to flip through its contents, she suddenly heard footsteps descending the stairs. She ran out and headed for the door of the restroom before she was spotted. Once inside, she headed for the sink and splashed water on her face, breathing deeply. She cursed. To be so close, only to be foiled at the last minute. There was a knock on the bathroom door.

“Ms Renton? Are you all right?”

Linda dried her face and came out to meet Theresa.

“I'm fine, thank you.”

“Gregory is waiting.”

Linda felt like telling Gregory to go to hell, but she followed his receptionist to his study.

“Ah, there you are,” said Freeman, pointing once again towards the leather

recliner.

Linda hesitated, and Freeman frowned.

“You do want me to help you, don’t you? Unless, that is, you’ve come here for some other reason.”

Linda shook her head and tried to hide her nervousness.

“No, of course not. Will the treatment take long?”

“It will be over before you know it. And afterwards you’ll feel much better, believe me.”

Linda sat in the chair and Freeman rolled up the sleeve of her jacket, before preparing the syringe.

“And this is just a muscle relaxant?”

“Yes, Linda, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Before she could ask any more questions, he swabbed her arm, located a suitable vein, and injected the needle.

A pleasant feeling of warmth spread through her body and she could feel her eye-lids becoming heavy. She closed them and wanted to sleep. She felt as if she were floating in the air and all contact with the outside world had ceased, apart from the sound of Freeman’s hypnotic voice.

“Why are you really here, Linda?”

Linda felt no need to be evasive. Gregory had asked a question and he deserved an honest answer.

“I’m here to get a look at your client-list.”

Freeman stepped back and looked down at his new patient with disdain. He couldn’t imagine that Linda had suddenly decided to meddle in his affairs on her own.

“Who put you up to this, Linda?”

“Detective Pete Bradley.”

Freeman’s thin lips pressed together, as he processed this latest revelation. His mind raced.

“Where is Detective Bradley now?”

“He is hiding behind the rockery next to the driveway.”

Freeman instinctively headed for the window, overlooking the grounds. The rockery was too far away for him to spot anything suspicious. He turned to face Linda.

“Why is he hiding on the grounds?”

“He needed to be close.”

“Why?”

“The transmitter in my brooch has a limited range.”

Freeman walked over to her and examined the brooch on the lapel of her jacket. It looked unremarkable, but he knew that Linda was telling the truth. She had no alternative. He thought for a moment before pressing a button on the intercom on his desk.

“Theresa, would you mind coming in here for a moment?”

Theresa appeared a minute later.

“Theresa. I need to you to walk along the driveway to the rockery. Behind it you will find Detective Bradley hiding. Please ask him to join us.”

Theresa was unable to hide her disbelief.

“What?”

“Just do it,” said Freeman irritably, and Theresa quickly left to do as she was told.

He returned to his patient and held his hand over her brooch.

“Linda. There’s something I need to tell you.”

He leant over her and whispered something in her ear. When he had finished, he stood back and ended the session.

“In a moment I will ask you to wake up, and you will have no memory of the injection I just gave you. Do you understand?”

Linda nodded.

Bradley must have cursed the gardener and his mower a hundred times before the man finally turned the engine off. But, now that it was quiet, he couldn’t hear any sound coming from his earpiece. He desperately tried to decide what to do next, when he suddenly heard footsteps making their way along one of the gravel paths. Whoever it was, they were getting closer. He risked a look through the bushes and saw Theresa approaching.

Despite what Gregory had told her, Theresa still found it hard to believe that the detective could really be hiding behind the rockery. She slowed as she approached and cautiously made her way round to the other side of the bushes. She let out a gasp when she found Bradley sitting on the grass. He smiled, even though he had never felt so foolish in his life.

“Dr Freeman wondered if you would care to join him and Ms Renton inside.”

Bradley stood up and remained calm, determined to salvage what little dignity he had left. He couldn’t understand how he’d been spotted. He thought

he'd been careful to stay hidden.

"It would be my pleasure," he said, straightening his tie.

"Good of you to join us."

Freeman's words were accompanied by a smug grin. Bradley wanted to wipe it from the man's face with his fist. The doctor was sitting behind his desk, while Linda sat in a chair in the centre of the room. She looked as if she were half asleep.

"How did you know I was here?" asked Bradley.

"You were picked up by one of our cameras. I think the important question here is, what are you doing sneaking around my property?"

"I wasn't sneaking around. I came here with Ms Renton. I was merely waiting until she had completed her treatment."

"I'm sure we could have found a more comfortable place for you to wait than my rockery," said Freeman, enjoying the moment. "In any case, I wasn't even aware that you were acquainted with my sister-in-law."

Bradley ignored him and turned to Linda.

"Are you okay?"

Freeman explained when she failed to answer.

"I place my patients into a deep hypnotic state. It will take a few more minutes before she is completely aware of her surroundings. There is nothing to be concerned about. However, my question stands. How do you know Linda?"

"What can I say? It's a small world."

"Are you here in an official capacity, Detective?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Do not take me for a fool. You come to my house, questioning me about my neighbour's murder, and now I find you skulking around the grounds of my property. It can hardly be a coincidence. Do you suspect me of something?"

Bradley knew that Freeman was trying to put him on the spot, and he decided the best thing was to ignore him. Linda was sitting up, looking around the room as if she were trying to get her bearings. He spoke to her.

"Linda. Are you ready to leave now?"

"Sure."

Linda joined him and they left the study, almost bumping into Theresa, who was loitering on the other side of the door. Freeman drew Theresa to one side.

“Escort them to their car. Make sure they leave my property.”

Theresa nodded and ran down the steps at the front of the retreat. Bradley turned to see who was following them. When he spotted Theresa, he looked around to make sure Freeman wasn't with her. He smiled to put her at ease. On a whim, he decided to take a shot in the dark.

“Theresa. Why is Dr Freeman so coy when it comes to talking about his success? I think it's admirable the way he treats people from all walks of life. Even our brave servicemen.”

“Servicemen? Oh, I suppose you mean Sergeant Foster.”

Bradley kept a straight face and didn't miss a beat.

“Yeah, Sergeant John Foster, the special forces guy, right?”

The detective didn't expect his ruse to work and he couldn't believe it when Theresa responded, all wide-eyed and innocent.

“No. I'm sure his name's Jim, and I could have sworn he's a Marine.”

“My mistake,” said Bradley, turning away to hide his broad smile.

## Chapter 25

Bradley was eager to tell his partner the news. He wanted her to know that, contrary to what she might think, he hadn't been shirking his responsibilities and was on the case. But whenever he called her cell phone, there was no answer. Not that he could blame her for ignoring him. He'd been self-absorbed and he'd let her down, just when she needed him most. No wonder she didn't trust him and blamed him for the death of her father.

In the end, he decided to head for the station house and hope he didn't get collared by the lieutenant. The last thing he wanted was another lecture and, besides, he'd promised his boss he was taking a vacation.

He entered the department building via the rear entrance and took the stairs up to the computer room. It was departmental policy to track the movement of every police car, even the unmarked variety, and Bradley hoped he would be able to locate Madison's vehicle. With any luck, she would be somewhere nearby.

The computer room was managed by Vince, a fifty-four-year-old veteran who was marking time until retirement. He didn't take any shit, but just loved dishing it out. As soon as he entered the room, Bradley spotted the man's curved shoulders slouched over his keyboard, hammering away, using just his index fingers. Despite ostensibly being the department's computer expert, he had never learned to touch-type.

It had been nearly a year since Bradley had last visited and he reckoned Vince's curvature of the spine hadn't improved. If anything, it was worse, and Bradley couldn't help wondering what happened to the fifty-four-year-old when he lay down. He doubted if the man's head touched his pillow.

"How's it hangin', Vince?"

Bradley's cheery approach failed to have the desired effect, and Vince merely grunted. The detective decided to try the direct approach instead.

"I was wondering if you could do me a favour."

Vince finally dragged his eyes away from his monitor and looked at Bradley over the top of his thick glasses.

"Figures. That's what everybody wants when they come here. I don't suppose you brought any coffee and doughnuts with you."

Bradley stood there, empty-handed, and shrugged.

"Would you like me to head over to Maisie's and get you some?"

“Forget it. At least you offered. What do you want?”

Bradley didn’t waste any time.

“I’m trying to get hold of Culver. I was hoping you could locate her car for me.”

“Culver? Madison’s your partner, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, why don’t you just call her?”

Bradley did a good job of hiding his irritation. As if he hadn’t thought of that!

“She’s not answering her phone.”

“Well, get her on the radio, then.”

Bradley had to admit it was a good suggestion, but he and Madison weren’t exactly getting along. He needed to meet with her, face-to-face.

“I don’t want to do that.”

“Why the hell not?”

Bradley was losing patience.

“Jesus, Vince, are you going to help me or not?”

Vince grunted and turned back to his keyboard. He decided computers were easier to get along with than cops. Thinking that Vince was ignoring him, Bradley started to leave.

“Where are you going, Bradley?”

“I’ve got things to do.”

“Don’t you want to know where Culver’s car is at?”

“Sure I do, Vince. That’s why I came here, remember?”

“Her Chevy’s on Farrington Road, between Harper’s Way and Third.”

Bradley smiled.

“Thanks, Vince. Next time, I’ll bring doughnuts.”

“Sure you will,” said Vince, but Bradley was gone.

Thirty minutes later, Bradley parked his car behind Madison’s Chevy. She was sitting in it, and she’d spotted him in her rear-view mirror. Of course she had, thought Bradley. She was too good a cop to get caught napping. Bradley got out of his car and joined Madison in her Chevy before she had a chance to protest.

“I’m glad I’ve finally caught up with you, Madison.”

By the look on her face, it was clear to Bradley that his partner didn’t share the sentiment. Her next words dripped with sarcasm.

“Do I know you?”

“I don’t blame you for hating me. I’ve been a jerk.”

“I don’t hate you, Pete. I’m just disappointed.”

Bradley didn’t know what to say, so he took a moment to look up and down the street.

“What are you doing here, Madison? Stake-out?”

Madison stared at him and her mouth turned down at the corners.

“What do you care?”

“Don’t be like that, Madison. I’ve apologised, haven’t I?”

Madison continued to stare at him, as if she were trying to read his mind. Eventually, she decided to share.

“I’m watching the shoe-repair place over there,” she said, nodding in the direction of Rudd’s place of work.

“Who are you waiting for?”

“His name’s Kyle Rudd. He cuts keys.”

“Come on, Madison, are you going to tell me what’s going on or not?”

Madison let out a deep sigh, as if she needed to release tension.

“Since you seemed determined to work on the Traynor shooting by yourself, I decided I might as well do my own thing.”

“What are you saying?”

Madison kept looking at the shoe-repair shop, wishing Bradley would just go away. He had no right to suddenly turn up and start interrogating her like this. In the end, she couldn’t bring herself to tell him to go, and she decided to share what she’d got.

“A few days ago, I checked out the address where you found the kid.”

Bradley sat up as if he’d been shot. He didn’t have to ask which kid she was talking about.

“And?” said Bradley, desperate to know where this was leading.

“And the landlord said the locks had been changed by whoever rented the place. So, I decided to check out some of the local locksmiths in the area.”

“Let me guess,” said Bradley, determined to keep things moving along. “The guy who changed the locks works here.”

As he said it, he pointed at the shoe-repair shop. Madison just stared at him, so he tried a different angle.

“Why does he deserve all this attention?”

“I caught him in a lie. He told me he didn’t replace the locks, when I already knew that he did.”



Bradley knew better than to ask her how she knew. She was finally opening up, and he didn't want to risk making her angry all over again. He needed to tread carefully.

"I'm sorry, Madison. I should have been there for you. I got wrapped up in the Traynor case when your father's killer is the one I should be concentrating on."

"Don't sweat it. You were taken off the case and I'm working on it unofficially. I suppose I ought to thank you. If you hadn't done your own thing, I might never have started looking into the kid's murder and come up with this."

She nodded in the direction of the shop, never taking her eyes off it. Her kindness made Bradley feel worse. He knew she held him partially responsible for her father's death, and yet he'd let her pick up the pieces on her own. And now she was being nice. He'd never felt so guilty.

"Do you really think this guy could have something to do with ..."

Bradley never got to finish his thought. A short, nervous-looking man suddenly emerged from the shop and headed towards a small Mazda parked along the street. Madison started her Chevy and waited for the guy to pull away.

The two detectives were so intent on not losing their quarry, they failed to notice Foster's four-wheel-drive following two cars behind.

Foster had been lucky. When he'd failed to find Detective Bradley's name and address listed in the phone book, he'd gone to the station house, just on the off-chance that he might spot him. He knew better than to ask at the station for the guy's personal details – it would be the police department's policy to keep such information confidential. Police officers make lots of enemies. It was the nature of the job. But when he was sitting in the parking lot, he spotted Bradley making his way to his car.

Luckily, the traffic was heavy, and the soldier managed to keep a few cars between him and Bradley, although the cop was in such a hurry, he probably wasn't even watching out for a tail. Foster had his rifle in the trunk of the car, but he doubted he would get the opportunity to use it. Downtown San Diego was simply too busy to risk a shot, even if he could find a suitable hiding place.

When Bradley finally arrived at his destination and parked, Foster pulled in about a hundred yards away. He watched the detective leave his car and join

another person in a second vehicle. The soldier couldn't see who it was, but he thought it was a woman. From the movement of their heads he could tell that they were talking, and he waited patiently. Suddenly, the woman behind the wheel started her car and pulled out into traffic.

Foster started his own car and decided to follow them.

The two detectives drove in silence. They were professionals, and Bradley let Madison concentrate on the task of not losing their suspect, while at the same time making sure they didn't inadvertently give themselves away. At first, this wasn't a problem, and Madison expertly kept several cars between their two vehicles, without losing sight of Rudd's Mazda. Unfortunately, the Mazda was heading for the suburbs of the city. Remaining inconspicuous was going to become more and more difficult. Madison's Chevy was deliberately nondescript, but if their nervous suspect began searching for a tail, they were sure he would spot them.

And it only got worse. Rudd was heading for the lakes to the north-east of the city and the traffic was getting lighter with every passing mile. The detectives pulled back as far as they dared, occasionally losing sight of Rudd's car when he disappeared around a bend in the road, but the longer they kept pace with his vehicle, the more chance there was of him spotting them.

Whenever he drew closer to the old barn, Rudd always made it a habit to pay extra care, checking his rear-view mirror on a regular basis. Since leaving the city, the Chevy had kept pace with him and taken every turn he'd made. In a shitty car like that, they had to be cops. He weighed up his options. Stop and find out what they wanted. Lose them. Or, his preferred choice, teach them who they were messing with. For the hell of it, he chose option three.

It had taken him a lot of time and effort to find a property that was suited to his needs, and the barn had fitted the bill. It was cheap and, more importantly, it was relatively isolated, considering it was so close to the city. He would have to find another place, which was a pain in the ass, but it would be worth it to teach the dumb cops a lesson.

The barn was situated in a dip on open ground, save for a small copse of trees at its eastern edge. When he turned the final bend, ahead of the long driveway to the barn, he accelerated, giving himself time to turn into the

driveway unseen. He reached the barn before Bradley and Madison realised what he had done, opened the large doors at its centre, retrieved a shotgun lying on a bench inside, and ran into the copse.

Madison had already driven past the entrance to the driveway, when Bradley spotted a trail of dust, leading towards the barn. She brought the Chevy to a quick stop and reversed until they had a good view of the barn.

“Is that him?” she asked.

“Yeah, the Mazda’s parked out front.”

“What shall we do? If we go in there, he’ll know we’re on to him.”

“I think that ship has sailed, Madison. He knew he was being followed, and after your visit to his shop he’ll know the cops are interested in him. I say we go in there and find out what he’s up to.”

Madison resented the way Bradley was suddenly trying to hijack the case, after she’d put in all the hard work. But she couldn’t fault his logic and, without saying a word, she turned into the driveway and made her way to the barn. She brought her car to a halt, a few yards behind the Mazda. The doors to the barn were wide open and there was no sign of Rudd.

“What do you think?” she asked.

Bradley turned his head to take a good look in every direction.

“Well, either the guy has run away, or he’s waiting for us.”

“How do you want to handle this?”

The two detectives shared a look. Without having to say it, they both knew what the other one was thinking. Madison was placing her life in Bradley’s hands, just as her father had done. Would he let her down, too? To help put her mind at rest, Bradley quickly came to a decision.

“I’ll head for the barn. You stay behind the Mazda and cover me.”

Before Madison could argue, Bradley was out of the car and removing his Glock from the holster on his belt. Madison reached for her bag and pulled out her .38, checked it was fully-loaded, and took up a position behind the Mazda. Bradley cautiously headed for the barn’s open doors and called out.

“Hello. This is the police. Is anybody there? We need to talk to you.”

There was no reply, but Bradley was reluctant to head inside, knowing the suspect could well be waiting, ready for him to show his face. He tried to figure out what the guy was up to.

That was when he caught the movement of a figure in the trees to his right.

Foster hadn't expected to find himself in terrain like this. He had parked his car on the road, a short distance from the entrance to the barn's driveway, and he had a clear view of the property. The Chevy was parked behind another car, and two figures appeared to be standing outside the barn.

He calmly retrieved his rifle from the trunk of his car and climbed over the fence, surrounding a nearby field. The ground quickly dropped away, and he was able to kneel and use the telescopic sight of his weapon without being seen from the road. He breathed as deeply and as slowly as he could, trying to reduce his heart-rate as much as possible in the time he had. Even the beat of his heart had the power to affect his shot.

He was in luck. He had a clear view of Detective Bradley, standing motionless in front of the barn's open doors.

He was about to take the shot, when the detective suddenly hit the ground and scrambled on his hands and knees until he was behind the barn door. He thought he heard a gunshot but couldn't be sure. The second figure – the woman – walked away from the Mazda and headed towards the barn to investigate. He brought his telescopic sight into focus and let his finger rest on the trigger of his rifle. And that was when he recognised her. His heartbeat quickened, once again.

It was Madison.

Bradley's instinct for self-preservation had saved his life. A fraction of a second before Rudd fired his shotgun, the detective had thrown himself to the ground and crawled to the barn door for cover. Everything had happened so quickly, Madison thought her partner had been shot. Unable to call to Bradley without giving away her position, she cautiously made her way to the open doors, gripping her .38 firmly in both hands, ready to fire at Bradley's assailant. She focussed on the barn and failed to notice Rudd leave the shelter of the copse to her right. He took up a position where he had a clear shot of her back.

Foster's head throbbed, as he tried to come to terms with his conflicting emotions. He was there to do a job. He had been given a mission, although by whom he did not know. His target – Detective Bradley – was indirectly responsible for the death of his friend in Afghanistan. He deserved to be taken

out, and Foster was just the man to do it. But had someone beaten him to it? And now, incredibly, Madison Culver was in his sights. A woman he was falling in love with. What the hell was going on?

But, in combat, there was rarely time to analyse the situation in any depth. He and his fellow Marines had been trained to follow the three-second rule. In a fire-fight, that was how long you had to evaluate the situation and make your move.

But even before his three seconds were up, another man emerged from the trees close to the barn, carrying a shotgun. He was pointing it in Madison's direction, preparing to shoot her in the back. Foster's confusion evaporated, and he was no longer a soldier following orders. He was a man, determined to protect the woman he loved. But there was precious little time.

He didn't dare risk a head shot, in case he missed, so he fired at Rudd's chest. But, just as Foster pulled his trigger, Rudd turned, and the rifle-bullet caught the target in his left arm. To his credit, Rudd did not wait to see from where the shot had come but headed for his car, finding cover before Foster had a chance to finish the job.

Foster only had time to see Madison head for the cover of the barn, just as Bradley had done. But now her partner had emerged, firing his pistol in the direction of the Mazda to cover her escape. But Rudd had already managed to get in and start the engine. The car threw up a cloud of dust, as he headed to another track at the rear of the barn. Rudd mentally patted himself on the back for choosing the location well.

"Let's go! I think you wounded him," yelled Bradley.

He was about to run towards Madison's Chevy, when she caught him by the arm and pulled him back into the barn. He looked at her, confused.

"What are you doing? He's getting away."

Madison yelled back, determined to make her point.

"I didn't wound him. The shot came from somewhere else."

"What are you talking about? There's no one else here."

Madison let out a cry of frustration as she did her best to make her partner understand.

"I didn't hear the shot, so I think the bullet was fired from a distance."

Bradley still couldn't grasp what was going on, but he had the sense to realise Madison was right. With another shooter out there, it was much safer to

stay in the barn until they figured out what to do.

Eventually, he stated the obvious.

“So, there’s some kind of sniper out there?”

“I guess so.”

“Does that kind of remind you of anything?”

Madison nodded.

“Yeah. The Traynor shooting.”

“Coincidence?”

“Could be. Anything’s possible.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t believe in coincidences. Traynor’s killed by a sniper, and I find out Freeman is treating a Marine trained as a sniper. And now a sniper turns up, firing bullets in our direction. Something’s not right here.”

Madison’s heart began to thud in her chest, causing her to shake, and it wasn’t because she’d nearly been killed.

“Freeman’s treating a Marine?” she asked.

“Yeah. A sergeant based in the city called Jim Foster.”

Madison stared at her partner wide-eyed, unable to hide her shock. Suddenly, it was as if her world were collapsing around her.

## Chapter 26

Madison felt as though every ounce of energy had been drained from her body, and this time she was happy to let Bradley take charge. She wondered if they should find the farmer who owned the barn. Maybe get a line on where Rudd was headed, or at least find out what he'd rented the barn for. Maybe they should head back to his shop or find out where he lived. But whatever Madison suggested, Bradley simply said no. They needed time to re-group, he said. They needed to talk.

Bradley said he knew just the place and, when they were sure the coast was clear, he drove to a general store a few miles down the road to pick up supplies. Thirty minutes later they were pulling up to a fishing lodge, next to a large private lake. There were no signs of life for miles around. The lodge had a wooden veranda, overlooking the water, complete with rocking-chairs, separated by a wooden table. There was a pot, containing a remarkably healthy cactus plant, and Bradley picked it up to reveal a key.

"How original," said Madison, somehow finding the energy to speak.

"The place belongs to Sheridan in Narcotics."

"He should know better."

"Give him a break, Madison. There isn't anyone here to break into the damn place."

Bradley went inside and returned with two padded seat-covers. He handed Madison the cleanest of the two and they placed them on the chairs. Madison piled their supplies on to the table. Sandwiches, a couple of Danishes, some beers, and a bottle of mineral water.

"What are we doing here?" she asked.

Bradley didn't answer. Instead, he pointed to her rocking-chair, indicating that she should sit down. She did as she was told, and he nodded towards the lake.

"Look at the water. Watch the wildlife and listen to the quiet. And, most important of all, breathe deeply until your heart-rate has returned to normal."

She looked at him as if he were crazy. She was about to say something, but he put his fingers to his lips.

"Shhh."

Madison decided not to argue and looked across to the lake. She had to admit it was a beautiful spot, and the peace and tranquillity was just what she

needed after her near-death experience. She couldn't get her heart-rate to slow down much, no matter how she breathed, but at least she started to feel half-human again. Perhaps Bradley knew what he was talking about. Several minutes had passed before he spoke again.

"I get out of the city and enjoy nature every chance I get."

Madison's mind was still racing, and she wasn't in the mood to play games any more.

"Good for you. I thought we came here to talk."

"Okay, let's talk. Why don't you start by telling me how you know Jim Foster?"

Madison immediately regretted her impatience and became defensive.

"What makes you think I know him?"

"Come on, Madison. When I mentioned his name, you looked like you'd seen a ghost."

Madison didn't know what to say and pursed her lips together, but Bradley wouldn't let up.

"Madison. Let's not hold out on each other anymore. We need to work together."

"That's rich, coming from you."

"Okay, you got me. Feel better now?"

"No."

"So, tell me how you know Foster."

So, she did, taking him through her visit to the Marine base in the city. She told him she and Foster had been on a date and connected, but she couldn't bring herself to say they'd slept together.

"Jesus, that's a hell of a coincidence, don't you think?"

"I guess. Oh, that's right, you don't believe in coincidences, do you?"

"Not usually, no. But I guess this time you just got a lucky break."

Madison leant forward and rubbed her temples with her fingers, hoping to wipe away the pain in her head.

"Have a drink of water," said Bradley.

Madison decided it was a good idea. She reached for the bottle and drank from it. Bradley had already helped himself to a beer and was munching on a sandwich. How he had an appetite after what they'd been through was beyond her. He put down his beer and chewed his sandwich before he spoke.

"The reason we're floundering is because we're working two cases at the same time."



“And who’s fault is that?”

“If it makes you feel any better, it’s all my fault, okay?”

Madison sighed and leaned back in her chair.

“I’m sorry. Go on.”

“Firstly, we’ve got the shooting of Traynor, apparently by someone who is well-trained at handling a rifle. Agreed?”

Madison simply nodded.

“Second, there’s the guy who just got away. The guy who could well have killed Timmy and your father.”

Madison was starting to wish Bradley would just shut up. She didn’t need reminding that they’d let her father’s murderer slip through their fingers. She reached for a beer and let him continue to think out loud.

“And now we’ve got our very own guardian angel, watching us from afar and covering our backs.”

Madison gulped down half of the beer in one go, wishing it was something stronger. Without thinking, she uttered her gratitude.

“Whoever it was, they saved my life.”

“Whoever it was? It’s got to be Foster.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because it’s just too much of a ...”

“Too much of a coincidence. I know. I get it.”

Bradley bit his tongue. He could tell from the tone in his partner’s voice that she was angry and confused. But so was he. Madison sensed his frustration and tried to help things along.

“Let me get this straight. You think Gregory Freeman somehow persuaded Jim to kill Traynor for him.”

“Jim?”

“Jim Foster.”

Bradley immediately knew there was something Madison wasn’t telling him, but he decided to let it go for the moment.

“Yeah. And he’s also used hypnosis and drugs to coerce a businessman into giving him the money to buy his wonderful retreat.”

Madison finished her beer and stared out across the water. Her headache was getting worse, not better.

“You *have* been busy, haven’t you? And here was me thinking you’d just headed home.”

“I haven’t been home.”

“What? For three days?”

“That’s right.”

“Where have you been staying?”

Bradley looked away, embarrassed, and Madison decided to give him a break.

“Forget I asked. It’s none of my business.”

Bradley took another bite of his sandwich, giving himself time to decide what to say.

“I’ve been staying over in Palm Springs.”

“Palm Springs? What’s in Palm Springs?”

Bradley decided honesty was the best policy. Hopefully, it would encourage Madison to open up, too.

“Linda Renton, Freeman’s sister-in-law, lives there. She’s been helping me out with the case. She thinks her sister didn’t really commit suicide.”

Madison suddenly had a host of questions she wanted to ask but chose one.

“Freeman’s wife jumped in front of a train, didn’t she? I mean, there were witnesses who say she wasn’t pushed.”

“How did you know that?”

“When you said you suspected Freeman, I did a little research of my own.”

“Oh,” said Bradley, failing to hide his surprise. “You’re right, she wasn’t pushed, at least not physically. But Linda thinks Freeman hypnotised her into taking her own life. Hell, the poor woman probably didn’t even realise she was jumping in front of a train.”

“Linda?” said Madison, changing the subject. “Is Freeman’s sister-in-law just helping you with the case, or is there something more?”

Madison couldn’t help feeling like a hypocrite. She’d deliberately kept her relationship with Foster from Bradley, and now she was accusing him of the same thing. To her surprise, her partner didn’t miss a beat and owned up.

“I like her a lot, Madison, and she’s a brave woman. She volunteered to see Freeman as a patient.”

Madison wanted to know what ‘like her a lot’ meant but decided to stick to the case.

“What happened?”

“We got caught out, but his assistant let slip that Foster is Freeman’s patient.”

Madison shook her head, as if she could wipe away her confusion. Foster hadn’t told her he was seeing a psychiatrist. But, then again, why should he? It

wasn't the sort of thing you discussed with a virtual stranger. Had she been wrong to trust him? Now it was her turn to think out loud.

"Let's say for the sake of argument that your theory is correct, and Freeman somehow has a hold over his patients, including Foster. Let's also assume that you're right, and the person who fired the shot back at the barn, saving my life, was also Foster. What does that mean? Did Freeman tell him to protect us? That doesn't make much sense."

Bradley reached for a second beer. What the hell, he was supposed to be on vacation.

"No, it doesn't."

He took a deep breath and chose his next words carefully.

"I've been honest with you about Linda, so how about you being honest with me?"

Bradley left it at that and stared into his partner's eyes, putting her on the spot. Eventually she relented.

"Okay, I like Jim, too. We've become close."

"How close?"

Madison gave Bradley a look that said he was on shaky ground.

"Don't look at me like that, Madison. I'm not asking you if you slept with him. What I mean is, have you got close enough that he might somehow feel protective of you. Maybe he followed you, like some sort of bodyguard."

Madison didn't buy it, but part of her liked the idea. She liked to think she was as tough as any man and didn't need protecting, but she couldn't deny that whoever had fired the shot, wounding Rudd, had saved her life. And maybe Bradley was wrong. Maybe Foster wasn't under Freeman's thumb. Maybe he had nothing to do with Traynor's death. But she was too good a cop to believe that. Just because she wanted it to be true, didn't mean it *was* true. Bradley broke in on her thoughts.

"We've got a lot of work to do, Madison. We've got to find Rudd and we've got to prove Freeman is behind Traynor's murder."

Madison stood up and leant against the balcony of the veranda, staring out at the water.

"Look. Whatever we do, we do this as partners."

She turned to see Bradley grinning at her. He drained his beer before he answered.

"Madison. I wouldn't have it any other way."

## Chapter 27

Freeman sat in his study, enjoying a rather fine Sauvignon. The sex with Theresa had been incredible, and she had done anything he had asked of her, naturally. He was sure he would tire of her eventually, but he was gaining a reputation among the rich and famous, desperate to avail themselves of his services - and among their number was a stunning model who commanded exorbitant fees for wearing the latest fashions on the catwalk. She would make a worthy successor to Theresa, once he'd had his fill of his assistant's charms.

What a pity it was that he couldn't boast of his achievements and bathe in the glory he deserved. He had answered the age-old question that had haunted philosophers for centuries. Was there such a thing as free will? Clearly, the answer was no. He had found a way to bend the will of anyone he chose, even to the point of convincing them to take their own life. It was a shame he had found it necessary to hypnotise his wife, he admitted, but he could console himself with the thought that the poor woman hadn't suffered. She believed she was diving into the clear, blue waters of the Pacific Ocean, right up to the point the train smashed into her and dismembered her body.

Freeman decided forgoing fame and notoriety was a small price to pay, when the rewards were wealth and power. He would only become richer and richer, as the wealthy clamoured at his door, desperate for him to relieve them of their anguish. He'd provide them with the one thing their money could never buy - happiness.

His improving financial status was gratifying, yes, but it was his growing sense of power that really excited him. Such power meant that he was guaranteed to have the most beautiful women on his arm for the rest of his life, making him the envy of every hot-blooded male who crossed his path. And then there was the most satisfying power of all. The power to sweep aside anyone who stood in his way.

Inconvenient wives, inconsiderate neighbours, and now troublesome police detectives. All would be eliminated without the slightest chance of him taking the blame. He could employ an army of killers, if he wished. No one could stand in his way. It was a little troubling that Foster still hadn't killed Detective Bradley, but it was only a matter of time. He had his own assassin on the job. And what an assassin he was. A Marine, trained to kill by the country of his birth. Yes, Detective Bradley's days were indeed numbered.

Freeman's feelings of invincibility began to overwhelm him. What if he could eliminate the need to use drugs? What if he could find another way to bend the will of his subjects?

If that were possible, he could rule the world.

Bradley and Madison might have finally been working together, but the start of their new partnership failed to deliver results. In fact, they couldn't help feeling that they were striking out at every turn.

The farmer who owned the barn that Rudd had led them to, had no new information to offer them. Rudd had paid in cash and had told the farmer he just needed somewhere to store a couple of classic cars. When the detectives informed the owner that the place was empty, the man had simply shrugged as if it made no difference. Rudd had paid in advance and, so long as the barn was still standing, he couldn't have cared less what the hell was in there.

Their next port of call was Rudd's place of work, outside which Bradley's car had received a parking ticket. He cursed the meter-maid who clearly hadn't recognised it as an unmarked police car. In the shop, the woman behind the counter informed them that Rudd had failed to return to work, although she did have an address for him.

Staying in Madison's Chevy, they headed over to Rudd's apartment in the south of the city, while Bradley called half a dozen of the main hospitals and medical centres, strewn around the city. According to the hard-pressed staff he spoke to, only one person had received treatment for a bullet-wound that day – a teenage male of Mexican origin. When they finally arrived at Rudd's residence, there was no one home and they had no warrant authorising them to search the premises. Things just weren't going their way. They needed to come up with a plan.

That was until Madison's phone began to ring. It was Jim Foster.

Rudd was convinced that his anger and his pain were the only things keeping him from collapsing behind the wheel. By rights, that bitch of a detective should be dead. He'd fooled her and her partner into thinking he was hiding in the barn and he'd had her in his sights. Dumb-ass cops. And then a bullet comes out of fucking nowhere and tears a hole through his arm. For some reason they must have had a sharp-shooter positioned on the road, which was

strange. He didn't know plain-clothes cops worked like that. But he still got away, didn't he? Even wounded, he outsmarted the lot of them.

Usually he enjoyed the drive north to LA, but not this time. He'd stopped and tied a tourniquet to his upper arm, but he was still pissing blood all down his shirt and over the seat. And he was feeling light-headed and cold, despite having the heater on full. But he needed to get out of San Diego, and he knew a guy in the city of angels who was a paramedic and owed him a favour. The first order of business was to get himself well and drop out of sight. Maybe he'd head east, into the desert, and find another quiet place where he could conduct his business.

That was all he wanted to do – conduct a business deal. He hadn't wanted to kill the kid. Hell, the spoilt prick was his ticket out of the sewer. It was the fault of those two cops who'd come after him. One of them was the same fucker who'd followed him to the barn. And there'd been the older guy. The one he'd put a bullet into before making his escape. If they hadn't poked their noses into his business, then he wouldn't have had to beat the kid to cover his tracks. His parents weren't going to pay a million bucks for a dead kid.

Luckily, there were plenty more kids with rich parents in California. Once he was back on his feet, he'd find another one and collect his million bucks. Maybe more. Then, with a new identity, he'd head for one of those places in South America where he could live like a king. Some place that didn't let the US government extradite its law-abiding citizens.

Once he got his arm patched up, he'd take care of business and he'd have it made. The dumb-ass cops were probably still licking their wounds, praying he'd turn up somewhere. Not a chance, he was long gone. No one could catch him now.

As far as Foster was concerned, he had failed his mission. And he wasn't a man used to failure. But the last thing he had expected was to find his target in the company of someone he had feelings for. It had thrown him off-balance. So, he'd compromised the mission to save the life of a woman to whom he'd become emotionally attached. For all he knew, she could be working for the terrorists, too, although he refused to believe that. He was a soldier, yes, but he was also a man. And that was why he had sacrificed his mission and shot the punk pointing a shotgun at Madison's back. And he would continue to protect her.

That was why he was following the Mazda, as it made its way to LA. The man had tried to hurt the only person he cared about. He was dead meat.

## Chapter 28

Jack Taylor was glad his wife had decided to feed the baby at that precise moment, because it meant that he was the one to answer the door when Kyle Rudd rang their bell. Rudd was sweating profusely and clearly in distress, and he opened his coat to reveal his blood-soaked arm. Taylor cursed and stepped out to make sure Rudd was alone.

“Jesus, Kyle, what happened?”

“Long story. Can you help me?”

Rudd was breathing hard and looked as if he were about to collapse, so Taylor quickly led him to the spare room of his modest bungalow. On the way, he grabbed some towels from the only bathroom and spread them out on the single bed.

“Lie down here, Kyle, and let me take a look.”

He removed Rudd’s coat and the man cried out. Taylor looked back at the door, hoping his wife hadn’t heard.

“I’ll go and get my kit,” said Taylor, and he quickly left the room.

He needed the stock of medical supplies he kept in the kitchen, but he also wanted to warn his wife what was going on. He popped his head round the door to the lounge.

“Jess. A friend has had a bit of an accident and I’ve taken him to the spare room to get him cleaned up. He’s going to be okay, but I didn’t want you to worry.”

Jess simply nodded and continued to feed their four-month-old baby. Jack was a paramedic and she was used to neighbours appearing at all hours for help and advice. It came with the territory. One guy had returned the favour by replacing their kitchen, so she had no complaints. Thirty seconds later, Taylor had returned to his uninvited visitor.

A year back, Taylor had started using amphetamines to help see him through a rough patch. Jess had been pregnant, and the demands of the job had started to overwhelm him. His old school pal Rudd had provided what he needed and never asked questions. He decided he owed him one. That was until he got a good look at his friend’s injured arm.

“Fuck, man, this is a bullet wound. You have to report this.”

Rudd had his answer prepared.

“I can’t. It ... it was an accident. I don’t want to get my friend into trouble.



We have to look out for one another, right?"

Rudd fixed his eyes on Taylor, just to make sure he got the message. Taylor saw that his friend was as pale as the white towels covering the bed. He shrugged.

"I can patch you up, but you've lost a lot of blood. You really need to go to the hospital."

Rudd swallowed hard and sighed.

"Just do what you can."

Taylor gave Rudd some painkillers and looked at the arm. The bullet had passed right through and had missed his arteries. If it hadn't, Rudd would have already been dead.

"Was the bullet fired at long range?" asked Taylor.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"I can tell by the exit wound. A bullet has to have time to slow down to tear your flesh like this."

While he spoke, Taylor cleaned and bandaged the wound. Much as he wanted Rudd out of his house, he gave him the bad news.

"You're going to need to rest. I've stopped the blood-loss, but it'll only start up again if you begin moving about. Also, you need to build up your strength to make up for the blood you've lost already."

Rudd was too tired to argue.

"How long?"

"You really need days," said Taylor, looking at his watch. "Look, it's getting late. Stay here tonight, then we'll decide what to do in the morning. Okay?"

"Sure."

"I'll get Jess to heat up some soup. Then get some rest."

"Sure."

Taylor left to tell his wife the bad news.

Foster was parked a few doors down from the bungalow, with a good view of Rudd's Mazda, parked on the driveway. If there was one thing his life as a sniper had taught him, it was patience. He was effectively a hunter now, tracking down a wounded animal. Rudd was up and around but Foster knew that he'd clipped his wing. He'd wait until morning and then decide what to do. He didn't know who this guy was, but he was messing with the wrong

Marine.

## Chapter 29

When Taylor heard Rudd leaving his home, bright and early the next morning, the paramedic was more than a little relieved. Although the pair had known each other since their school days, there was something about Rudd that made Taylor feel uncomfortable. They enjoyed reminiscing about their youth and even shared a somewhat dark sense of humour, but Rudd displayed a distinct lack of empathy for others. Whenever Taylor shared stories from his days spent in ambulances and emergency rooms, Rudd never showed any sign of understanding another person's pain.

He also wasn't sure if he believed the man's story about how he'd received his bullet wound. If it had genuinely been an accident, why hadn't he gone to the nearest hospital in San Diego, instead of driving through the night to LA. His friend's sudden departure also meant he wouldn't have to come up with a story for Jess. If she'd known a man with a bullet wound had been staying in their home, she would have freaked out.

There was someone else who was very pleased to witness Rudd's early departure - Sergeant Foster. He'd waited until daybreak, hoping to discover who lived in the bungalow where Rudd had sought sanctuary. If necessary, he would have gone in and dragged the man out by the scruff of his neck, but now he could simply follow him and pick his moment. The roads to LA, the previous night, had been far too busy for him to make a move. Hopefully, today things would be different.

When Rudd left his friend's home at first light, he had no idea he was being followed, and he also had no idea that his choice of destination would fit right into Foster's plans. During the night, when sleep had eluded him, he'd suddenly remembered a deserted shack he'd come across by accident a year ago. He and some like-minded acquaintances from his neighbourhood had taken a trip up to Death Valley, where they hoped to get in a little target practice, undisturbed.

If it was still there, it was just what he was looking for. Not only was it an ideal place to lie low until he recovered, but it would also serve as somewhere to hide his next kidnap victim, while he waited for his ransom money. So, he left LA and headed north-east, hoping that his arm didn't start

oozing again. He didn't want to faint from loss of blood before he made it to the shack. He needed somewhere quiet with no one around to carry out what he had to do.

Rudd wasn't to know that the soldier following him was thinking the same thing.

When Rudd stopped off in a place called Ridgecrest for supplies, Foster resisted the temptation to grab the guy and bundle him into his car. There were still too many people around. Besides, he had a feeling Rudd was headed for a less-populated area, and when they reached the heart of the Death Valley National Park just over two hours later, he was glad he'd remained patient.

The amount of traffic on the road was becoming noticeably lighter. But keeping his distance so Rudd didn't become suspicious wasn't a problem. The landscape in this part of the valley was virtually flat and Rudd's red Mazda stuck out like a sore thumb. But it was still a relief, when Rudd finally pulled up to a small shack in the middle of nowhere.

It was already late afternoon, and Foster wouldn't have long to wait until dark. He parked in a dip just off the quiet road, where he could keep an eye on the shack, hopefully without being seen. The sun was hot, and he was forced to leave his engine running so that he could use the air-conditioning. Fortunately, the temperature cooled noticeably when the sun dipped below the horizon.

Foster wasted no time and reached across to the glove compartment to retrieve his Beretta M9 – the army's trustworthy 9mm semi-automatic. He checked it was loaded but left the safety on. Rudd had wasted no time making himself at home and the glow of a fire could already be seen through the shack's only window. It was so dark, Foster knew he wouldn't be spotted, even if Rudd looked right at him.

When he was a few yards away, he released the safety on his Beretta and, keeping to the shadows, looked through the window, into the shack. Rudd was sitting on a crate, staring at his fire and nursing his arm while he drank what looked like coffee from a tin mug. He could even see Rudd's shotgun, leaning near the fireplace, out of reach. Foster decided there was no need for subtlety.

The door was a wooden affair and the lock had already been broken, presumably by Rudd. Foster kicked it in, brandishing his pistol, and he was greeted by the comical sight of Rudd, staring open-mouthed with shock, his clothes covered in the hot coffee he'd been drinking prior to Foster's

unexpected entrance.

Foster simply grinned. He'd bagged himself an early Christmas present for Madison.

## Chapter 30

The shack was built entirely of wood, save for the stone column that served as a fireplace. The structure was liberally decorated with holes, so that any heat generated by Rudd's fire dissipated almost immediately. The only 'furniture' consisted of three crates – a larger one that served as a table, and two smaller examples that doubled up as chairs. Various tins and packets of food were strewn across the makeshift table, together with a small gas stove and a metal pan. Rudd finally managed to find his voice.

"Who the fuck are you?"

Foster pointed his gun at Rudd's wounded arm.

"I'm the guy who gave you that."

"You're a cop?"

Foster ignored the question and walked over to retrieve Rudd's shotgun before he got any stupid ideas. Once it was safely out of the way, he pointed his pistol at Rudd's head.

"Put your hands behind your head."

"Oh Jesus, man, you're not going to shoot me, are you?"

This caused Foster to smile.

"I will if you don't put your hands behind your fucking head. Now do it!"

Rudd obeyed, and Foster helped himself to the man's rucksack, lying in the corner of the shack. Still keeping a close eye on Rudd, he rummaged through its contents and found two lengths of rope. He couldn't think why Rudd had brought them with him, but it didn't matter. It was just what he was looking for.

"Lie down on the floor, face down with your hands behind your back."

Rudd did as he was told, and Foster tied the man's wrists firmly together. Then he did the same with Rudd's ankles. Next, he checked his phone to see if he had a signal, but he was out of luck. He looked in the rucksack and found Rudd's phone, but it was the same story. There was also a wallet with a driver's licence. He read the name.

"Kyle. I'm going to have to leave you for a few minutes while I go and get my car. If you've moved from your little spot on the floor when I get back, I'll put a bullet in your skull. Got it?"

"Yeah."

Foster thought Kyle sounded pissed off, but he guessed he had a right to be. He stuck the Beretta in his belt and picked up the shotgun, before leaving the

shack to run back to his car. He'd parked it by the road, and hoped he'd have a better chance of getting a signal there. There were still no other cars and not a single sign of life, so he didn't rate his chances. But he was wrong. Somehow, he got a signal. Before his luck ran out, he found Madison's number on his phone.

"Madison? It's Jim."

He heard her let out a gasp before she spoke.

"Jim, where are you?"

"Death Valley."

"Death Valley? What are you doing there?"

"I've caught the guy who was trying to kill you at the barn this morning."

Madison realised she had stopped breathing and Bradley watched her, resisting the temptation to ask what the soldier was saying. Eventually, she found the words she was looking for.

"That was *you* this morning? The one who fired the shot and wounded Rudd?"

"Yeah."

Madison paused again as she tried to take in what Foster was telling her.

"Are you following me, Jim?"

"Not exactly. Look, I'll explain everything when you get here."

Madison was becoming exasperated.

"Look, Jim, this is a police matter. You shouldn't be getting involved."

When Foster replied, he sounded hurt.

"I was just looking out for you, Madison."

Madison suddenly took pity on him.

"I can see that, Jim, and I appreciate it, really. You saved my life."

Foster decided to call her bluff and put her on the spot.

"So, are you coming out here to get your suspect, or should I hand him over to the local police?"

Madison looked at Bradley and came to a decision.

"No, don't do that. We'll head off now and be there by morning. Just be careful, Jim, okay?"

"Sure."

Foster gave her directions and explained that he couldn't get a phone signal in the shack. She said she understood and promised him that they would get there as soon as possible.

As Foster made his way back to the shack to check on his prisoner, he felt

pleased that his plan was working. He'd not only saved Madison's life, but he would soon be handing over her suspect. But, most important of all, she had said '*we* 'll head off now'. She wasn't coming alone. She was bringing Bradley with her.

And Foster would be waiting to greet him. This time he would complete his mission.



## Chapter 31

It was almost eleven p.m. when Madison had received the call from Foster. She and Bradley had been sitting in her Chevy, outside Rudd's home, and they decided they had no choice but to head over to Death Valley, as Madison had promised. They took turns driving so that they would both get a chance to grab some sleep. They stopped for gas for the car, and food and coffee for themselves. They needed it to keep functioning. Because they drove overnight, traffic was light, and they eventually pulled up on the side of the road with the shack in sight, just under six hours later. Madison was the first to speak.

"How are we going to handle this?"

Bradley squinted through the early-morning light, hoping to get a better look at the shack. It provided no answers.

"That depends on your boyfriend and whether or not he can be trusted."

"He's not my boyfriend," said Madison, and she immediately regretted sounding so defensive.

"I hope not. Because, if my theory's right, he may well have killed Traynor."

Madison frowned, as if she were confused.

"Look, I'm not saying I'm agreeing with you but if you *are* right, then Jim had no choice in the matter. He was being controlled by Freeman."

For Madison, saying the words out loud only served to make Bradley's theory sound even more ridiculous, and Bradley's answer only added to her confusion.

"Yeah, but would a judge and jury see it that way? We might have to arrest the guy for murder. Have you thought about that?"

Madison hit the steering wheel in frustration.

"Of course I've thought about that. If Jim shot Traynor, then he'll have to answer for it. It'll be up to a court to decide if he did so willingly."

"Even though he saved your life yesterday?"

"Even then," said Madison, staring Bradley in the eye to prove she meant what she said.

"Fair enough. So, let's get this over with."

Madison paused for a moment and then nodded, as she started the Chevy and turned on to the track leading to the shack. Rudd's Mazda and Foster's four-wheel-drive were parked outside. Bradley kept his eye on the window to

the shack but couldn't see any movement inside. They got out of the car and drew their weapons. They moved to the door and stood either side, just in case someone decided to put a bullet through it. Bradley was about to knock, when the door slowly opened. Foster stood in the doorway, apparently unarmed, and looked at each of them in turn. Bradley was pointing his Glock directly at his chest.

"Hi, Madison. Why don't you come in?"

"Step out, Sergeant. And lean your hands against the wall and spread your legs," said Bradley firmly, determined to prove who was in charge.

Foster did as he was told, and Bradley stepped back, keeping his gun aimed at him. He turned to Madison.

"Perhaps you'd better have the honour," said Bradley, grinning as he pointed to Foster's muscle-bound body, leaning against the shack.

Madison gave him a look that could kill but holstered her .38 and stepped forward. She ran her hands over every part of Foster's body, feeling his muscles coil like a spring. She even felt his groin, not for any gratification on her part, but because she'd almost been killed years before, when a suspect had hidden a small .22 in his briefs. Bradley was grinning, as if he found the whole thing amusing. Right then, she felt like shooting him with her .38. When she was done, she stepped back.

"He's unarmed."

Bradley pointed to the door and addressed Foster.

"Shall we?"

Foster led the way and the two detectives followed closely behind. They were immediately greeted by the sight of Rudd, sitting on a crate, his arms and legs bound tightly by two pieces of rope. Bradley spotted Rudd's shotgun, propped against the far corner of the shack. Madison had already retrieved her .38 from its holster and was standing in a position where she could cover both Rudd and Foster. Bradley placed his Glock on the large crate, close at hand, grabbed the shotgun, emptied it and picked up his pistol once more, all in one swift motion. Working as a team, the two detectives hoped that they had effectively secured the area. Madison turned to Foster and was the first to speak.

"Jim. What were you doing at the barn yesterday?"

He gave her another sheepish grin.

"That's a long story."

"Not good enough."

When the soldier still didn't answer her question, she decided to try a different tack.

"Okay. How did you find Rudd?"

"That was easy. I followed him."

"All the way here?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"To help you. You were following him, weren't you, until he got away?"

Madison was becoming exasperated and was momentarily lost for words. Bradley decided to take up the reins, hoping to wipe the smug smile off the soldier's face.

"What is Dr Freeman treating you for?"

Bradley's question caught the sergeant off-guard and he hesitated for a second before replying.

"How do you know I'm seeing Dr Freeman?"

Now it was Bradley who was grinning.

"We're cops, remember?"

Foster eventually recovered.

"I've been having trouble sleeping, since I got back from my last tour in Afghanistan."

"PTSD?"

"Something like that."

"What can you tell us about the Traynor shooting?"

Now it was Foster's turn to become exasperated and he turned to Madison for support.

"Look, what the hell is this? You're treating me like some sort of suspect. Okay, maybe I shouldn't have meddled in police business, but I was only trying to help. I'm handing you your man on a platter, and this is the thanks I get? You came to *me* for help, Madison. Remember?"

Madison suddenly had a question.

"Jim. Rudd had a shotgun. How did you overpower him if you're unarmed?"

Foster laughed.

"Do you think I needed a gun to take this punk?" said Foster, and he turned away, as if in anger.

Bradley caught the look of disbelief on Rudd's face, but it was too late. He'd already made the mistake of letting Foster move behind him. Only for a

fraction of a second, but that was enough for the Marine.

Foster reached up to a low wooden beam in the roof and retrieved his Beretta. Before Bradley had time to react, the Marine had his neck in a vice-like grip and the 9mm was pressed firmly into his back. Foster growled into the detective's ear to prove he meant business.

“Drop your gun.”

Bradley did as he was told. He had no choice, and he hoped it would save his life. But Foster's next words proved him wrong.

“Bradley, is it? Well, Bradley, this is the end of the road. No more innocent people are going to die because of you. It's all over.”

Foster pointed his pistol behind Bradley's heart and began to squeeze the trigger.

## Chapter 32

Bradley had often woken up in the middle of the night, his heart pounding after experiencing a nightmare that was somehow related to his job. He'd even talked to some of the guys back at the station about them, and they all agreed that it went with the territory. But by far the most common scenario involved being overpowered by a suspect, leaving you totally powerless. And now the day had finally arrived. His nightmare had come true. Foster had the power to snuff out his life in an instant, and the only thing that stood between him and eternity was his partner, Madison.

For one awful second, he wondered if they were in it together. By her own admission, Madison and Foster were apparently an item, and she'd already made it quite clear that she held Bradley responsible for the death of her father. Was this how she intended to avenge his death? But he quickly realised how foolish he was being. Her father's murderer was sitting right there, on a wooden crate, tied up and helpless. Then again, maybe Madison was simply getting her partner out of the way before she turned her attention to Rudd. Before he could torture himself any more, Madison pointed her .38 at Foster's head and cried out.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Part of him hoped that Foster would suddenly come to his senses and release him, but instead he heard the soldier's voice, inches from his ear, spitting out what sounded like insane ramblings.

"You don't understand, Madison. This man is a terrorist sympathiser. My orders are to take him out before more innocent people get hurt."

Bradley wanted to defend himself, but he didn't dare make a move in case he provoked Foster into pulling the trigger. It was all down to Madison to save his life, and he could almost see her mind working overtime, desperate to get a handle on the situation. She took a step closer, and he was pleased to see she was still aiming her revolver directly at Foster's head. If the lunatic shot him, then he must know that Madison would shoot him dead. Or was he counting on her to spare his life? Or maybe he didn't even care? Bradley was relieved when Madison fired another question at Foster, because it meant he wasn't going to die, just yet.

"Orders from whom?"

Bradley felt the muscles in Foster's arm stiffen around his neck, and for the

first time there was a hesitancy to his voice.

“I ... I’m not allowed to give you that information.”

“Not allowed ... or can’t?”

Bradley felt Foster’s Beretta dig harder into his back, as the man struggled for an answer.

“The orders came from the Pentagon.”

“How?”

Bradley could tell that Madison was deliberately keeping the pressure on Foster and not giving him time to think. He fervently hoped it would work, and not just send the man over the edge.

“I ... I can’t remember.”

“Think about it, Jim. The military, the CIA – they’re not allowed to kill citizens in this country. And Bradley is a police officer. If you shoot him, I will be forced to shoot you. You’ll both die for nothing.”

Foster’s grip on Bradley’s neck eased, but he didn’t release him. And now his voice was calmer, and his confidence appeared to have returned.

“I have a duty, too. This man is funding terrorism and he has to be stopped before more American lives are lost.”

“Who told you he’s a terrorist?”

When Foster paused again, Madison decided to take a calculated risk.

“Jim. You’ve been tricked. My partner and I have been investigating Dr Freeman, and we believe he’s using hypnotism and drugs to get his patients to do things against their will. He was the one who told you Detective Bradley is a terrorist sympathiser. Please, Jim, try and remember.”

Bradley could hear Foster’s breathing become heavier and Madison watched as the soldier shook his head.

“Are you crazy? That’s not possible. I can remember receiving my orders.”

“But who gave you those orders, Jim? Who?”

Foster began to gasp, as if he were struggling for breath. He cried out.

“My head. What’s happening?”

Madison saw Foster grimace with pain and decided to keep up the pressure.

“Jim. Please put the gun down and we can talk about this. I promise you, if we can prove that Bradley is a terrorist sympathiser, as you claim, then I will personally make sure he pays. Do you believe me?”

Foster’s breath seemed to leave his body.

“I don’t know what to believe anymore,” he said.

“Okay. Bradley is unarmed and Rudd is still tied up. I’m going to get to the bottom of all this and do the right thing. Do you trust me, Jim?”

Slowly, Foster released Bradley, but held on to his Beretta. Madison did her best to maintain Foster’s trust.

“Okay, Detective Bradley. Sit on that crate in the corner and don’t move.”

Bradley did as he was told, and he picked up on the brief smile Madison had offered him. She needed him to appear as harmless as possible. Foster still clutched his pistol, but it was pointed at the ground.

“Jim. I need you to drop your gun and kick it over here. Can you do that for me?”

Foster’s eyes were glazed over, but her words seemed to bring him out of his trance, and he brought his head up to look her in the eye.

“Do you think I’m a criminal? Are you going to arrest me, Madison?”

Madison struggled to find the words. Foster still wasn’t harmless, but she knew she had to be honest with him.

“I don’t know, Jim. But I’m a police officer. It’s my duty to uphold the law.”

Suddenly, Foster’s face appeared to relax, as if an inner calm had washed over him.

“Justice has to be done, right?”

“I guess.”

He nodded.

“Let justice be done.”

He raised his Beretta and Madison was about to fire, but she hesitated for a split second. And that was enough. Foster placed the barrel of his weapon under his chin and pressed his finger against the trigger.

“Good-bye, Madison.”

## Chapter 33

Looking back, after the event, Bradley could honestly say that he hadn't intended to save Foster's life. The instant the soldier had raised his gun, the last thing he had expected was the man to try to kill himself. Rather, he thought that the Marine, a man of action for whom the mission was everything, would do what he was trained to do – kill the enemy. And the enemy right then, at least as he saw it, was Bradley, or maybe even Rudd. Hell, the poor guy was so mixed up, he might have even killed Madison, since she was the one stopping him from carrying out his so-called orders.

The truth was that Bradley had lunged at the deranged soldier with only one aim in mind. To relieve the man of his weapon. By the time the barrel of the Beretta was pressed under Foster's chin, it was too late for the detective to change his mind, even if he'd wanted to. He'd made his choice, and the momentum of his body, moving forward, did the rest.

The moment Bradley's hands made contact with Foster's wrist, the pistol fired, and the detective half-expected to be showered with pieces of the soldier's brain. But, miraculously, the bullet missed and buried itself in the roof of the shack. Nor was Bradley fool enough to believe he could overpower the muscle-bound Marine, and when he managed to wrestle the Beretta from Foster's grip, he knew it was because the soldier had let him.

When he finally turned to face the inevitable wrath of the man he had just disarmed, he found Foster slumped against one of the crates, a broken man. He toyed with handcuffing the soldier, while he had the chance, but thought better of it. Why provoke him when it wasn't necessary? Besides, Madison still had a firm grip on her .38 and she was taking charge.

"Bradley. Pick up your gun," she said.

Bradley was still breathing hard, and it took him a moment for his eyes to focus on his Glock, lying on the floor where he'd dropped it. The pistol was sitting only a few inches away from Foster's feet. Bradley kept his eyes firmly on the soldier as he bent down to retrieve his pistol, but it was caution wasted. Foster had his head in his hands, and he wasn't even aware of what was going on around him.

"Cuff him, Bradley."

Bradley stared at Foster, wondering how he'd react to Madison's latest command, but he wasn't listening. The soldier was in his own world of pain.



The detective tucked both pistols into the small of his back and reached for the cuffs on his belt. Slowly, he knelt behind Foster's back and gently pulled one of the man's arms behind him. The soldier didn't resist. Bradley did the same with the other arm and quickly snapped the cuffs on to his prisoner's wrists, breathing a sigh of relief when he'd finished. When he finally took a step back and pulled out his Glock, he and Madison shared a look of relief.

At last, they were back in control of the situation.

As they all faced one another in silence, Bradley couldn't help thinking that the entire situation was surreal. What a motley crew they were. A wounded kidnapper; a Marine who had most likely killed an innocent man without even being aware of it; a detective who had recently lost her father and was standing with a gun in her hand, no more than three feet away from his murderer; and finally himself – a cop traumatised by the death of a little boy. What a mess. As if to add insult to injury, Rudd chose that moment to speak.

“Jesus Christ, is this fucking circus finally over?”

Bradley noticed that the man had apparently lost his nervous twitch. If anything, his whole demeanour oozed calm. He was almost serene. Madison gave him a deadly look and told him to shut up, but he was having none of it and nodded in Foster's direction.

“That's rich. I'm sitting here, minding my own business, and soldier-boy here bursts in and ties me up. And the fucker tried to kill me, back at the barn. It's a miracle I'm still alive.”

Madison quickly realised that Foster must have shared a few details of what had happened with his prisoner, while they were waiting for Bradley and herself to arrive. She was determined to put the little punk straight.

“You were about to shoot a police officer in the back, Rudd, and Sergeant Foster merely offered his assistance. Just be thankful he didn't blow your head off.”

“Thankful? Who says I was going to shoot you? Besides, how the hell was I to know you were cops? You were on my property and I had a right to defend myself.”

As Bradley listened to the exchange, he began to worry. He hated to admit it, but the guy had a point. He decided to help Madison out.

“Why did you lie to Detective Culver about replacing the windows at the place where the Brewster kid was murdered?”

“I didn’t want any hassle. I rented the place, sure, but I didn’t know about the dead kid until I read about it in the paper. I had nothing to do with it, and you’ve got no right hassling me like this.”

Bradley was beginning to realise that Rudd wasn’t as dumb as he looked and decided to try something else.

“Why did you rent the place when you already have somewhere to live?”

“What can I say? I like change.”

“What about the barn in the middle of nowhere?”

“Sometimes I feel like a little peace and quiet.”

Bradley could see that Rudd thought he had an answer for everything, but he wasn’t giving up. He nodded towards the Mazda, parked in front of the shack.

“What happened to your van, Rudd? You know, the one you used to kidnap Timmy.”

“I already told you. I didn’t kidnap any kid. And my van was stolen a few weeks back.”

“How convenient.”

“Nothing to do with convenience. My wheels got stolen, man.”

Bradley decided to deal his ace.

“We’ve got witnesses, Rudd, who saw you take the boy and drive him back to that place you rented.”

“That’s bullshit.”

Bradley had got the reaction he had expected.

“You seem pretty sure of that, Rudd. What makes you think I’m lying?”

“Easy. You’re a cop.”

Rudd sneered, and Bradley fought hard to stop himself from grabbing the guy by the throat and strangling him.

Madison placed her .38 in her belt and beckoned Bradley over to where she was standing. She opened the door to the shack and told him she wanted to speak in private, outside. Bradley turned to look at their two prisoners, both restrained, and nodded. Once they were outside, Madison pushed the door to and they stood by the window, where they could keep an eye on their charges.

“We need to make sure we’re on the same page when we get back to the station,” said Madison.

“Are you sure going back to the station is a good idea?”

“What are you getting at?”

“When I put my theory about Dr Freeman to the lieutenant, he wasn’t

buying it.”

“So?”

“So, that means your boyfriend is looking good for Traynor’s murder.”

Madison took a step forward and stared Bradley in the eye.

“He’s not my ‘boyfriend’, okay? If you can’t talk to me without being flippant, then maybe I’d be better handling this on my own.”

Bradley stared at his feet and immediately regretted what he’d said. He could tell Madison had feelings for Foster, and he’d made it sound as though he was making light of the situation. He realised an apology was in order.

“I’m sorry, Madison, that was uncalled-for. I thought I was about to get killed back there,” he said, pointing at the shack, “and I wasn’t thinking straight. Forgive me?”

Madison took pity on her partner.

“There’s nothing to forgive.”

“Besides,” said Bradley, risking another quip, “apart from the fact that Foster tried to kill me, I can’t help liking the guy, and I think I have an idea about how we can prove Jim didn’t know what he was doing.”

“What would that be?” asked Madison, with a hint of a smile.

Bradley grinned back.

“I think we should all take a little trip.”

“Do you have somewhere in mind?”

“Yeah. I’d like you to meet a friend of mine, in Palm Springs.”

## Chapter 34

Madison had wanted to say no but found herself saying yes. She was a police officer and knew full well what they should do. She and Bradley had two suspects in custody, and they should be escorting them back to the station, either to be formally questioned, or to be arrested and read their rights. And, under normal circumstances, that was exactly what she would have done. But these weren't normal circumstances. One of their suspects had killed her father and he was doing too good a job of denying he had anything to do with it. She couldn't help worrying. Was the evidence they had against him just circumstantial? If she let her father's murderer escape justice, she would never forgive herself.

And then there was Foster. She'd investigated too many murders to kid herself. In the eyes of the law, Foster fired the gun that killed Traynor and he was as guilty as hell. Even if they could persuade the lieutenant to investigate Freeman, that didn't mean they would be able to prove he hypnotised Foster and forced him to kill Traynor unwillingly. Hell, she still wasn't sure she believed it herself. Freeman had achieved something that hadn't been done before. He'd forced others to do things they didn't want to, and then made them forget what they'd done. It was so far-fetched that the whole thing would probably be laughed out of court. That was if it even got that far.

So, she'd said 'yes' when Bradley suggested heading for Palm Springs to visit Linda Renton. According to her partner, Linda had been at the receiving end of Freeman's mind-tricks. They'd need her to help prove what he was up to, but that wasn't why she had agreed to go along. She'd agreed because she was worried about Jim. The sudden realisation that he'd been used to unwittingly commit a capital crime was hitting him hard and he was on the edge. If they took him in now, Madison was certain he'd fall apart under interrogation. She wouldn't have been surprised if his conscience and sense of duty didn't force him to confess to the murder and take the punishment that he believed he deserved, no matter how innocent he was. At the very least, she hoped that speaking to Linda would help him to realise he wasn't the only one to have been duped.

Once the decision had been made to go to Palm Springs, the next hurdle to overcome was a matter of logistics. Exactly how would they get there and what would they do about Rudd? In the end, they chose to drive there in Foster's

large four-wheel-drive, the four of them together. Rudd was cuffed, and his legs were fastened together by cable-ties. As an added precaution, he was shackled to the rear door of the vehicle. Foster even volunteered to be restrained in the same way but, to his surprise, Bradley said it wasn't necessary. As far as the detective was concerned, Foster had the chance to kill him back at the shack and he didn't. He said he trusted the Marine. Foster didn't say anything, but Bradley's confidence in him had meant a great deal.

Madison drove, and Bradley called ahead to let Linda know what he had planned. When she finally answered, he was concerned about how she would react. She might not take too kindly to the idea of he and Madison turning up with a couple of suspected murderers in tow. As it turned out, he needn't have worried.

"I'm glad you called, Pete. I've got something to tell you."

"What is it?" asked Bradley, more than happy for Linda to share her news first.

"Whatever Gregory did to me must be wearing off. I've been having flashbacks and what happened at the retreat is gradually coming back to me."

"So, you remember being hypnotised?"

"Yes. And he drugged me, too. I'm sorry, Pete, but I told him what we were up to. It was as if I didn't have a choice."

"Believe me, Linda, I understand. As a matter of fact, that's why I'm calling. My partner and I have someone with us whose gone through the same thing, and I think it would really help if he could talk to you. We're on our way over now, if that's okay?"

"Sure. How long will you be?"

Bradley looked over at Madison and she checked Foster's Satnav.

"A little under four hours," she said.

Bradley relayed the message and Linda said she couldn't wait to see him. For some reason, Bradley felt embarrassed and couldn't bring himself to return the complement out loud. He looked at his partner, hoping she hadn't heard Linda's voice over the phone. Thankfully, she was concentrating on her driving. He decided to save the news about Rudd until they got there and thanked Linda before hanging up.

"Did she say it was okay?" asked Madison.

"Yeah, no problem."

"That's great. She sounds like a keeper."

Bradley simply smiled and nodded, not knowing what to say, but inside he

couldn't help agreeing with Madison. Yes, she was a keeper. He would have liked nothing more than to be arriving at her lovely home in Palm Springs, alone, and to spend time with her. Instead, he'd be turning up with his partner, a Marine who'd killed an innocent man with his rifle, and a cop-killer who specialised in kidnapping children from wealthy families and demanding a ransom.

He'd already decided, when this was all over, he'd resign and try to build a normal life. He turned in his seat and Rudd glared back at him. The man would have liked nothing more than to put a bullet in the back of his head. Next to Rudd sat Foster, a once proud Marine who gazed out of his window, not seeing anything. A shell of a man. Bradley recognised the look. He'd seen it in the mirror, whenever he thought of Timmy's body, battered and bruised. But now that he and Madison had caught Timmy's killer, perhaps the nightmares would go away. Perhaps he could build a new life.

When this was all over.

## Chapter 35

They pulled up on the driveway of Linda Renton's house, having had an uneventful journey. Bradley had half-expected Rudd to make a nuisance of himself - maybe even ask for a rest-stop as a pretext for making an escape attempt. But, for four straight hours, he hadn't made a sound. That wasn't to say that the prick wasn't bugging him. Every time Bradley looked into the rear-view mirror to get a look at the monster that had beaten little Timmy to death, Rudd stared back, as if his eyes were trying to bore into the detective's skull. Bradley tried to shrug it off, but he was relieved when the journey finally came to an end.

"I better go and check with Linda first, before we all descend on her. Are you okay holding the fort, partner?"

Madison opened her door, ready to get out and stretch her legs.

"I think I can manage," she said, failing to hide her attempt at sarcasm.

Bradley could tell she was tired, and she looked ready to crawl into bed. It was already dark and well into the evening. They'd spent the day either on the road, or nearly getting killed by a Marine who'd had his brain scrambled. They had a right to be tired.

Bradley hadn't even made it to the door, when Linda ran out to throw her arms around him. After his near-death experience, the expression of human warmth almost overwhelmed him. He felt a lump in his throat, and it took all his willpower not to break down in front of her. He'd already had a nightmare in front of her, and the last thing he wanted was Linda thinking he was a basket-case. She held his face in her hands.

"It's wonderful to see you again, Pete."

That was what he liked about her. No pretensions. No games. She wore her heart on her sleeve and it made him want to protect her. So far, he hadn't done a very good job. And it was about to get worse.

"It's great to see you, Linda. I'm just sorry we keep dragging you into the case."

"You're not dragging me into anything. You're trying to catch my sister's killer and anything I can do to help, I will. Besides, the *case* brought us together, so I can't complain."

Bradley smiled and looked into her eyes. God, she was lovely. She was almost too good to be true. And then he remembered that there were two killers

sitting in the car on the driveway. He couldn't exactly see a fairy-tale ending on the horizon. He decided to get it all over with.

"Linda. I need to tell you something. You know the guy I told you about, the one who was hypnotised, like you?"

"Yes. What about him?"

"He killed someone."

Linda brought her hands up to her mouth.

"Oh, my God. How?"

"He's a Marine and he shot a civilian. But I think Freeman told him to do it. That's why I think it would be good if you could talk to him."

"Of course. I'll help in any way I can, you know that. Is he dangerous?"

Bradley decided it might be best not to mention the fact that Foster had tried to kill him only a few hours before. Things were going to get tricky enough as it was.

"No. Madison and he are pretty close, and she's managed to persuade him that he's been duped by Freeman."

"Madison?"

Bradley shook his head, realising he was getting ahead of himself.

"Sorry. Madison is my partner."

"And she's close to this Marine?" said Linda, failing to hide her surprise.

"She met him while she was working on the case and they must have connected. That was before she knew he was involved in the killing, of course."

"Sounds familiar. Have we connected, Pete?"

Linda offered him a cheeky grin and brought her finger to her lips. It was the cutest thing he'd ever seen.

"It certainly looks that way from where I'm standing. But, Linda, there's something else I've got to tell you, before we come inside."

"Now I'm fascinated."

"Don't be, because you might not like it, and this is where it gets even weirder."

"I'm still fascinated."

"Do you remember the other case I told you about? The one about little Timmy?"

"How could I forget?"

"Well, we think we've caught the guy who did it."

Linda gave him a big smile.



“But that’s great news, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess. The thing is, he’s in the car, too.”

Linda instinctively looked over his shoulder and saw Foster’s car sitting on the driveway. An attractive woman was leaning against the driver’s door and she waved. Linda waved back.

“Oh,” was all she could think of to say.

“The problem is, we can’t leave him in the car, on his own. Is it okay to bring him inside? He’s restrained and he’s no danger, I promise.”

This was the part Bradley had dreaded. Rudd might be no immediate danger, physically, but the thought of bringing the creep into Linda’s life turned his stomach. But it was too late to turn back now. The events of the day seemed to be running things. Linda’s brave smile only made him feel even more of a heel for asking.

“Sure, no problem. Why don’t you all come inside.”

“Thanks, Linda,” said Bradley, kissing her on the cheek and feeling like a fraud.

As he watched her disappear into her welcoming home, he hoped his actions wouldn’t come back to haunt him. He knew that if he ever did anything to bring harm on Linda Renton, he would never forgive himself.

## Chapter 36

Introductions were made, and Linda had thought to prepare drinks and sandwiches for her guests. Even Rudd got a chance to wash, eat, and drink after the long journey, closely watched by the two detectives. Bradley had remembered Linda's study, separated from the living area by two glass doors, and he decided it would make an ideal place to stow Rudd while they talked. He'd be able to keep an eye on the creep without the guy eavesdropping on their conversation. Bradley cuffed him to Linda's heavy writing desk and seated him, facing away from the living area so that they wouldn't be forced to look him in the eye.

Two sofas sat facing one another, across a large coffee table. Bradley and Linda sat in one, while Madison and Foster took the other. Bradley couldn't help feeling like he was on some sort of weird double-date. But then he remembered why they were there and decided to get down to business.

"Linda. Like I told you outside, we believe Jim has been hypnotised by Freeman and forced to do things against his will. And we thought it might help if you could share your experience ... you know, to make the poor guy realise he's not going crazy."

As Bradley said this, Foster glanced in his direction. The soldier couldn't believe how wrong he'd been. The detective had gone from being a terrorist sympathiser to a Good Samaritan, doing his best to help him. He shook his head at the thought of having almost killed him. Luckily, Madison had stopped him in time. It was just a pity she hadn't been around when he killed Traynor. He decided to speak up.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do, Detective, but the fact remains that I've killed an innocent man. I've committed a crime and I deserve to be punished."

Linda reached across and touched the sergeant's hand, desperate to let him know she understood what he was going through.

"Freeman is the one who pulled the trigger, Jim, not you. Until I started getting these flashbacks, I had no memory of what he'd done to me."

"Did he drug you?" asked Jim.

"Yes. I don't know how much Pete has told you, but we went to *The Meadows* to find out what he was up to," said Linda, deciding not to mention the fact that they'd been trying to discover if someone like Foster was a client.

“Pete was waiting in the grounds and I was wearing a listening device. But this is the thing. I told Gregory everything. It was as if I had no choice.”

Foster leant forward, suddenly interested.

“Gregory?”

“Sorry. Dr Freeman. He’s my ... he *was* my brother-in-law.”

Foster paused while he took in this latest piece of news.

“You said you’ve been having flashbacks. What I don’t understand is, why is it I can’t remember Freeman telling me to kill Traynor?”

Bradley chose to answer.

“Linda was drugged, but she was only under this maniac’s influence for a few minutes. Whereas you’ve been attending regular sessions. That is bound to have made a difference. Hopefully, now that he can’t mess with your head anymore, you’ll start getting flashbacks, too.”

“But you don’t know that,” insisted Foster.

“No, I don’t, but it sounds reasonable.”

“Okay, so what if I suddenly remember Freeman telling me to kill Traynor. That doesn’t alter the fact that I’m the one who pulled the trigger.”

Madison leant across and rubbed Foster’s arm.

“No, it doesn’t. But it’s like Linda said. You had no choice but to do as he said.”

“I wish I could see it that way.”

“That’s something you’re going to have to try and deal with, Jim,” said Bradley. “But, speaking for Madison and myself, we’re certainly not going to charge you with anything.”

“Maybe it’s not up to you.”

“Maybe,” conceded Bradley, and he decided the best thing was to change the subject. “The point is, Freeman was behind the murder of Traynor and he got you to do his dirty work. We need to gather all the evidence we can get to prove what he’s up to.”

“What do you have in mind?” asked Madison.

Bradley sighed, knowing he had nothing constructive to offer.

“I say we head over to *The Meadows* and shake things up a little.”

Madison appreciated what Bradley was trying to do, but she couldn’t help thinking he was shooting in the dark. She didn’t realise it, but Bradley had an ulterior motive for getting Rudd to meet Freeman. He wasn’t prepared to share his idea with Madison just yet. If he did, she would have probably thought he was crazy and refused to go. So, he kept his thoughts to himself.

“What do you mean by shake things up, exactly? More to the point, what makes you think that Freeman will agree to see us? And don’t forget we’ve still got Rudd with us,” said Madison, nodding in the direction of the lone figure, handcuffed to the desk. “We can’t leave him here, and if we take him back to the station, we’ll be knee-deep in paperwork and due-process.”

“I agree, so he’ll have to come with us.”

“And me, too,” said Linda, surprising everyone.

Madison sat back and let out a deep breath, totally exasperated.

Bradley gently touched Linda’s knee and asked her to join him in the kitchen, on the pretext of helping her to clean the dishes.

“Linda. I don’t think you coming to *The Meadows* again would be a very good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t forget, he caught you trying to trick him the last time he saw you.”

“And you, too.”

“Yeah, but that was part of my job.”

“And Gregory and I are related, sort of. You’ve got a better chance of getting in there with me than without me.”

Bradley thought about this and he had to agree, but he was unwilling to admit it. Before he could think of anything to say, Linda was speaking again.

“Besides, there’s something I haven’t told you because I didn’t want to upset Sergeant Foster.”

“What’s that?”

“When I said I can remember everything Gregory did to me, that wasn’t exactly true. I know that he did something, right at the end of the session ... something weird, but I just can’t put my finger on it.”

Bradley thought about this for a moment.

“Do you think it could help us?”

“I don’t know. But if I come along, maybe it’ll come back to me.”

Linda looked at Bradley expectantly and, against his better judgement, he finally agreed to take her with them. She smiled and pecked him on the cheek.

“Well,” he said. “I better go and tell Madison the good news.”

## Chapter 37

When Bradley told her the plan, Madison couldn't help thinking it was amateur hour. They weren't cops anymore, they were social workers.

Their fun-filled day eventually became night, and the talking came to an end. In the ambience of the comfortable lounge, it was replaced by sleep without anyone even realising it.

She was the first to wake up, her head resting against Jim's broad chest. She looked across to see a mirror image, with Linda nestling against Bradley's shoulder. Suddenly realising that all four of them had succumbed to feelings of exhaustion, she darted a look in the direction of the study. She was relieved to see Rudd, his head and shoulders slumped on the desk, his hands still firmly handcuffed. Her watch told her it was six-thirty a.m., and sunlight was already streaming through the windows.

Before she moved and disturbed her fellow sleepers, she looked over at her partner. Bradley was dozing peacefully, and she wondered if his nightmares about blood-covered squirrels had finally gone away. She still couldn't figure the guy out. He was a good cop and he did his best to portray a strong and confident persona, when, in truth, she believed he cared too much. The brutal death of Timmy had pushed him over the edge, and she was sure it was affecting his judgement.

So why was she going along with him? She turned to look at Jim, the new man in her life, and instantly knew the answer. She wanted to do whatever she could to save him from going to prison for the rest of his life – even if it meant clutching at straws.

Once everyone was awake and they'd had a chance to prepare themselves for the day ahead, it was a little after eight. Bradley decided that Linda should follow in her own car. He gave several reasons, not least of which was the fact that he didn't want her sharing a vehicle with Rudd. As far as he was concerned, the guy wasn't fit to lick her boots.

Foster offered to drive, and Bradley and Madison were too tired to argue. Besides, it meant that both detectives were free to keep a close eye on Rudd. The soldier handled his four-wheel-drive well and they made good time. A little over two hours later, they were parked at the main gate to Freeman's sprawling retreat. Throughout the journey, Bradley had checked his mirror, and he was surprised to see Linda keeping pace with them in her little Japanese

sports car. It was just another addition to the long list of things that impressed him when it came to Linda Renton.

Bradley got out of the car and made his way to the intercom, at the side of the gate. He noticed that a second camera had been added since his last visit. As he pressed the button to announce their arrival, he mentally crossed his fingers, hoping they would be admitted and that they hadn't had a wasted trip. There was a low buzzing sound, followed by a chirpy female voice, emanating from the speaker. Bradley recognised it as belonging to Theresa, Freeman's beautiful assistant and one-time fiancée of Robert Summers.

"Good morning. Is that Detective Bradley?"

"Yes, it is. I wonder if I might be able to speak with Dr Freeman?"

"Is this a police matter?" she asked, and Bradley could tell by the tone of her voice that she was recalling his last, ill-fated visit.

"Yes, it is," he lied, and he pointedly avoided the fact that he had brought a veritable party of followers with him.

There was a pause before she responded.

"Wait one moment, while I see if Dr Freeman is free to see you."

"Thank you," said Bradley, but it was politeness wasted. The intercom was no longer on.

He turned to face the others and smiled, hoping to offer some reassurance that his plan was working. Linda was the only one to return the gesture. He turned back to look at the intercom and willed it to announce that Freeman would receive his uninvited guests.

Now there was nothing to do but wait.

Freeman was in his study, reading. Theresa had been relieved when he hadn't come to her room earlier that morning, expecting to share her bed. She felt an irresistible urge to please him but, deep down inside, she found sex with him repulsive. She was conflicted. She was sure that was the word a psychiatrist would use if one were to analyse her emotional state. Sometimes she tried to recall the gentle touch of her fiancé Robert but it only caused her head to hurt. She knew that something was wrong with her, but she felt powerless to do anything about it. She braced herself and knocked on the study door.

"Come in, Theresa."

She hated the way Gregory did that. He made it sound as though she were

being foolish, knocking the door, when she was the only other person in the house. But if she ever dared to enter his inner sanctum without announcing herself, Freeman would lose his temper and yell at her. Once, he'd gone to strike her but had stopped himself at the last minute. He prided himself on always maintaining control. But Theresa knew it was all a pretence.

"Detective Bradley is here again. He would like to speak with you."

Freeman grimaced. He couldn't understand why the detective was still alive. Sergeant Foster had been given his instructions and the man was a damn Marine. Surely, he could handle some half-assed policeman.

"Did he say what it was about?"

"No."

Freeman sat back in his comfortable leather chair and tried to think. If the detective had come to arrest him, he was sure the pain-in-the-ass would have announced the fact. He was probably on another fishing expedition. Nevertheless, it was always wise to take precautions.

"Theresa. Do you remember what I told you to do, if anyone tries to spoil what we have here?"

Theresa frowned as she struggled to understand what Freeman meant.

"Are you saying Detective Bradley has come here to hurt us?"

"I do not know, but it is a possibility. In any event, I would like you to go to the hiding place I created for you, remember?"

Theresa nodded.

"What should I do when I get there?"

"Do you have your phone?"

Theresa reached into her pocket and retrieved the phone Freeman had bought for her. She hadn't understood why he had given it to her, because he didn't allow her to use it to call anyone but him. She shuddered to think how Gregory would have reacted if she ever took it upon herself to call Robert, even though she had been tempted many times. Freeman's voice intruded on her thoughts.

"I will call you if you are needed."

"Yes, Gregory," said Theresa, and she headed for the door until Freeman called after her.

"Theresa. Do you remember the words I taught you?"

"Do you mean the ones from the play? The play by Shakespeare?"

"Yes. Do you remember them?"

"Yes, Gregory."

“Good. If you hear those words, you know what you must do, don’t you, Theresa?”

“Yes, Gregory.”

“Very good.”

Theresa waited to see if there was anything else Gregory wanted to say, but he simply waved his hand dismissively.

“Go and tell the bothersome detective I will see him and bring him here. Once you’ve done that, go and hide, like I told you.”

When she’d gone, Freeman smiled to himself. He could handle Bradley, no problem. If the man decided to cause trouble, he would be making the biggest mistake of his life.



## Chapter 38

Bradley was torn. On the one hand, he felt relieved to be allowed into Freeman's citadel. He'd been right – the doctor's curiosity had probably got the better of him. But, on the other, he couldn't help but be suspicious of the psychiatrist's motives. The guy knew full well he was a suspect in a murder case, so why make it easy for the opposition? Did Freeman have his own agenda?

As the two cars pulled up outside the large property and the five occupants spilled out on to the gravel driveway, Bradley began to wonder what the hell he thought he was doing. He was handing Freeman just the ammunition the doctor needed to have him thrown off the case. Maybe even fired. And then he remembered. To all intents and purposes, he *wasn't* on the case. He was supposed to be on vacation. If the lieutenant ever got wind of what he'd been up to, it would surely cost him his badge. If the worst came to the worst, he hoped that he didn't take Madison down with him. She didn't deserve it.

Once again, he was met on the front steps by Freeman's beautiful assistant and unwilling mistress, Theresa.

"Who are all these people?" she asked, her pretty mouth open in surprise.

Bradley started with the easy introductions first and pointed to the ladies in the group.

"This is my partner, Detective Culver, and of course you know Linda, Dr Freeman's sister-in-law."

Theresa nodded absent-mindedly, looking confused, but before she could protest, Bradley nodded towards Foster.

"And I believe you also know Dr Freeman's patient, Sergeant Foster."

Again, Theresa offered an uncomprehending nod, but managed to pre-empt the detective before he had a chance to introduce his final companion. She pointed at Rudd.

"And what about this man? The one in handcuffs," she added, as if Bradley might not know which member of the group she was talking about.

"Ah, yes," said Bradley, trying to think on his feet. "This man is under arrest. Nothing to do with why we're here, but I'm afraid it wouldn't be safe to leave him in the car alone."

Theresa began to look even more puzzled, if that were possible.

"Well, I must say this is all highly irregular."

Bradley smiled at her response. He was sure she had uttered the words, simply because it sounded like the right thing to say.

“Don’t worry. This won’t take long,” said Bradley, making his way up the stairs before Theresa had a chance to refuse to let him in.

He waved to the rest of the group to follow him. Linda and Foster took their cue, while Madison brought up the rear, guiding Rudd by the arm. Their prisoner seemed uncommonly co-operative. Bradley suspected the man was just happy not to be in jail and might still be looking for a way to get the hell out of Dodge.

Theresa led them to Freeman’s study before disappearing to her hideaway, and Bradley’s motley crew quickly filled the large space, much to the consternation of their host. However, he quickly recovered, and his smug smile returned.

“Detective Bradley, I didn’t realise you had come here with your own entourage. Don’t you think you’re rather taking advantage of my hospitality? Although, if I think back to your last visit, it wouldn’t be the first time.”

Bradley decided to play the doctor’s game and hopefully avoid any unnecessary confrontation, at least for now.

“I apologise if I’ve caused any offence, but I assure you this meeting will be beneficial to all parties,” he lied.

Grudgingly, Bradley had to hand it to Freeman. The doctor must have been shocked to see Foster, his so-called patient and unwitting hit-man, in the company of the detective who suspected him of being involved in Traynor’s murder. But the man hadn’t even flinched. Once the formal introductions were over with, and Freeman had made his disapproval of Rudd’s presence known, the doctor graciously arranged seating for his uninvited guests. Bradley dragged Rudd to the most uncomfortable wooden chair he could find and cuffed him to it. He expected Freeman to say something, and he was surprised when the doctor simply waited patiently for the detective to explain what he was up to.

As it turned out, he wasn’t the only one who was eager for Bradley to get it over with. Madison was beginning to regret her decision to go along with her partner’s half-baked idea, and she found herself wishing she were anywhere else but in Freeman’s study. They had no warrant and, as far as she could tell, no earthly reason to be there.

Bradley took a deep breath. He was about to play Russian roulette with other people’s lives.

His only aim right then was to try and put Freeman at his ease. The last thing he wanted was his suspect to become defensive and uncooperative. He hoped that by remaining civil and giving the impression that they were there to seek the doctor's assistance, his plan would work. Besides, he'd come too far to turn back now.

"Dr Freeman. I'd like to start out by apologising for my little act of subterfuge, the last time I visited. My only defence is that I believed you were somehow involved in the murder of your neighbour, Mr Traynor. I now realise I was wrong."

Bradley waited to see how Freeman reacted to his admission, but the psychiatrist was giving nothing away. He had to presume that the doctor knew it was all bullshit, but he had to go along with it, or he'd be admitting his guilt.

"I am pleased you have finally seen sense, Detective. As you know, I have a cast-iron alibi and the idea that I would kill a neighbour over the construction of a wind farm is preposterous."

"Am I forgiven?"

"On one condition, Detective."

"Condition?"

"Yes. Please tell me what on earth you and these people are doing here."

"Certainly, Doctor," said Bradley, nodding in Foster's direction. "You know Sergeant Foster, of course."

"Yes. He is one of my patients. It is nice to see you again, Jim. Although I'm afraid I still do not know why you are here."

Bradley held up his hand.

"Let me explain. Sergeant Foster has been helping us with another case," he said. "Unfortunately, he has been having problems with his memory. He explained that he was under your care and I was taken aback by the coincidence. I told the sergeant that I suspected you of a crime and he was the one who convinced me I was wrong."

Freeman nodded in Foster's direction and smiled graciously.

"It seems I am in your debt, Jim."

Bradley glanced at Foster and saw that the soldier was looking totally bewildered. He quickly decided to press on and not give Freeman a chance to come up with any awkward questions.

"Anyway. We were in the neighbourhood, and I thought it would be an

ideal opportunity not only to offer my heart-felt apologies, but also to seek help for Sergeant Foster. After all, it is the least I could do, considering everything he has done for the department.”

“Would it be too indelicate of me to ask exactly how Sergeant Foster has helped you?”

Bradley knew Freeman was testing him and had to think on his feet.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to tell you. We’re trying to find the identity of a murderer, and we believe he was once a military man. Sergeant Foster kindly offered his expertise and helped us to try and get into the mind of the killer. As a psychiatrist, I’m sure you are familiar with such practices.”

Freeman grunted, sounding totally unconvinced. He held up his hands in front of his face and pressed his fingers together, making a spire.

“Am I to assume you would like me to try and help Sergeant Foster?”

“Yes, if it wouldn’t be too much of an imposition.”

Bradley didn’t dare look in Madison’s and Foster’s direction. He hadn’t warned them what he was up to, and he began to worry that one of them might put a stop to his charade. Fortunately, Freeman responded to his request before they got the chance to interject.

“Of course, I would be happy to help. But I’m afraid my treatments require very strict conditions. I will not be able to assist Sergeant Foster if I have an audience. The rest of you are more than welcome to wait in one of my reception rooms, and I will call you when I am finished.”

Bradley’s plan was working. He had gambled that Freeman would be more than willing to hypnotise Foster. The doctor must have been shocked to see Foster with Bradley and he had seen through the detective’s lies. He was worried what the soldier might be able to tell the police, and this gave him an ideal opportunity to reassert control over his patient. He probably suspected that the detective was up to something, but Bradley was banking on the fact that the doctor’s arrogant confidence would win the day. It looked like he was right.

But the plan would all unravel if Madison and Foster didn’t play along. He could tell that Madison was on the verge of calling a halt to the whole thing and he tried to give her and Foster his most reassuring smile. He walked over to the dumbstruck soldier and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I hope Dr Freeman is able to help you, Sergeant. We’re really in your debt.”

He winked and mouthed the words ‘trust me’. His back was turned to

Freeman, but Madison had spotted the gesture. She didn't look convinced. Bradley quickly uncuffed Rudd from his chair and ushered the group to the door. Linda led the way, and while Madison held open the door for Rudd and Bradley, she whispered in her partner's ear.

"I hope to God you know what you are doing."

Bradley simply nodded and looked away. He thought back to the day when he'd failed to save her father's life and allowed Rudd to escape. Now he was expecting her to trust him with Foster's life, too. *He* hoped to God he knew what he was doing as well.

## Chapter 39

When Freeman had said that they could wait in *one* of his reception rooms, he hadn't been joking. There were at least three leading off the grand hall. And those were only the ones they could see. If Bradley had been pressed to describe the place, he would have said it reminded him of an English stately home. But, having never been to Europe, he wasn't really the right person to ask. They gathered in the nearest room to the study and Madison immediately turned on him.

"Jesus Christ, Bradley. What the hell are you playing at? You can't leave Jim in there with Freeman."

Bradley didn't want to waste any time, and he grabbed Rudd and headed for the door. He'd only got everyone to leave so that Freeman would agree to treat Foster. Now, he wanted to get back before the doctor had a chance to inflict any more suffering on his patient. But, for his plan to work, he also needed to get Madison and Linda out of the way.

"I need you both to go and find Theresa. She's under our psychiatrist's spell, too, and we need all the witnesses we can get if we're going to prove what Freeman's been up to. I'll take care of Rudd and head back to the study to stop our doctor from causing any more mischief."

Before they had a chance to object, Bradley was gone. Madison and Linda looked at one another, as if to share the same thought. Had Bradley gone completely mad? Madison quickly took charge.

"Okay. Let's find Theresa as quickly as we can. Then we'll head back to the study. We'll just have to hope Bradley knows what the hell he's doing."

Linda felt like defending the new man in her life but didn't know what to say. She was as confused as Madison. Not knowing what else to do, she followed Bradley's partner and they began their quest for Freeman's beautiful assistant.

Freeman jumped back in alarm when he heard the door to his study crash open. He turned to see Bradley enter the room, shoving his handcuffed prisoner in front of him. He felt like a petty criminal, caught with his hand in the cash register, as he glanced down at his hand, gripping one of his syringes. Foster reached up and grabbed the doctor by the wrist. He then tore the syringe from

the man's hand.

"You arrived just in time," said Foster, standing and shoving Freeman into the chair he'd just vacated. "I was about to punch this fucker's lights out."

"Maybe I shouldn't have been in such a hurry," said Bradley, grinning.

Foster loomed over his psychiatrist.

"Dr Freeman," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "What made you think I'd let you come anywhere near me with one of your fucking needles?"

Freeman sighed.

"It was worth a try."

Bradley didn't like the way Freeman was so calm. Perhaps it was just a demonstration of his self-assurance for their benefit, but he doubted it. He couldn't help thinking the doctor knew something they didn't. And it worried him. He tried to put his misgivings to one side and shoved Rudd into the wooden chair he'd vacated only minutes before. He reached into the pocket of his jacket and brought out a pair of cable-ties, before throwing them to Foster.

"Sergeant. Would you mind tying our friend's arms to the chair."

Foster hesitated for a moment but did as he was asked. He presumed the detective was simply being careful. He towered over the diminutive Rudd who didn't resist. When he turned back, he was shocked to find Bradley pointing his Glock at Dr Freeman's head.

"Jesus, Detective, what the hell are you doing?" cried Foster.

Bradley was gratified to see that he'd finally managed to get a reaction out of the psychiatrist, whose mesmeric eyes momentarily betrayed fear. He glanced across at Foster.

"I'm going to prove what this bastard did to you."

"How?"

"The doctor here is going to work his magic on Rudd."

Rudd jolted against his restraints and cried out.

"Like hell he is. Nobody's going to fuck with *my* head."

Bradley had a flashback to the bruised and bloody body of Timmy Brewster, and he scowled at Rudd.

"Who says you've got a fucking choice?"

"Do *I* have a choice?" asked Freeman.

"No," said Bradley curtly, brandishing his Glock. "Sergeant. Hold Rudd steady while the doctor gets his magic potion ready."

"Are you sure about this, Detective?" asked Foster. "Look, I've spent half my career in war zones, and I've seen rules and laws broken all the time. But

this is a whole different ball game. This is America and you're a law enforcement officer. You're stepping over the line here, buddy."

"Let me worry about that. Right now, I don't much care about this child-murderer's rights. Are you going to hold him, or do you want me to do it?"

Foster shrugged and stood behind Rudd. He placed his strong hands on the guy's arms and watched as Freeman injected his drug into one of Rudd's veins.

"Do your stuff," ordered Bradley, and Freeman pulled up a chair and sat across from Rudd.

"What's his first name?" asked Freeman.

"Kyle."

Freeman glanced at his watch and waited another thirty seconds before he spoke. His voice exuded calm and sounded almost melodic.

"Kyle. Close your eyes and relax. Breathe deeply and empty your mind. Nothing matters anymore, Kyle. All you need to do is listen to my voice and do what I ask. In fact, if you don't do what I ask, your head will be consumed by an intense and blinding pain. Conversely, obeying my voice will fill you with contentment. Do you understand, Kyle?"

Kyle nodded, and Freeman seemed pleased with the result. He turned to Bradley.

"Mr Rudd is ready. What do you have in mind?"

"I want to know the truth about his foray into kidnapping. I want to know dates, times, locations, the vehicles he used, the weapons he used, how he planned it all and how he killed Timmy Brewster and Dan Culver."

Freeman relayed the questions, using the same serene tones as before, and Rudd spilled his guts. Bradley couldn't believe what he was hearing. He reached for the notebook in his shirt pocket and began scribbling. He'd placed his Glock on the table next to his chair, but Freeman hadn't even noticed. The doctor was in his element – he had total control of a human being's mind. Foster looked on in disbelief.

"Can you make your patients do anything you want?" he asked.

Bradley stopped taking notes and glanced up to hear Freeman's response. He was surprised when the doctor confessed.

"Yes, I can," he said, and he couldn't resist offering his audience another one of his smug smiles.

Bradley decided to try a question of his own, while the psychiatrist was being so co-operative.

"Did you make the sergeant do what you want? Did you tell him to kill



Traynor?”

Foster and Bradley held their breath, as they waited for an answer. Freeman grinned from ear to ear.

“Yes, I did.”

“You bastard ...”

Foster lunged forward and was about to grab Freeman by the throat, until Bradley stopped him.

“Hold it, Sergeant. I’m the one breaking all the rules here, remember?”

Foster managed to restrain himself and stood there, trying to get his breathing under control.

“Besides,” said Bradley. “Rudd’s treatment isn’t quite over. Doctor, I want you to tell Rudd that he must confess to his crimes back at the station and waive his rights to a lawyer.”

Bradley picked up his Glock and pointed it at Freeman’s head to show he meant business. But, somehow, he knew it didn’t make any difference. For some reason, Freeman was doing whatever was asked of him. Had the guy simply given up? Did he have some devious plan of his own? If he did, Bradley was at a loss as to what it could be.

For the second time, Freeman relayed Bradley’s request and Rudd nodded and said he would do as instructed. Bradley had another question for the doctor.

“Will he remember any of this?”

Freeman’s mouth turned up at the corner.

“Not unless you want him to. *Do* you want him to?”

“No,” said Bradley.

Freeman let out a humourless laugh.

“Ha. I thought not. Will that be all, Detective, or is there something else I can do for you?”

The moment had come. It was time to carry out the second part of his plan, but he needed Foster out of the room.

“Jim. The girls have been gone a long time and I’m getting a little worried. Would you mind going to see what’s holding them up?”

Foster failed to hide his surprise at this sudden request but had to admit he was concerned, too. He headed for the door of the study.

“Okay. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Can you handle things here?”

“No problem.”

Once Foster had left the room, he took a deep breath and turned to

Freeman.

“Doctor. There’s something else I need you to do for me.”

## Chapter 40

Madison couldn't imagine why Doctor Freeman would have wanted to buy such a vast property as *The Meadows*. She suspected that it must have once been a hotel, when they discovered one bedroom after another, each one complete with its own sumptuous bathroom. It was a four-storey edifice, and on the first floor they had discovered a vast conference room, together with a large oval table that would have been the envy of any boardroom.

On the fourth floor they found two particularly large bedroom suites, joined by a connecting door. One was totally functional, while the other had a host of feminine touches, including a dressing table with wrap-around mirror. Madison assumed that these rooms belonged to doctor Freeman and Theresa, although any of the dozen or so other bedrooms would have served equally as well.

But the one thing they had not been able to find was Theresa herself. As they had made their way up the grand staircase, searching one room after another, they had continually called out her name but to no avail. If the psychiatrist's assistant was in the building, she was deliberately hiding from them. But why?

"This must be the last room, surely," said Linda, tired of searching.

They were in yet another study, with a built-in bookcase filling an entire wall at the end of the room. As Linda perused the books and tried to catch her breath, Madison posed a question.

"We're on the top floor, right?"

Linda frowned.

"I think so, yes. Why do you ask?"

"When we parked outside, I looked up and I'm sure there were a couple of windows set into the roof. But I don't remember seeing an attic door or anything like that, do you?"

"Now you mention it, no, I don't."

Madison stared at the bookshelf and took a step back. Something wasn't right.

"Linda. Does that shelf on the end look different to you?"

Linda looked where Madison was pointing and compared it to the rest of the bookshelves.

"Yes. It's a fraction lower than the rest."

Madison approached it and pressed against the shelving. There was a distinct ‘click’ and the bookcase sprang back. It opened, just like a regular door, to reveal another staircase, apparently leading up to the attic-space. Madison took the lead and Linda followed, until they found themselves in a huge room with sloping walls. Sunlight filtered through a dirty skylight and revealed a whole array of cardboard boxes, strewn over the dusty floorboards. Madison put her finger to her lips, indicating that she wanted Linda to be quiet. They stood in the middle of the room and strained their ears to listen to a faint sound in the corner.

Theresa was sitting on a stool, behind one of the larger boxes, and she was weeping. Madison walked towards her to see what was wrong.

“Are you okay, Theresa?”

Theresa looked up and nodded. Madison was about to relax, until she looked down to see what Theresa was holding in her hand. The detective was an expert and she recognised the make.

It was a snub-nosed, Smith & Wesson *Ladysmith* revolver. Small and light - but deadly, nonetheless.

“I want you to tell Rudd to confess to the killing of your neighbour, Traynor.”

For once, Freeman’s relaxed demeanour deserted him, and he stared at Bradley as if he had lost his senses. But when he realised that the detective was serious, he could no longer hold back a smile.

“I think that is a marvellous idea, Detective, although I am struggling to find your motive for asking me to do such a thing. We both know I ordered Sergeant Foster to kill Traynor,” said Freeman candidly and he pointed to Rudd. “Why would you want this man to take the blame for Traynor’s murder?”

“Believe me, I’m not doing this for you. But, as things stand, Sergeant Foster could well be forced to stand trial for a killing he unwittingly committed.”

“And the soldier’s welfare is important to you?”

“He doesn’t deserve to take the blame for Traynor’s death, but that’s not why I’m doing this. He means a great deal to Detective Culver and *she* means a great deal to me.”

“I see. Well, let’s get on with it,” said Freeman enthusiastically.

The doctor relayed the details of the Traynor murder to Rudd and told him he must confess to the shooting in addition to the crimes of kidnapping, child-murder and cop-killing. As Bradley looked on, he formed a plan in his mind. He would get hold of Foster's rifle and force Rudd's prints on to the weapon. He glanced at the window, wondering if the rifle was in Foster's car. As he did so, he failed to notice Freeman reach for his phone and rest it in his lap. The doctor leant forward so that it was out of sight.

"Can I complete the treatment now?" asked Freeman.

"What?" said Bradley absent-mindedly. He was looking at the door of the study and beginning to worry what had happened to everyone.

"I need to follow a few final procedures for the treatment to work," insisted Freeman.

Bradley waved a hand, indicating that the psychiatrist should just get on with it. The detective was simply glad that the dirty work was all over, at least for the moment, and he was busy working on the next stage of his plan.

Freeman was relieved that the detective was appearing to lose interest, as it gave him the chance he had been looking for. While he reached out to Rudd and offered words of reassurance, his other hand dropped down to his phone. He found Theresa's number and made the call. Bradley appeared oblivious, until Freeman began to speak.

*"Life, Theresa. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."*

The sound of Freeman's voice brought Bradley's attention back to the room.

"What the fuck? What the hell are you doing?"

Bradley lunged forward and pushed the doctor back into his chair to reveal his phone. The detective grabbed it and stared at the screen. Freeman had obviously put a call through to his assistant. Bradley couldn't think why, or what on earth the doctor's strange words had signified, but he guessed it couldn't be good.

And that was when he heard the gunshot, followed by a woman's scream.

"What are you doing here, Theresa?" asked Madison, staring at the young woman's pistol.

Theresa looked confused and answered automatically, without even looking at the detective.

“I am waiting for a call from Gregory,” she said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Just then Theresa’s phone rang. She tapped the screen and Freeman’s words drifted over the airwaves.

*“Life, Theresa. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”*

Madison was about to ask Theresa what the hell was going on, when the woman pointed the weapon at her and fired. The detective had gone to reach for her .38 but she was too late. The bullet struck her in the abdomen, and she fell to the floor, crying out in pain. When Linda rushed forward to help her, Theresa turned the gun on her and fired.

Linda was terrified, but she could tell that Theresa was terrified, too. It was the way she held the weapon and the fact that she was clearly unused to the gun’s recoil. So, thankfully, the bullet missed. Before Theresa could recover, Linda ran to the stairway and raced down to the study.

As she emerged from the bookcase, she ran into the arms of Sergeant Foster.

It was a woman’s scream, and Bradley knew that it must have come from Linda. Madison was a cop with years of experience. She might have called out for help, but she would never have screamed hysterically. Bradley’s immediate reaction was to go and help, but then he remembered Freeman. He reached into his pocket and took out another cable-tie. He pulled the doctor out of his chair and spun him around. Once he’d tied the man’s wrists firmly behind his back, he headed for the door of the study to investigate. He was starting to panic, and he didn’t have time to do any more.

When Freeman was sure that the detective had gone, he walked over to his desk and turned his back on the uppermost drawer. He pulled it open and fished inside. He tried to see what he was doing but couldn’t turn his neck far enough around, so he had to find what he was looking for by feel alone. Eventually his fingers gripped a large pair of scissors and he walked over to Rudd, still tied to his chair and under the psychiatrist’s influence.

“Kyle. Take the scissors,” he said, turning his back on Rudd and placing them in his right hand.

Rudd’s arms were still tied to his chair, and Freeman was forced to stoop and position his wrists so that his unwitting assistant could reach them.

“Carefully cut the cable-tie around my wrists, Kyle.”

Rudd did as he was told and, wasting no time, Freeman ran over to his desk to retrieve his wallet and his car keys. He would have liked to have spent more time, gathering together some essentials, but he didn't dare risk getting caught by Detective Bradley. Besides, he had ways of getting everything he would need. On that thought, he went back to his desk and pulled out the small bag, containing his spare syringes and samples of his specially-formulated truth serum.

As he drove his Bentley along the gravel driveway, he wondered if he would ever see *The Meadows* again. By the sound of the scream, Theresa was obviously following his instructions, but he doubted if the fragile girl would be able to take on two armed detectives and a Marine. But at least she had bought him some time. Time to regroup.

And, more importantly, time for revenge.

## Chapter 41

Bradley was certain that the scream had come from one of the upper floors, and he headed up the grand staircase to investigate. He found himself calling out Linda's name as he went, and, hearing his voice, Linda yelled back to tell him where she was. He finally arrived in the study to find Linda crying and she rushed into his arms.

"She shot Madison. It was awful."

"Who shot Madison? Theresa?"

"Yes."

"Where is she now?"

"Through there," said Linda, pointing to the open bookcase. "Jim has gone in there to help her."

"Is Madison still alive?"

"Oh God, Pete, I don't know. It all happened so quickly."

Linda looked as if she were on the verge of breaking down, so Bradley tried to calm her down as he reached for his phone. He called nine-one-one and asked the woman on the end of the line to send an ambulance. He explained that a police officer had been shot and that he needed assistance. He gave his location and ended the call, before heading up to the attic. Linda called after him.

"Please be careful, Pete."

He pulled his Glock from its holster and nodded, telling her to stay where she was. He inched up the stairs, hoping he wasn't about to make a bad situation worse, and he prayed that Madison was okay. He couldn't help thinking he'd abandoned both father and daughter to their fate.

He was desperate to discover what had happened to Madison but, as he reached the top step, he peered over to assess the situation. No sense going in there like a bull in a china shop. He grimaced when he saw Madison's prone body lying next to a pool of blood, while Theresa stood over her, a small revolver in her hand. Foster had his back to him, his arms spread out, no doubt trying to prove he was unarmed and harmless. Bradley decided to tell Theresa help was on the way.

"Theresa, it's me, Detective Bradley. I've called for an ambulance for Detective Culver. If the paramedics are going to be able to help her, you need to put the gun down."



Theresa was startled by the sound of his voice, and it took her a moment to spot his head, peering across at her from the top of the stairs. Foster looked from one to the other, still assessing the situation. Bradley had his Glock in his hand, but it was out of sight. It would only take him a second to raise it and shoot, if Theresa decided to open fire again.

“No. It’s a trick,” she cried, and she pointed her revolver at both men in turn. But her breathing was laboured, and her face was covered in sweat.

“You didn’t really mean to hurt Detective Culver, did you, Theresa?”

“You came here to hurt us,” she insisted, her voice shaking.

“Who told you we came here to hurt you, Theresa?”

Theresa frowned, and she stared at the gun in her hand, as if she were searching for the answer to Bradley’s question.

“I don’t know.”

The sound of a siren could be heard, approaching the property.

“The ambulance is here now, Theresa. You’re going to have to put the gun down and let the paramedics help Detective Culver.”

Theresa appeared to come out of her trance and she suddenly focused on Bradley’s head, peering over the top of the stairway. She gripped her pistol in both hands and prepared to fire.

Bradley’s arm jerked, as he instinctively tried to raise his Glock, but he knew he didn’t have time. He ducked his head, and a bullet tore into the wall behind him. He heard Theresa scream and there was a second shot. He risked raising his head above the floor of the attic, and found Foster sprawled over Theresa’s prone body, a crushed cardboard box lying between them. Bradley assumed the soldier had charged into her, using the box as a flimsy shield. He wasted no time and called down to Linda.

“Linda. Go and tell the paramedics where we are. Tell them not to worry. The police are on the scene and everything is under control.”

He ran over to Madison and prayed that she was still alive. Foster had managed to relieve Theresa of her gun, but there was no need to restrain her. She was curled up in a ball, crying and rocking from side to side in the corner of the attic. The sergeant joined Bradley at Madison’s side.

“She’s still breathing,” said Bradley.

He felt helpless, and he was relieved when he heard the paramedics making their way up the stairs to the attic. The two men stepped back, knowing better than to get in the way of the professionals. Linda had joined them, and the trio looked on, as the medics opened Madison’s jacket and blouse so that

they could examine her wound.

The paramedics both looked young. In their twenties, Bradley would have said. A man and a woman. The man carried a large box, from which he grabbed bandages and a drip. The bandages were applied, and drugs were administered. The drip was attached to Madison's arm.

"Roy, we'll need the stretcher," said the woman.

Roy looked at the bannister, guarding the stairway.

"God knows how we're going to get the stretcher over that?"

Foster followed the man's gaze and walked over to the bannister. He kicked out with his right foot, and his sturdy boot had demolished the bannister within seconds, until it was nothing more than matchwood.

"Problem solved, I guess," said Roy, and he ran off to get the stretcher, while his partner continued to attend to Madison.

Bradley helped himself to Theresa's revolver and gently took her arm. They all followed, as the paramedics took Madison to the ambulance. Once they were outside, they could hear more sirens approaching.

"That'll be the local police," said Bradley. "I guess I'll have to stay around and try to explain this mess."

"I'll go with Madison," said Foster, heading for the ambulance without waiting for a reply.

"Wait," cried Bradley. "Give me the keys to your car."

Foster reached into his pocket and threw them at the detective. Bradley ran over to the ambulance and slapped the driver's door.

"Where are you taking her?" he asked.

"San Diego. The general hospital is the nearest."

"Okay, thanks."

As the ambulance pulled away, Linda, Bradley and Theresa went inside and headed for the study. Rudd was still sitting where they had left him, tied to the wooden chair. He appeared to be sleeping, as if he hadn't yet emerged from his hypnotic trance. The detective directed Theresa to one of the other chairs, where she sat and immediately began to cry.

Bradley's eyes wandered around the room, but there was no sign of Doctor Freeman. The detective walked over to the window and looked for the expensive Bentley he had seen parked outside when they arrived. But it was gone. A squad car from the County Sheriff's Department was skidding to a halt on the loose gravel, and two uniformed police officers began running to the house. Bradley searched for the word he was looking for, hoping to sum up

the situation.  
“Shit.”

## Chapter 42

Bradley saw that the local police weren't taking any chances and were entering the premises, guns drawn. The fact that they must have passed the ambulance on the way in obviously hadn't reassured them that all was well. The last thing he wanted was for the four of them to get mown down by trigger-happy cops, so he turned to Linda.

"We're about to have company. Raise your hands above your head to prove you're harmless."

Linda did as she was told, and Bradley reached for his badge and did the same, seconds before they were joined by the two cops.

"I'm a police officer with the San Diego Police Department," said Bradley. "Everything is under control."

Bradley didn't recognise either of the cops from the Sheriff's Department. One of them was a burly sergeant with red hair. Bradley guessed the guy was in his mid-thirties, but somehow his fair skin had managed to retain a plethora of boyish freckles. He walked up to Bradley and examined his ID. Satisfied, he nodded to his partner and holstered his weapon.

"I'm Sergeant Peterson. This is Corporal Turner. Are you the only people in the house, Detective Bradley?" he asked.

"Yes. My partner was shot, and she was taken away in the ambulance you passed on the way in."

He decided not to tell them about Foster. He had enough explaining to do as it was.

"She going to be okay?" asked Peterson.

"I don't know," said Bradley, and Linda touched his hand.

Peterson let his eyes wander around the room. Theresa was sitting with her head in her hands, and Rudd was still apparently asleep. For the first time, the sergeant noticed that Rudd's arms were tied to his chair.

"Are all these people civilians, Detective?"

"Yes."

"Any of them the owner of this place?"

"No. He escaped."

"Escaped?" said Peterson, clearly shocked, and Bradley immediately regretted his choice of words. "So, the owner was under arrest? Is he dangerous? I mean, should I let the Sheriff know?"

“No. He presents no immediate danger,” said Bradley, trying to cover up his earlier mistake.

That was when Corporal Turner decided to join the conversation.

“Hey, I remember you. You were one of the detectives sent from the city to investigate the Traynor murder.”

“That’s right,” Bradley admitted. His head was spinning, and he was eager to wrap things up. He wanted to avoid any more awkward questions.

“Who’s this guy?” asked Peterson, pointing at Rudd. “Is he the one who shot your partner?”

“No,” said Bradley, worried that he might be about to dig a deeper hole for himself. “My partner was shot by the young woman over there.”

He pointed at Theresa, but she didn’t react. She was still lost in her own little world. Peterson took off his hat and scratched his head.

“Jesus, Detective, you’re making my head spin.”

“Sergeant. I promise I’ll explain everything but, in the meantime, can you and the corporal take these two into custody, while I find out if my partner is okay.”

“I guess,” said the sergeant, although he looked doubtful. “Am I to assume this pretty lady holding your hand isn’t under arrest.”

Linda smiled at the sergeant and he smiled back.

“No, she’s with me,” said Bradley.

“Yeah, I figured that.”

Peterson nodded to his partner, and the corporal went over to Theresa and removed his handcuffs from his belt.

“Would you mind coming with me, ma’am?”

Theresa looked up as if she had only just realised where she was. She held up her hands and the corporal put on the cuffs. As he led her out of the room, Bradley called after her.

“I’ll tell Robert what’s happened. He’s been worried about you.”

She turned to face him, and Turner stopped to allow her to respond.

“Robert?” she said.

“Yes, Robert. Your fiancé.”

Tears suddenly filled her eyes and she nodded.

“Thank you, Detective.”

Corporal Turner led her away and the sergeant waved his hand around the room. He nodded at the departing prisoner.

“You can explain all this?” he asked.

“I think so,” said Bradley, trying his best to sound confident.

Peterson took out a pen-knife and headed towards Rudd. Before he cut the ties holding the suspect’s arms to his chair, he smiled across at Bradley.

“Well, Detective. I’m surely looking forward to that. Yes, sir, I surely am.”

## Chapter 43

Madison didn't know what to feel. On the one hand, she was elated, and felt as though she had been born again. When Theresa had pointed the gun and shot her, point-blank, the detective had been sure that her time was up. But the doctors had assured her that she would make a full recovery. She had lost a lot of blood, but the paramedics had got her to the hospital in time, and the single bullet had hit her left side, missing her vital organs. She had been very lucky.

But, on the other hand, she still felt incredibly vulnerable. One minute she had simply been doing her job, and the next she was lying in a pool of blood, her life hanging by a thread. Being a detective was her life. But, for the first time in her professional life, she found herself having doubts about her career choice. Who was to say that she wouldn't leave the hospital and return to work, only to get gunned down her first day back? It didn't matter how careful you were, it was all just a lottery. If someone like Theresa could take her down, what chance did she have against the host of real criminals out there?

It had been almost a week since she had been brought in to the hospital, and Jim had been at her bedside every single day. Lying in her bed, she had plenty of time to think. Not only that, her second chance at life had apparently caused her to be totally honest with herself, and she was finding this new trend extremely infuriating. For instance, Jim's presence made her feel safe and protected. But she also recognised that she resented this. It was a matter of professional pride. She had always been able to take care of herself.

The *new* Madison also had no qualms about admonishing herself. She had been careless. Bradley had warned her about the control Freeman had over those he'd hypnotised, but she hadn't completely believed him. She'd regarded Theresa as a vulnerable young woman, and she hadn't realised the threat Freeman's assistant had posed. She'd been careless and almost paid for it with her life.

Madison-the-cop was also frustrated because she felt like she was out of the loop. Whenever she had questioned Jim about what had happened after she was shot, he refused to discuss it. He insisted he was as much in the dark as her and was too modest to brag about his heroics. Consequently, Madison had no idea that he was the one who had disarmed Theresa and stopped her from harming anyone else. He'd simply said that Theresa had been arrested by the police.

So, she was somewhat relieved when the nurse came in to say that she had a visitor from the San Diego Police Department. Jim had told her that Bradley had come to the hospital on numerous occasions to ask the doctors how she was getting on. He had even come to her room during those first few days, when she had spent most of her time sleeping. But he hadn't come to see her since, and she was beginning to think he might be avoiding her. When Bradley did finally enter the room, sporting a sheepish smile, her relief was short-lived because he was closely followed by their boss, Lieutenant Harper.

"How are you doing, Madison?" asked Harper.

"Fine, thank you, Lieutenant."

"Good. I'm pleased to hear it. And I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear this. The DA's agreed to prosecute Rudd for the murder of your father."

Madison did her best to sit up, and Foster leaned over to help her with her pillows. This *was* good news. She'd been worried that they lacked enough evidence to make a convincing case.

"And what about Timmy's murder?" she asked.

"We've got him for that, too," said Harper proudly, as if he'd been behind the investigation from start to finish.

"So, we've got enough to go on?"

"Sure. And what we didn't have, Rudd told us about. Hell, he confessed to the whole shebang. Dates, times, locations ... we've got it all."

"He confessed?" asked Madison, not quite believing what she was hearing.

"Yeah," said the lieutenant, unable to hide his enthusiasm. "And get this. He confessed to the Traynor killing, too."

Madison fell back on to her pillows, as if the lieutenant's words had struck her in the face. She began to wonder if the drugs the doctors had pumped into her hadn't worn off. The Traynor killing? She turned to look at Bradley and he shook his head before looking away, unable to return her gaze.

Madison wasn't the only one to react to the lieutenant's unexpected news. Foster suddenly stood up and he too turned to Bradley. He went to say something but stopped himself at the last minute.

The lieutenant frowned. He was surprised to see the stunned look on the sergeant's face. He turned to Foster.

"Sergeant Foster. Do you own a rifle? An M40A3?"

Foster couldn't help glancing in Bradley's direction. The detective hoped the lieutenant hadn't spotted it. It made the soldier look damned guilty.

"Yes."



“Do you know where the rifle is now?”

“As far as I know, it’s in the trunk of my car. I have a steel box, specially made, welded to the inside. It’s pretty secure.”

The lieutenant sighed.

“Obviously it wasn’t secure enough. We found it in Rudd’s car, covered in his fingerprints.”

Foster looked at Bradley and then at Madison. He didn’t know what to say. The lieutenant clearly misread his reaction.

“Look, Sergeant, we’re not blaming you. Somehow, Rudd must have got hold of your keys and taken your rifle. You weren’t to know.”

“I guess not,” said Foster unconvincingly.

“No, Sergeant,” insisted the lieutenant. “I’m not blaming you. But I do blame my detectives here for dragging you along on their investigation. They shouldn’t have involved you.”

Bradley stared down at his shoes, looking like a guilty schoolboy. Madison simply looked confused and lay back, exhausted. Luckily, this had the desired effect on her superior, and Harper began to make his excuses.

“Anyway,” he said. “This isn’t the time to go through a formal debriefing. As soon as you’re feeling better, Madison, we’ll get all the details of the case squared away for the DA. In the meantime, Pete here can handle all the paperwork he’s let build up over the past few days. I’ll leave you to rest, Detective.”

Harper stepped forward and tapped Madison’s arm with his hand. Within the department, the lieutenant was known for his stoicism and reserve, so his attempt at displaying affection just felt awkward.

“Are you coming, Bradley?” asked Harper, as he made his way to the door.

“If it’s all the same to you, Lieutenant, I’ll stay to see if there’s anything I can do for Madison. I’ll meet you back at the station.”

The lieutenant looked none too pleased.

“Okay, Detective, but don’t take too long. That paperwork we talked about isn’t going to get done by itself.”

“Sure, Lieutenant. I won’t be long.”

Harper gave Bradley a look that said he wasn’t happy, but he stepped out of the room and left the three of them alone. Madison and Foster both stared at Bradley as if he were public enemy number one. Madison was the first to speak.

“I don’t believe this. You got Freeman to make Rudd confess to Traynor’s

murder, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"What the hell were you thinking?"

Bradley rubbed his chin before answering.

"I was thinking maybe Jim doesn't deserve to go to prison for a murder he didn't even know he was committing. I was thinking maybe it wouldn't make any difference to Rudd. He's going down for killing Timmy and your father, so he'll be serving a life sentence anyway."

Madison was sitting up again, and she was shaking her head, as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"And what about Freeman?"

Bradley looked away, unable to return Madison's stare.

"He escaped."

"He escaped, or did you let him go?" said Madison accusingly.

"He escaped," said Bradley pointedly.

"What difference does it make?" said Foster. "You've got him off the hook. There's no way you can tie him to Traynor's death now."

"I know. But Linda insists he was behind her sister's suicide. And he told Theresa to shoot Madison. *And* he's swindled some businessman out of millions of dollars. I won't let him get away."

"You've got to find him first. He could be out of the country by now for all you know."

Bradley grimaced. He'd been dreading telling Madison and Foster the truth. He thought he'd been doing the right thing, but now he wasn't so sure. Foster interrupted his thoughts.

"In the Marine Corps we try to live by a strict code of honour. I don't know how it is in your world, Bradley, but aren't cops supposed to live by the rules? This just doesn't feel right."

"You can say that again," said Madison.

"Okay, Madison, what do you suggest?" said Bradley. "Should we all go to the lieutenant and tell him what I've done? Even if he believed us, you know what would happen. The whole case against Rudd would unravel, and Jim could very well end up behind bars for murder."

"That's not fair and you know it," said Madison, becoming agitated, and Foster stepped forward to rub her shoulder.

"Maybe that's what I deserve," said Foster, voicing his thoughts.

"No, you don't," said Madison, reaching across the bed to touch his hand.

“If anyone deserves to go to jail it’s Dr Freeman and his accomplice, Detective Bradley.”

“Now who’s being unfair?” countered Bradley.

At that moment a nurse came into the room to check on Madison. She noticed her patient was looking distinctly distressed and red in the face. She scowled at Madison’s two visitors.

“I think it’s time you two gentlemen left,” she said firmly. “Detective Culver needs to rest.”

Foster and Bradley nodded, knowing the nurse was right. They needed to save any further arguments for a later time, when she was feeling stronger. Foster leant over and kissed Madison on the forehead.

“Take care, Madison. I’ll come and see you tomorrow.”

Madison managed a strained smile, but this disappeared when Bradley spoke.

“Get well soon, Madison.”

His partner refused to acknowledge him, and he left the hospital room, feeling like a piece of dirt. They’d caught her father’s killer and it should have been a moment for celebration. Instead, in Madison’s eyes he’d tainted the case against Rudd. He thought he’d been saving the new man in her life from prison and she’d be grateful, but she clearly didn’t see it that way.

There was only one way for him to make amends now - for his partner and for Linda. He had to find Freeman and put the man away for good.

## Chapter 44

Foster and Bradley walked to the parking area at the front of the hospital in silence. The detective had deliberately parked his car next to Foster's four-wheel-drive because he wanted to talk to the soldier alone. The sergeant was the first to speak.

"If I open the trunk, will I find that my rifle has mysteriously disappeared?" he asked.

"I planted it in Rudd's car. It's evidence in a murder case now."

"How did you get Rudd's prints on the gun?"

"Before the guys from the Sheriff's Department took him away, I used your keys and helped myself to your rifle. I showed it to Rudd and asked him if he recognised it. When he said no, I threw it at him, and he caught it without thinking. Naturally, I'd made sure it was unloaded."

"Naturally," said Foster sarcastically.

Bradley shook his head.

"I thought I was doing the right thing. Clearly, I was wrong."

Foster stared at the detective and suddenly took pity on him.

"Look, I suppose I should really be thanking you. You stuck your neck out to get me off the hook. You didn't have to do that. But you've got to understand something, Detective. Everything I've done in my career as a soldier - going to war, staring death in the face - I've only been able to do because I can look in the mirror and feel good about what I see. But that's all changed now. I shot that guy, pure and simple. Freeman told me to do it, sure, but I played my part in Traynor's death. I have a debt to pay."

"I'm sorry you feel that way. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," said Foster.

Bradley leant against Foster's car and composed his thoughts before he spoke.

"I don't expect you to believe me, Jim, but I don't care what happens to me. If you want to come with me to the station and confess, that's up to you. I know that Madison got involved with you before she knew what you'd done, but the problem is, I can't guarantee the lieutenant and the DA will see it that way."

"Don't you think I know that?" said Foster and, for the first time, Bradley saw fear in the man's eyes.

Bradley kicked the gravel at his feet.

“Shit, this whole thing is a mess.”

Foster looked at him and offered a humourless grin.

“You won’t get an argument from me.”

Bradley offered his hand.

“Take care, Sergeant.”

“You too, Detective.”

The two men got into their vehicles and drove off. Bradley headed for the station to catch up on the lieutenant’s paperwork. As he drove, he wondered if Foster wasn’t far behind, preparing to hand himself in.

Mrs Traynor was struggling with a box of vegetables she had picked from her plot at the end of the garden. She always got carried away and picked more than she needed. That was the trouble, when they all looked so fresh and delicious. Her husband had always been so proud of his vegetable patch, and she had made it her mission to maintain it as best she could.

When she put the box on the ground for the second time, she heard a vehicle, making its way along her driveway. The four-wheel-drive parked in front of the house, and a young man got out and looked in her direction. She smiled and waved. He waved back, before walking over to her.

“Can I help you with that, ma’am?” said Foster.

Doreen Traynor smiled. Her memory wasn’t what it used to be, but she was sure she hadn’t seen this man before. She would have remembered such a handsome, tall visitor. Foster’s biceps strained against his shirt, as he effortlessly picked up the box of produce.

“Thank you, young man,” said Doreen, leading the way into the house.

Foster placed the vegetables on a large table, taking centre-stage in the kitchen. When he turned around, a man had appeared in the doorway. He looked to be in his early thirties, and Foster assumed he was Traynor’s son. A lump appeared in his throat, and he quickly realised this was going to be even harder than he had anticipated. But he’d made a decision and he was going to follow it through, whatever the consequences might be. It was a matter of honour.

“Who are you?” asked the man at the door, alarmed at the sight of an imposing stranger in the family’s kitchen.

“Don’t be so rude, Michael. This kind man helped me in with your father’s

vegetables.”

“I hope I’m not intruding,” said Foster, holding out his hand and smiling. “My name is Sergeant Jim Foster. I’m stationed over in San Diego.”

“Oh, you’re a soldier,” said Doreen, gushing. “Isn’t that wonderful, Michael. You know how your father was always keen to support our boys in uniform.”

Although she had no way of knowing, Doreen Traynor’s words cut into Foster like a knife, and his throat had suddenly become incredibly dry. He tried to swallow but couldn’t.

Michael shook Foster’s hand but still eyed him suspiciously. His mother had recently been diagnosed with the onset of dementia and she was oblivious to his discomfort. While she busied herself with the vegetables, Michael led Foster into the hallway. Before they left, Doreen called after them.

“Nice to meet you, Sergeant Forester,” she said.

Foster caught a look from her son and didn’t correct her.

“Nice to meet you too, Mrs Traynor.”

“Oh, you can call me Doreen, young man.”

“Nice to meet you, Doreen,” said Foster, waving, but Doreen was too busy to notice.

“What can we do for you, Sergeant Foster?” asked Michael, determined to find out what the stranger wanted.

Foster took a breath and steeled himself.

“I came here to talk to you about your father.”

“Forgive me. I don’t think we’ve met before. Did you know my father?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“What is this about?” asked Michael, starting to lose his patience.

“It’s about your father’s murder.”

“But the police told us they’ve caught his killer.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that. I have some information I think you should know.”

“What information? If you know anything about my father’s murder, then you should go to the police.”

“If that is what you want me to do, then you have my word I will. But, if you can forgive the imposition, I would like to speak with you first.”

Michael had initially felt intimidated by the presence of the imposing stranger, but the man certainly appeared to mean no harm, and his curiosity was getting the better of him.

“If it’ll help, I guess there’s no harm in it.”

“Thank you,” said Foster.

*I guess there’s no harm in it.* Contrary to what Traynor’s son had just assumed, Foster wondered if he was about to inflict more harm on a family that had already suffered enough.

## Chapter 45

Bradley sat at his desk, going over the transcript of Rudd's interrogation. The more he read, the more torn he became. On the one hand, he was elated. His plan had worked, and, thanks to Freeman's mind-control tricks, Rudd had sung like a bird. He'd admitted everything and he offered any information his questioners asked for, despite the constant warnings from his lawyer to deny everything until they knew what evidence the San Diego Police Department possessed. Rudd's interrogators had never witnessed such forthright cooperation in all their years. At one point, they even began to wonder if the man was playing games with them, but numerous searches of his home and the murder scene proved he was telling the truth.

So, when Rudd began spilling his guts about another murder he had committed – one that he was not even being considered for – his questioners lapped it up with a spoon. As Bradley continued to read, the only uncomfortable moment came when Rudd was asked what his motive was for killing Traynor. But his reply seemed to satisfy his interrogators. He'd robbed Sergeant Foster's car on a whim and, finding himself in possession of high-tech rifle, he'd killed Traynor for the hell of it. Shooting the farmer had given him a thrill. The police officers sitting opposite him in the interrogation room had accepted his claim. Random shootings were far from uncommon, after all.

Bradley wondered if Rudd might have had an alibi for the time Traynor was killed. But, as far as he could tell, his colleagues in the department weren't even looking for one. Why should they? Rudd had already confessed to the murder and they had no reason to doubt him.

When the two men from the Sheriff's Department had relieved him of his prisoners, back at *The Meadows*, Bradley had made the long drive to the shack in the heart of Death Valley. Sitting beside him, all the way, was Foster's rifle. He'd been careful not to let the Sheriff's men see it, even when he'd tricked Rudd into handling it in the back of their car. He'd used a cloth to hold the weapon, so that his own prints wouldn't appear on the gun. Once he reached the shack, still using the cloth, he placed the rifle in the trunk of Rudd's Mazda.

Once he got back to the station, he told the lieutenant how he and Madison had followed Rudd to Death Valley. He gave him the location of the shack and Harper sent two of his men to investigate. They called a few hours later to inform their boss that they had found Rudd's car. They'd also had a lucky



break. A sophisticated rifle had been found in the trunk of the vehicle. Rudd seemed to be telling the truth. If ballistics could convince a court that the rifle they'd found in the Mazda was the one used to kill Traynor, then it proved Rudd was the shooter. Case closed.

The tricky part had been explaining what Bradley, Madison, Foster and Rudd had been doing at Freeman's retreat in Pine Valley. When it was discovered that Freeman was missing and that his assistant Theresa Lee had been the one to shoot Madison, confusion reigned. And it was up to Bradley to enlighten everyone.

Bradley decided the best way to avoid his story coming under suspicion was to take the blame for being at *The Meadows* in the first place. The lieutenant was convinced the detective was a screw-up anyway. So, he kept it simple and as close to the truth as he could. He explained that they'd tracked Rudd down to the shack in Death Valley due to Madison's excellent detective work. She'd been the one to discover that Rudd had changed the locks on the property where Timmy was killed. But it had been Bradley who insisted they go to *The Meadows* before heading back to San Diego. He'd been convinced that Freeman was still the most likely suspect for Traynor's murder. Of course, now he knew how wrong he was.

As for Madison getting shot by Theresa Lee – that was nothing more than a tragic accident. The assistant had thought they were intruders and had mistakenly shot Madison in self-defence. She was a fragile woman under the care of Dr Freeman, who had left her in the large and isolated property all alone. The department was using its own shrink to try and assess her mental state at the time of the shooting, and they appeared to corroborate the fact that she was 'pretty mixed up'. Bradley made a mental note to visit Madison in hospital to make sure that their stories tallied. He just had to hope she would go along with it.

While he was wading through his paperwork, Bradley was visited by the lieutenant, who congratulated him on not only finding the killer of Timmy Brewster and Dan Culver, but also Traynor's murderer. But he couldn't resist chiding the detective for his cock-and-bull theory about Dr Freeman using hypnosis to make his patients bend to his will. Bradley was forced to swallow his pride and admit he'd messed up. He didn't want Harper suspecting he was still going after the guy.

Once Harper had left him in peace, he applied his mind to the task of catching Dr Gregory Freeman. But that was easier said than done.

Where the hell should he start?

## Chapter 46

Henry Buller almost never received visitors to his palatial office on the top floor of the Buller building, in the heart of San Diego. The floor-to-ceiling windows ensured that he had uninterrupted views of the Pacific Ocean and it was a sanctuary of calm, in a cut-throat world where one wrong decision could cost his company millions.

But this was different. His secretary told him that the man waiting patiently in his outer office was Dr Gregory Freeman. The man had saved him from the abyss and, consequently, his business empire from ruin. Besides, no one in the company knew that their commander-in-chief had been seeking the help of a psychiatrist, so he wanted the doctor out of sight before anyone started spreading rumours. As the man at the top, he couldn't afford to show any signs of weakness.

When Buller's secretary escorted Freeman into the inner sanctum, her boss was waiting in the centre of the room, his arm outstretched, ready to welcome his visitor. This only happened when Mr Buller was expecting a very important guest, and the secretary looked at the thin, rather unimpressive figure of Dr Freeman with a new-found respect. The doctor declined the offer of a drink and she left, curious as to whom the man might be.

"Hello, Dr Freeman. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?" said Buller, shaking the doctor's hand warmly.

Buller noticed that Freeman was carrying a small black bag in his left hand but said nothing. Hopefully, all would be explained in due course.

"I'm extremely sorry to barge in like this, Henry, but I'm afraid it is a matter of some urgency."

"My goodness. Well, Doctor, I must admit that you've piqued my interest. Whatever can I do for you?"

"It's more what I can do for you, Henry."

Buller led Freeman to a comfortable leather sofa at the rear of the room and took the seat next to it.

"Go on, Doctor."

"Certainly. If you remember, as part of your treatment I administered what I thought was a harmless relaxant."

Buller suddenly sat up in his chair and his eyes widened in alarm.

"Forgive me, Doctor. Did you say, what you *thought* was harmless?"

“Yes, Henry, but please don’t be troubled. I’m here to make sure that any unforeseen problems can be avoided.”

“I think you’d better explain, Doctor,” said Buller, far from untroubled.

“Of course. I have been contacted by the company that supplied the relaxant, and they have informed me that it may have been contaminated.”

“Contaminated? Dear God!”

Freeman raised his hand and waved it in a calming motion.

“Please, Henry, it is not as bad as it sounds. They are not saying the drug is in any way harmful to your health. Rather, it is just that it might affect your mental well-being at some time in the future.”

Buller was still far from reassured.

“What sort of effect?”

“You might experience episodes of paranoia.”

“Paranoia? But my susceptibility to such feelings was the very reason I came to see you in the first place. And I can assure you that I feel absolutely fine.”

“That is excellent news, Henry. But I would very much like to keep it that way.”

“Believe me, so would I, Doctor. But what do you have in mind?”

“When I heard of my supplier’s error, you can rest assured that I admonished them severely.”

Buller did his best to control his temper. He didn’t give a damn how much the man admonished them. He wanted to be well again. He bit his tongue and let the psychiatrist continue.

“To make amends, they have sent me another drug – what you might call an antidote. They guarantee that it will counteract the effects of the so-called relaxant I administered during our sessions together.”

Buller pointed to the black bag, sitting on the leather sofa next to Freeman.

“Do I take it that a sample of the ‘antidote’ is contained in this bag?”

“Yes.”

“But what makes you think you can trust these suppliers now, after what they have done. For all you know, this new drug of theirs might only serve to make things worse.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Freeman, trying to offer the businessman the reassurance he was looking for. “That is why I have tested the antidote myself.”

“You tested it?”

“Yes. In a previous reincarnation, I was a student of chemistry,” he lied.

“And you are confident that this new drug is perfectly safe?”

“Yes. And, what’s more, I can confirm that it contains the ingredients necessary to counteract the effects of the other drug, as the company has claimed.”

“Doctor. Do I take it that you wish to administer the drug here, in my office?”

“That’s right, Henry. The sooner you receive the antidote the better. These episodes of paranoia could strike at any time. You are not my only patient, of course, but I have taken the liberty of coming to you first, as a courtesy and as a way of thanking you for the financial help you have given me.”

“Well,” said Buller, standing up and removing his jacket. “I suppose we’d better get on with it.”

## Chapter 47

As soon as he had returned to the station, Bradley had put out an APB on Freeman's Bentley. Strictly speaking, he was supposed to get the okay from the lieutenant, but he figured he was so out on a limb, he was past caring. He'd also put out an alert on Freeman's bank cards. If the doctor was foolish enough to use an ATM, the detective would get to know about it. The same was true of the guy's credit cards, although that sometimes took a little longer. As it turned out, it was all looking like a waste of time. So far, nothing had turned up.

Having nothing better to do, he found himself scribbling notes on a yellow legal pad sitting on his desk. He wrote Freeman's name in the centre of the page and drew a bubble around it. From the centre, he pencilled in lines with arrows pointing outwards. On the outer edge, he continued to jot down anything relevant that came to mind.

Needs cash? Needs to buy provisions? Needs to dump the Bentley? Needs to get help? After he finished writing the word 'help', he tore the sheet from the pad and wrote 'help' for a second time. He underlined it. He wrote Theresa's name and immediately crossed it out. He wrote the word 'colleagues' and then 'friends & family'. He shook his head in frustration. He hadn't got the time or the patience to go down that route.

He rubbed his eyes and tried to wake himself up. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept. He was about to throw the legal pad into the trash in frustration, when his pencil pressed on to the yellow paper. His fingers scribbled the word 'clients'. He dropped the pencil and his fingers froze in mid-air. He reached for his phone and called the sergeant manning the desk where the department processed detainees.

"Sergeant Garret speaking."

"Yeah, Terry? This is Pete Bradley."

"Homicide, right?"

"Among other things."

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for a Theresa Lee. She was brought in a week ago."

"Oh yeah, the looker. I remember her."

"Where did they take her?"

"She's still here."

"Really? How come?"

“The shrinks are still checking her out. She was a mess when the guys from the Sheriff’s office brought her in.”

“I need to see her.”

“Sure, Detective, but you know the drill. You want an interview, you’ve got to set it up and I need the paperwork.”

“Listen, Terry, can you give me a break? I haven’t got time for all that shit. I’ve got a murderer on the loose and she might know where he is.”

“Hey, Detective, that’s not fair. Rules are rules and they’re there for a reason.”

“The answer to one question. That’s all I need.”

Bradley heard Sergeant Garret sigh.

“If I get you in to see her and the shit starts to fly, it better not come my way, you know what I’m saying?”

“Sure, no problem.”

Theresa was spending her nights incarcerated in the cells reserved for prisoners requiring medical attention. She was physically unharmed, but clearly her mental state qualified her for special treatment. The accommodation was generally better, and residents didn’t have to follow such a strict regime.

Sergeant Garret had decided it was best if they dispensed with the interrogation room altogether, and he waited by the open door to Theresa’s cell, while Bradley asked his important question. But it turned out there was more than one question. Bradley had lied.

“How are you doing, Theresa?”

She was sitting on her bunk, wearing her own clothes instead of prison garb, and her eyes were red, as if she’d been constantly crying. She squinted in the harsh light.

“Is that you, Detective Bradley?”

“Yes, it is, Theresa. How are you?”

“I guess I’m doing okay,” she said unconvincingly. And then it was as if she suddenly remembered something. “My lawyer told me what you did – you know, saying it was self-defence - and I wanted to say thank you. Gregory made me shoot your partner, you know.”

“I know, Theresa.”

Behind him, Sergeant Garret frowned. He knew that Theresa Lee was

supposed to be a fruitcake, but Bradley appeared to be going along with her story. Perhaps the guy was just humouring her.

“Robert came to visit me.”

“That’s good, Theresa. I think you make a wonderful couple.”

For the first time she smiled, and he decided it was time to ask his questions.

“I’m still trying to find Dr Freeman, but I’ve had no luck so far. Can you think of any of his friends or members of his family who might be helping him to hide out?”

Theresa shook her head.

“Gregory never had any visitors like that. At least not when I was around, which was most of the time.”

“So, the only people to visit him at *The Meadows* were his clients?”

“Clients? You make it sound like they were clamouring at the door.”

“Are you saying he didn’t have many patients?”

“You could say that. Gregory didn’t like me to talk about it, but since moving to Pine Valley he’s only had three clients that I know of, and one of those was Linda Renton, his sister-in-law. But you know about that because you were there.”

“That’s right. And you told me about Sergeant Foster. So, who was the other one?”

At that moment, Sergeant Garret spotted another detective, loitering at the other end of the corridor and looking in his direction. He tapped Bradley on the shoulder.

“Hey, Detective, time’s up. We’ve got to go.”

“Just a second, Sergeant.”

“Yeah, right.”

Bradley ignored him and turned to Theresa.

“Who was the other client, Theresa?”

“Henry Buller.”

“The industrialist? The one who funded *The Meadows*?”

“Yes. He visited Gregory several times. Gregory treated him more like a friend.”

“Thanks, Theresa, you’ve been a great help. Give my best to Robert.”

Before Theresa could answer, Garret was guiding Bradley out of her cell.

“That’s enough, Detective. We’ve got to go!”



It took Bradley only fifteen minutes to reach the Buller building in the centre of town. He parked on the street and used his 'police business' sign to hopefully ward off any eager traffic cops trying to fill their quotas.

Buller's secretary informed him that her boss was in a meeting and wasn't to be disturbed. Bradley flashed his badge and said he was there on urgent police business. He stared her down and it had the desired effect. She threw her notepad on to her desk in frustration and knocked one of two doors that led to the company boardroom. Buller emerged a few moments later, looking suitably irritated.

"I sincerely hope this is as urgent as you claim, um ...?"

"Detective Bradley, sir."

"Yes, well. I'm in the middle of an important meeting, Detective. Can't this wait?"

"No, sir. I'm conducting a murder investigation and I need to speak to Dr Gregory Freeman. I believe you know him."

Buller glanced across to his secretary, who was staring at her notepad and pretending not to listen. He pointed to the door leading to his office.

"Let's discuss this in here, Detective," he said, leading the way.

Once inside, Buller headed for the large chair behind his desk and pointed to one of a pair of chairs that faced him. This time, there was no offer of a comfortable leather sofa for visiting law enforcement officers who neglected to make an appointment.

"Now, Detective," said Buller condescendingly. "What is so urgent that you need to pull me out of a crucial business meeting?"

"Like I said out there," replied Bradley, losing his patience. "I'm looking for Dr Freeman."

"And what makes you think I might know of his whereabouts?"

"You're a patient of his, I understand. And you have invested a great deal of money in his foundation."

For the first time, Buller appeared to lose some of his bluster.

"That is a matter between me and Dr Freeman."

Bradley felt like telling the industrialist some home truths about his precious Dr Freeman, but he didn't have time. Instead, he got straight to the point.

"When was the last time you saw Dr Freeman?"

"If you must know, I saw him this morning."

Bradley felt as if he'd been slapped in the face, and he leant forward in his seat.

"This morning? Where?"

"Well, here, in this very office."

Bradley glanced around the large room as if he might find Freeman lurking behind one of the pieces of furniture.

"What did he want?"

Buller avoided Bradley's gaze and pretended to be interested in something on his desk. He nervously brought his hand to his face and cleared his throat before answering.

"It was a personal matter, Detective, which I would rather not discuss, if it's all the same to you."

Bradley tried to control his temper. The last thing he wanted to do was put the businessman on the defensive.

"I'm talking about murder, Mr Buller. Believe me, it doesn't get much more personal than that."

"Are you suggesting Gregory might be involved in a crime? Because, if you are, you're way off the mark. Dr Freeman is a kind and caring professional."

Bradley felt like grabbing the man by the throat and beating the answer out of him, but he had to tread carefully. Buller had every right to throw him out of the office if he felt like it.

"I'd appreciate it if you could tell me what you can, sir. If it helps, I promise that whatever you say will go no further. You have my word. I just need to speak to Dr Freeman because I believe he can assist the department in its investigation."

Buller shuffled uncomfortably in his chair and sighed.

"Very well, Detective. Dr Freeman was concerned for my well-being, and he came here to see how I was doing."

"That's quite unusual, isn't it? I mean, I don't think I've ever heard of a psychiatrist making house calls."

"That's the kind of man he is."

Bradley worded his next question very carefully.

"I'm going to ask you something, Mr Buller, and I want you to think very carefully before you answer. Did he try and treat you while he was here? I mean, did he administer any kind of drug?"

Buller could read the concern on the detective's face and it made him feel uneasy. Could Gregory have lied to him? Had the drug he'd given him been

safe? He decided to answer the police officer's question.

"Yes, he did."

"What did he say to you, while you were undergoing treatment?"

Buller's eyes wandered around the room, as if he were looking for the answer to Bradley's question. The detective decided to help him out.

"You can't remember, can you?"

Buller frowned and tried to cover up his embarrassment by lying.

"We just talked about my lack of confidence in certain situations, I'm sure."

"You're sure? You mean you don't know?"

Buller didn't answer, so Bradley changed the subject.

"Do you know where Dr Freeman went, after he left here?"

"No," said Buller indignantly, trying to regain some of the dignity he felt he'd lost. "I'm not the man's keeper."

"So, as far as you know, once he'd treated you, he simply left the building."

Buller frowned again, as if he'd suddenly remembered something.

"No, he went to our accounts department."

"Why would he need to visit your accounts department?"

"He said he needed some funds."

"And you agreed to give him these funds?"

Now Buller looked bewildered. Bradley could tell that the man was digging up memories that had been suppressed until now.

"Yes," he said hesitantly. "I was glad to. And he needed to speak to Mr Gleeson."

"Who's Mr Gleeson?"

"He runs the company's car pool."

"Why did he need to speak to him?"

"I should imagine he needed to borrow a car," said Buller, as if Bradley had asked a stupid question.

"I need to speak to this Mr Gleeson," said Bradley, not wanting to waste any more time.

Buller called in his secretary and told her to direct Bradley to the manager's office in the car pool. Bradley got up and thanked Buller, but the businessman wasn't listening. He was staring into space, a confused look on his face.

His important business meeting apparently forgotten.

Gleeson was far more co-operative than the head of the company. Helping the police came naturally to him and, besides, the detective had been sent down by Mr Buller himself.

“Yes, Detective, we issued a car to a Dr Freeman only this morning, as per Mr Buller’s instructions.”

“Can you give me a description of the car and the registration?”

Gleeson walked over to a noticeboard on the far wall of his office. There was a large chart pinned to it, and he took a notepad from his desk and scribbled down some details, before handing them to Bradley. The detective thanked him and headed for the door. Just as he was about to leave, Gleeson called after him.

“If you want to locate the car, why don’t you just use the tracker?”

Bradley halted on the spot and turned to face Gleeson.

“The tracker?”

“Yeah. All our cars are fitted with GPS trackers. The management likes to know where everyone is at all times.”

Bradley couldn’t suppress a smile.

“Yeah. Why don’t we use the tracker?”

Gleeson sat down at his desk and logged into his computer. As the man tapped away at his keyboard, Bradley wondered if he was finally going to end up with some good luck for a change. He stood there, trying to suppress the butterflies in his stomach while he waited. But, when Gleeson revealed the location of the vehicle Freeman had taken, his feelings of hope were soon replaced with a sense of dread.

“I’ve found it, Detective,” said Gleeson excitedly. “It’s in Palm Springs. On a street called Paradise Lane. Sounds like the place to be.”

## Chapter 48

Michael Traynor was beginning to feel awkward again. He'd agreed to hear the sergeant out, but Foster was simply sitting there in silence. He wasn't to know that the soldier was finding the thought of saying what he was about to say more frightening than any battlefield he'd ever fought in. In the end, Foster decided there was no easy way to break the news, so he just got on with it.

"The man who has confessed to killing your father didn't do it."

Michael let out a gasp. Foster thought it sounded like an expression of both shock and disbelief.

"So, you're saying the police have arrested an innocent man?"

"Innocent of killing your father, yes."

"But you're saying this Rudd is a criminal?"

"Yes. He murdered a child and a police officer."

For the first time, Michael looked irritated.

"Yes, I know. The police told me. But what makes you think he didn't kill my father?"

Foster was tempted to blurt out the truth, right there, but he was worried how Traynor might react. So, as much as he hated doing it, he maintained the deception, at least for the moment.

"I have two friends in the police department. They're convinced that Dr Freeman, your neighbour, was behind your father's death."

"The guy in *The Meadows*?"

"Yes."

"But why haven't the police told me this? They definitely said it was this guy Rudd."

"My friends are detectives and they're convinced they have a good case, but their superiors refuse to believe Freeman is guilty."

"I take it you do believe them."

"I don't just believe them. I *know* they're right."

"And what makes you so sure?"

Foster shifted in his seat and looked at the floor. Traynor couldn't help thinking how vulnerable the man sitting opposite him appeared, despite his imposing stature.

"I know Freeman and I know what he's capable of."

"You know Freeman?"

“Yes.”

“So, let me get this straight. You’re saying this Dr Freeman, our neighbour, hid in the woods of our property and shot my father with a rifle?”

“Not exactly.”

Traynor stood up and walked over to the window, partly out of frustration, and partly to prepare for an escape. The soldier sitting on his sofa was starting to worry him.

“Come on, Sergeant. I’ve done you the courtesy of hearing you out. The least you can do is be straight with me.”

“Of course, you’re right, Mr Traynor, but I’m afraid this is a little difficult for me. What I’m saying is, Freeman had your father killed. He just got someone to do his dirty work for him.”

“Are you saying he went to the trouble of hiring a hit-man to kill my father? I’m sorry, Sergeant Foster, but I find that very hard to believe.”

“Do you know what he does over there, at *The Meadows*?”

“It’s some kind of retreat, isn’t it?” said Traynor, starting to lose his patience again.

“That’s what he calls it. But he’s a trained psychiatrist and he’s using drugs to get people to do things against their will. My friends, Detective Culver and Detective Bradley, are in the process of proving that. Did you hear about the shooting at *The Meadows*, just the other day?”

“Yes,” said Traynor, suddenly intrigued. “I heard it was a case of mistaken identity. Didn’t some woman shoot a police officer?”

“Yes. Freeman’s assistant shot my friend, Detective Culver. She only got out of hospital yesterday. The point is, Freeman told her to do it and my friends think they will be able to prove it. That is why he’s on the run.”

Traynor sat back down in his chair and rubbed his hand through his hair.

“I’m sorry, Sergeant, I’m just having difficulty taking all this in. What I still don’t understand is, what have *you* got to do with all this? The police are telling me one thing, and now you turn up out of the blue with this incredible story. Who am I to believe?”

“I understand. I didn’t believe it myself for a while.”

“So, where do you fit in all this?” asked Traynor, putting Foster on the spot.

“I was hypnotised by Freeman, too.”

“You were hypnotised?” asked Traynor, suddenly wishing he hadn’t let the soldier stay. Maybe the guy was crazy.

“Yes.”

“And did he get *you* to do something against your will?”

Foster placed his hands in his lap and tried his best to look as submissive as possible.

“Before I answer that, Mr Traynor, could I ask you a question?”

“Go on.”

“Do you own a gun?”

Traynor almost fell back into his chair and instinctively looked for an escape route. Obviously, the guy *was* crazy. But he decided there was no harm in telling the soldier the truth.

“Yes, I do.”

“Would you mind getting it. And make sure it’s loaded.”

“Why would I do that?” asked Traynor, trying to hide his fear.

“I want you to point it at me, before I answer.”

“Why?”

“Please.”

“Are you armed?” asked Traynor nervously.

“No.”

Deciding he had nothing to lose, Traynor headed for the dining room and unlocked the family’s gun cabinet. He took out his favourite rifle, made sure it was loaded, and returned to face Foster. The soldier was still sitting in his chair, his hands resting in his lap. Traynor held the rifle at the ready - not pointing it at Foster, exactly, but ready to do so if the need should arise. Unknown to him, his mother had followed him into the room, wondering why he was carrying his gun.

“Are you going to answer the question now, Sergeant?”

Foster looked up and stared at both mother and son. Tears were streaming down the soldier’s face.

“God forgive me, I killed your father.”

While what was left of the Traynor family looked on, Foster put his head in his hands and wept like a child.

## Chapter 49

When the phone rang, Linda checked her caller-ID and was disappointed when she discovered it wasn't Pete calling. She was missing him already, but she knew he was busy trying to clear up the mess that had been left behind at *The Meadows*. He'd made a promise to her. He'd said that Freeman would pay for what he'd done to her sister. He just needed time to gather the evidence and make his case. She didn't recognise the number that appeared on her phone's screen but answered it anyway. The voice at the other end sounded strangely familiar.

*"Life, Linda. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."*

Linda was instantly overcome by an eerie feeling. It was as if she had forgotten what she was doing, and she was waiting for someone to remind her. Freeman's soft and gentle voice provided her with the instructions she was looking for.

"I'm walking up to your front door, Linda. I want you to open it and invite me in."

Linda did as she was told and obediently followed Freeman into her kitchen, while he searched for the item he was looking for. In a drawer he found a set of knives and he took out one of the larger ones. It had a black handle made from toughened plastic, and he was pleased to note that the pointed blade was particularly sharp. He turned to Linda who was standing close by, patiently waiting for her next instruction.

"Are you expecting a visit from Detective Bradley any time soon, Linda?"

"I'm waiting for him to call," said Linda. "He promised to phone me when he had a spare moment. I don't know if he will find the time to come to Palm Springs."

"Very well, Linda," said Freeman calmly. "Do you see this knife?"

"Yes."

"When Detective Bradley deigns to visit you, you must show him the usual affection he has come to expect. Hug him and bring him to the kitchen. And, when he is at his most vulnerable, I want you to stab his body with this knife."

"I understand."

"Remember, Linda, this is very important – you must keep stabbing Detective Bradley until he is dead. Do you understand?"



“Yes. I understand,” said Linda, her voice as calm as Freeman’s.

Freeman was about to tell Linda that she would have no memory of his visit, once he had left, when the phone rang. It was in her hand and she looked at the screen.

“Who is it?” asked Freeman.

“It’s Pete.”

Freeman thought for a moment, before giving Linda her next command.

“When you answer it, you must act completely naturally, and you must not tell him I am here. If he asks, you haven’t seen me since we all met at *The Meadows*. Understand?”

“I understand.”

Linda pressed the button on her phone, and the sound of Bradley’s wary voice could be heard.

“Linda, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Pete. Where are you?”

“I’m still in the city but I’m heading to Palm Springs right now.”

Freeman had his ear close to the phone, listening in to the call. The detective would meet his death in a few short hours.

“That’s wonderful, Pete, I’ve been missing you.”

Freeman was pleased that his subject was playing her part well, and he smiled. His face fell when he heard Bradley’s next words.

“Listen, Linda, there’s something I’ve got to tell you. I’ve pinpointed the location of the car Freeman’s driving and it’s parked on your street. Go to the window and look outside. Can you see anything?”

Freeman was shocked. How did Bradley know the location of the car? And then it dawned on him. A tracking system. Which meant that the detective had already visited the Buller building. He decided it wouldn’t do to underestimate Detective Bradley again. Linda looked at him, waiting for instructions. Freeman whispered in her ear.

“Tell him you can’t see anything suspicious.”

Linda relayed what Freeman had told her to say and waited for Bradley’s response.

“Okay, Linda. It’s going to take me a couple of hours to get there. In the meantime, is there anywhere safe you can go and wait for me?”

“I could go next door. Larry is in the National Guard and he has the hots for me. He’s always inviting me over for coffee.”

“Okay, that sounds ideal. I doubt whether Freeman will try anything in front

of witnesses. Besides, it sounds like Larry might be able to take care of himself. Just don't let him get any wrong ideas," said Bradley, trying to lighten the mood and stop Linda from worrying.

"Okay, Pete."

"I'll meet you at Larry's. Keep your phone with you just in case. If you see any sign of Freeman, call the cops."

"Okay, Pete."

"Good girl. I'll be there as soon as I can. You head over to Larry's now, okay?"

"Sure, Pete."

Bradley ended the call and pressed the pedal to the floor, desperate to get out of the city and miss the rush-hour. Linda seemed to have taken the news well, although she wasn't her usual chatty self. But what did he expect? The poor girl was probably terrified. He put his thoughts aside and concentrated on the road. He wouldn't relax until she was safely in his arms.

Linda put down the phone and looked at Freeman. He kissed her on the lips. She was a beautiful woman, like her sister, and he was tempted to have some fun. But then he decided there would be plenty of time for that. With Buller providing unlimited funds for him to live on, he'd have ample opportunities to enjoy himself. Besides, Bradley would arrive soon, and he wanted to be ready to witness the detective's demise. Maybe when the man was bleeding to death, he might avail himself of Linda's charms before she telephoned the police to confess what she'd done. Then she would feel such remorse, she would take her own life. Suicide ran in the family, after all. For the moment, Linda was still waiting for him to tell her what to do. He looked into her eyes.

"Linda. I'm going to make myself comfortable upstairs. Remember what I said. You have not seen me. Go to your neighbour and wait for Detective Bradley. When he arrives, bring him here and kill him with the knife. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Go now, Linda. Don't worry. It will all be over very soon."

## Chapter 50

Doreen Traynor looked at the fine figure of a man, his head in his hands, crying uncontrollably. She wondered what fiendish breed of anguish a strong man like Foster must be experiencing to weep so. And she took pity on him. She walked over and rested her hand on his shoulder. Not quite able to believe what he was seeing, her son gripped his rifle and called out to his mother.

“Get away from him, mom. Didn’t you hear what he said, for Christ’s sake? He just said he killed dad!”

Doreen shook her head and tutted, as if her son were the one that was crazy.

“Can’t you see this man is deeply troubled? If he’d wanted to cause us any harm, I’m sure he could have done so the moment he stepped on to our property. Now, put that gun away before someone gets hurt.”

Michael Traynor was dumbfounded by his mother’s reaction to Foster’s confession. Nevertheless, he lowered his rifle, but wasn’t ready to put it away just yet. His mother was right, Foster could probably have killed them before they’d known what was happening, but that didn’t mean the guy wasn’t some nut. He might turn into a wild man without any warning. He’d heard about some of the crazies the Sheriff had to deal with. His mother’s voice broke in on his thoughts.

“Young man. Did you really kill John?”

Foster took his head from his hands and looked Doreen in the eye.

“I pulled the trigger of the rifle that killed him. But Freeman hypnotised me and told me to kill your husband. I had no idea what I was doing, I swear.”

Doreen nodded, as if being hypnotised and forced to do things against your will were an everyday occurrence. Michael put it down to her dementia. He decided it was time to reason with her.

“Mom. Surely you don’t believe this nonsense, do you? Come away from him.”

Doreen ignored her son and patted Foster’s arm.

“If you killed my husband, then why haven’t the police arrested you?”

Foster sighed and wiped away his tears, feeling weak and foolish.

“They think Rudd did it. He confessed.”

“Why do you think he confessed, if he didn’t do it?”

Grudgingly, Michael had to admit that his mother was handling things well.

She hadn't overreacted and she'd got to the heart of the matter in no time at all. Perhaps she wasn't suffering from dementia, after all.

"Freeman hypnotised him and told him to confess."

Michael grunted and shook his head. The man's story was getting more unbelievable with every word. But his mother remained calm and kept firing questions.

"Why did he do that?"

"I can't tell you why."

"Of course you can't," said Michael sarcastically.

His mother gave him a look that said he should be quiet, and she touched Foster's hand.

"Why can't you tell us?"

"Because I could get a friend of mine into trouble. He thought he was helping me."

"If what you say is true, he *did* help you. You shot John, but the police think that this man Rudd did it."

"Yes," was all Foster could manage.

"And yet you came here and confessed to the crime. Why did you do that, young man?"

Foster initially looked puzzled by the question, as if he didn't know why he'd confessed. He sat up in his chair, coughed and straightened his shirt. Doreen's insightful questions were forcing him to face his demons.

"I might not have known what I was doing when I shot your husband, Mrs Traynor, but the fact remains that I was the one who pulled the trigger. I deserve to face the consequences of my actions."

"So, like I said, why not just go to police?" asked Michael, still unable to believe Foster wasn't deluded.

"Believe me, I've wanted to. But if I did, I would hurt someone I care about very much."

"What about us?" said Michael accusingly. "Don't you think *we're* hurting?"

Foster simply nodded and stared at the floor, but Michael wasn't about to give him an easy ride.

"Did you come here looking for forgiveness? If you did, you came to the wrong place."

Foster raised his head and looked Michael in the eye.

"No, I don't expect you to forgive me. But I wanted you to know the truth.

You deserve that, at least.”

Doreen continued to hold the soldier’s hand and asked him another question in the same, soothing tones.

“What is your first name, Sergeant Foster?”

Foster turned to look at her, but he found it difficult to meet her gaze when she was sitting so close. The feeling of intimacy just didn’t seem right.

“Jim.”

“And what do you do in the army?”

“I’m a sniper,” he said.

He dropped his head into his hands. It was the first time he had felt ashamed to say those words.

“Was that why this Dr Freeman chose you to shoot my husband?”

“I guess.”

“Why did he want to kill John? We don’t even know the man.”

Foster had to think about this. What had Madison told him? Finally, it came to him.

“Freeman didn’t tell me. He didn’t have to. He knew I would obey his instructions, whatever. But my friend, the detective, told me Freeman was upset about the wind farm your husband was planning to have built on his land. Apparently, it would have spoilt Freeman’s view of the mountains.”

“But that’s crazy,” insisted Michael. “To kill someone over a damn wind farm?”

“I guess he just thought he could get away with it. And he would have, if it hadn’t been for my friends in the police department.”

“But surely if this man Rudd has confessed, Freeman *has* got away with it,” said Michael, determined not to make things easy on Foster.

“You’re right, but hopefully not for long. My friends are going after him. I wasn’t the only one he tricked into doing something against his will. They have sworn to me that he will pay for his crimes.”

“What if you went to the police and told them what you’ve told us?” asked Doreen. “Would they believe you?”

“Maybe. I honestly don’t know.”

“If they did, what would happen to your friends in the department?” asked Michael.

“I think they broke too many rules to come away unscathed. My guess is they might lose their jobs, whether I’m believed or not.”

“But that would mean John’s killer would escape justice, wouldn’t it?”

asked Doreen.

“Maybe,” said Foster.

Michael shook his head, not knowing what to believe any more. Doreen got up from the arm of the chair where Foster was sitting and began to lead him to the kitchen. Foster, for his part, allowed himself to be guided to the door. Michael looked on in disbelief.

“Mom, what the hell are you doing?” he asked.

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m taking Jim to the kitchen to fix him some coffee. Put away that stupid gun and come and help me. And don’t cuss.”

“But what are we going to do?”

“We’re going to do the right thing,” said Doreen firmly. “It’s what John would have wanted.”

Michael watched his mother head to the kitchen to make coffee, on the arm of a stranger who had just confessed to killing his father. He looked down at his rifle, resting uselessly in his hands, and he shook his head.

‘We’re going to do the right thing,’ his mother had said. He hoped to hell she knew what that was, because he was damned if he did.

## Chapter 51

Bradley didn't let himself relax until he had made the second call to Linda. She assured him she was safely ensconced in Larry's house and they were drinking beer and watching a movie together. Larry was in his element and fussing over her, apparently. He was behaving himself, and all was well. She told Bradley that she'd looked outside but there was still no sign of Freeman. Bradley described the car Freeman had taken from the Buller car pool, but she couldn't see it. At least not from Larry's window.

She explained that she'd told Larry about the possibility that Freeman could be loitering in the neighbourhood, looking for her, and he had become somewhat alarmed. He'd wanted to call the police, but when she'd told him Bradley was on his way, he seemed to calm down a little.

When Bradley finally arrived on Paradise Lane, after a two-hour drive that almost ended in a couple of serious accidents, he spotted Freeman's car. It was parked several doors down from Linda's place. Because of the trees lining the road, there would have been no way for Linda to see it without going out on to the street.

Bradley parked behind it and removed his Glock from the holster on his belt. He took off the safety and looked around in every direction. The car was empty and there was no sign of the driver waiting nearby. He got out of his car, holding his gun down by his side and out of sight. It was a residential area and there was no point in giving the neighbours a reason to start a panic. Once he was satisfied the area was clear, he holstered his gun and he headed for Larry's house.

The door was opened by a man in his forties with a chubby face, short brown hair and glasses. He was a head shorter than Bradley, and he wore trousers that looked like they were part of a suit. Bradley guessed the man had recently come home from work.

"Hi," he said, "You must be Pete. Linda told me she was expecting you. Please, come on in."

The man was smiling, but Bradley thought it looked a little strained. The guy probably didn't welcome the competition for Linda's affections.

Bradley didn't stand on ceremony and darted into Larry's lounge, where Linda was waiting. She rushed into his arms and Bradley felt relief wash over him. He smelt her hair and kissed her passionately on the mouth. He didn't care

what Larry might have thought, it just felt so good to have Linda in his arms again. Larry stood in the corner of the room, shuffling awkwardly and not knowing where to look. The couple ended their embrace at the sound of Larry's voice.

"Linda tells me you're a cop in San Diego."

Bradley released Linda and turned to face their host.

"That's right. And I want to thank you for keeping Linda safe until I got here. It's good to know she's got someone looking out for her."

Larry stood up a little straighter, clearly flattered.

"No problem. Linda knows she doesn't have to worry when I'm around," he said proudly.

"Anyway, we'll leave you in peace."

Bradley guided Linda out of the house, and they heard Larry quickly lock his door behind them. He obviously wasn't about to take any chances. They headed to Linda's, and all the while Bradley kept his right hand under his jacket, within easy reach of his gun. Linda used her key to open her door, and, once they were inside, he breathed a little easier.

"Did you leave any windows open while you were gone?" he asked, as they stood in the hallway.

Linda shook her head.

"No. It gets pretty hot here during the day and I leave my air-conditioning on, so I keep all my windows closed."

"So, there's no easy way to get in."

"No, I'm sure."

"I'll check the place out, anyway. Just in case. Freeman has come here for a reason and I don't like it one bit. Once I get you somewhere safe, I'll come back and try to find him."

Linda suddenly felt a little dizzy. She thought it might be from the shock of discovering Freeman could be after her. For some reason, despite her reassurances to Bradley that her house was safe, she was frightened. She didn't want Bradley to go upstairs, although she couldn't think why. She wanted to go to the kitchen. She wanted the two of them to sit down and drink coffee and relax. She grabbed Bradley by the hand and led him to the back of the house. Without saying anything, she headed for her coffee machine and started filling it with water.

"I think I better check out the place first," insisted Bradley.

"Please," said Linda. "Just sit with me for a few minutes. Have some



coffee. I need to calm down. I'm still feeling pretty shaken up."

Bradley could tell that Linda wasn't her old self. She genuinely looked frightened and her light-hearted nature had deserted her for the moment. Perhaps he was expecting too much of her. A man who had ordered her sister to kill herself had very nearly turned up on her doorstep. No wonder she was shaken up. So, he sat down and waited for Linda to finish making the coffee.

Linda was relieved. Why did the upstairs of her house frighten her? She was happy to be busy, grinding coffee beans and preparing the filter for her machine. She wanted Pete to relax and feel at ease. She didn't like him being on edge and alert to danger. She wanted him to feel safe. Maybe she would offer to make him something to eat. She looked around her kitchen, trying to decide what she would need, and remembered she'd bought some fresh bread from the local bakery. Yes, after they'd finished their coffee, she would slice some bread.

She would use the sharp carving knife, lying next to the stove.

## Chapter 52

Foster came away from the Traynor farm not feeling absolved of guilt, exactly, but a hell of a lot better than when he had arrived. At least Doreen and Michael Traynor now knew the truth, although the son had been far from convinced. The Marine had taken an instant liking to Doreen Traynor. She had a calm presence about her, and a wisdom he hadn't expected. Unlike her son, she seemed to recognise Foster's inner turmoil, and wasn't at all frightened of the stranger who had come to reveal his incredible tale.

Michael had been all for calling the police and having Foster arrested on the spot. As far as he was concerned, the soldier was either crazy, or guilty of his father's murder and was making up his ridiculous story in the hope of getting himself off the hook. It took the man's elderly mother to point out the flaw in his logic. Sergeant Foster was *already* off the hook. The police clearly believed that Rudd had killed John Traynor. All the soldier had to do was keep quiet if he wanted to get away with murder. But he hadn't. Instead, he'd come to the very people who had every reason to want him locked away for good. In Doreen's book, that meant they should give him the benefit of the doubt.

In the end, the mother and son had made a deal with Foster. They had agreed not to reveal what he had told them, under two conditions.

Firstly, they wanted to meet the two detectives Foster had said were his friends. It was they who clearly believed that Dr Freeman was responsible for John's death, and they wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth, so to speak. At least then they would have some assurance that Foster's story wasn't a bizarre figment of his imagination.

If it turned out that Foster had told them the truth, their second condition was that they would only remain quiet if Dr Freeman paid for his crimes. They all agreed that this second condition would be the more problematic of the two. If Rudd's confession went unchallenged, then Dr Freeman could not be tried for the same crime. Doreen was also concerned that Rudd would be punished for a crime he did not commit. But her conscience was eased somewhat, when Foster pointed out that the man had killed not only a police officer, but an eight-year-old boy he had kidnapped in order to make a ransom demand.

At this point Michael had threatened to renege on their deal. But Foster assured them that his friends would not allow Freeman to go unpunished. The

doctor's assistant was undergoing psychiatric help, having fallen foul of Freeman's hypnosis technique. Like Foster, she had been coerced into trying to kill someone against her will. Not only that, the detectives were going to investigate the so-called suicide of Freeman's wife. With luck, they would be able to prove that Mrs Freeman jumped in front of a train without realising what she was doing.

As Foster drove back to San Diego, he did his best to take stock of his situation. Unless he could truly believe that he was living according to his own code of honour, his life was pointless. He had pulled the trigger of the gun that killed John Traynor. Because of him, Doreen Traynor was now a widow. Because of Freeman's mind-tricks, he had committed the act without knowing what he was doing. But he had committed it, nonetheless. For the past few days, every fibre of his being had told him to go to the police and turn himself in. And he would have done just that, had it not been for Madison and Bradley.

If it weren't for Madison, he would have killed Bradley, too. And not only had Bradley absolved him of all blame, the detective had done everything he could to ensure Foster didn't face a murder charge. If he went to the police and told them the truth, not only would *he* go to jail, but so would Bradley. Maybe Madison would, too. How could he be responsible for ruining the life of someone he cared about?

But he hadn't been able to sit back and do nothing. The feelings of guilt, deep within his soul, threatened to tear him apart. So, he had told Doreen and Michael Traynor the truth. It had been the most difficult thing he had ever done in his life. And not just because he'd had to face the family of the man he'd killed. He'd also gambled with the future of the woman he loved. Fortunately, at least for now, the gamble seemed to have paid off.

But he felt compelled to tell Madison what he had done. He would have to tell her and Bradley anyway, if Doreen and Michael's conditions were to be met. Besides, he wanted to hear her voice. So, he activated his phone and made the call.

"Hi. Jim, is that you?"

"Yeah. Where are you?"

"I'm at my desk, trying to sort out a few things, but the lieutenant is insisting I go home and get some rest. Hell, that's all I've been doing for days."

"On this occasion, I think he might be right. You've only just come out of hospital, Madison."

"I know. I just couldn't face going back to an empty apartment."

“What if it weren’t empty?”

Madison smiled into the phone.

“Did you have something in mind?”

“Yeah. What if I pick up a few things and make you dinner?”

“Do Marines cook?”

“This Marine does. Besides, I need to talk to you about something. What do you say?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“So, we’re on?”

“Yes, under one condition.”

Foster was amused by Madison’s choice of words. He had hoped he’d agreed to enough conditions for one night.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“You stay the night and look after me properly.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“But don’t think you’ll get lucky,” said Madison, laughing. “I’m a poorly girl.”

“Spending the night with you sounds pretty lucky to me,” said Foster, doing his best to lay on the charm.

“A war hero *and* a smooth talker. I think *I’m* the lucky one.”

“See you there in an hour?” said Foster.

“I can’t wait.”

## Chapter 53

Something wasn't right, Bradley knew. But he just couldn't say for certain what it was. As he drank his coffee, Linda leant across the table and gripped his hand, begging him for the umpteenth time not to search the house and leave her alone. He tried to think what was wrong, but he was tired after his adrenaline-filled journey and nothing seemed to make sense.

Why would Freeman drive all the way to Linda's house in Palm Springs and then disappear? Had he been casing the joint, waiting for an opportunity to attack her? Perhaps he'd spotted the detective's car before he had the chance to do anything and he had run off, on foot. Somehow, Bradley didn't buy it. And why was Linda behaving so oddly? Yes, she was her usual warm and affectionate self, but Bradley couldn't help sensing a strange fear behind her eyes. And it wasn't just down to the shock she'd had when he'd told her that Freeman was somewhere close by. The encounter she'd had with her brother-in-law at *The Meadows* had been far worse, and she'd handled that in her stride. No, this time something was different.

He finished his coffee and was about to insist he check out the house, when Linda turned away and started fussing over her kitchen worktop.

"I'm going to make you something to eat," she announced. "You must be famished after your long journey. How about a sandwich?"

He wasn't hungry. He was still too full of adrenaline to even think about food. He got up from his chair and stood behind Linda, preparing to kiss her on the neck, before telling her he was going to search the house. He'd promise to be quick. If that didn't satisfy her, he'd let her come along, provided she was careful and stayed behind him.

And that was when his world fell apart.

The San Diego Police Department possesses a long list of officers who have died in the line of duty. And, like most cops, Bradley often wondered if he would ever become one of the sad statistics. Getting shot was always a possibility, of course. Or maybe even dying in a car accident during a chase. Naturally, getting knifed was another, but getting knifed by a woman you felt close to? Someone you'd connected with? Surely, you had to live in a mixed-up world for something like that to happen.

But, as the burning pain seared through his gut, it was a fact he had to deal with. For no reason that he could think of, Linda had grabbed her kitchen knife, turned around, and stabbed him in the stomach.

Instinctively, his hands reached down, perhaps as an act of self-preservation. But it was too late. The damage had been done. It felt as though he had immersed his hands in a bowl of warm water. But it was the warmth of his blood, oozing from his body that created the illusion. Warm, life-giving blood, dripping down on to the cold kitchen floor.

Linda's hand was still firmly gripped round the handle of the knife, and when Bradley fell to the floor, there was a horrible sound of tearing flesh, as the blade left his body. Linda looked down at the bloody knife in her hand, her face filled with horror. Something in the recesses of her mind told her she should stab Bradley again, but the thought of doing so sickened her.

She convinced herself she was safely asleep in bed. This was a nightmare. It couldn't be anything else. Only in a nightmare would she kill a man she cared about. She tried to move but found that she could not. So, she decided she had no choice but to stand there and wait for the nightmare to end of its own accord. She forced her eyes to look down at the body of Bradley. The body had raised its head and it was speaking, but she could not hear the words. She tried to read his lips. 'It's okay', he was saying. And she continued to pray that the nightmare would end.

Bradley's strength was leaving him, and he was growing cold. He knew it was a sign that he was losing too much blood to survive. But his mind was still working fine, and when he saw the look of horror on Linda's face, he realised that the knife-attack was none of her doing. Yes, she held the weapon in her hand, but this was Freeman's work. Somehow, the doctor was controlling her will.

Freeman was standing at the top of the stairs. He had heard the cry. The cry of a man in pain. And then the thump, as Bradley's body hit the floor. He decided it was safe to head downstairs and inspect his handiwork. When he entered the kitchen, he was pleased with what he saw. Linda was holding the kitchen knife, covered in blood, and Bradley lay on the floor where he belonged, spewing blood.

But he became disappointed when he realised the detective was still alive. His first thought was to order Linda to complete her assigned task. His instructions had been for her to stab Bradley until he was dead. But the psychiatrist could recognise when someone was so traumatised that they could

no longer function. In the end, he decided the fact that Bradley was still conscious might be fortuitous. The detective would witness the completion of his plan. A plan that would rid him of everyone that was a threat.

“Affection can be a fickle thing, can’t it, Detective?” said Freeman.

Bradley stared back at him, unable to speak.

“Personally, I don’t believe in such an ethereal concept. I think it is simply an idea that was cooked up in foolish romantic novels and we chase after it at our peril. I certainly have no need of it. And, judging by your present condition, I would venture to say that you might well have been wise not to succumb to its imaginary charms.”

Bradley moved his lips, yet no words came out. Freeman could tell that the detective was mouthing obscenities. No matter, it was a futile gesture. He would be dead soon.

“You see, Detective, there is no such thing as free will or love. Your friend Linda stabbed you and will now watch you bleed to death because that is what I instructed her to do. And when you take your last breath, she will be filled with remorse and take her own life. Just like my dear wife, God rest her soul. No doubt your colleagues in the police department will put the tragedy down to a lovers’ tiff.”

Bradley could no longer hold his head up and the room began to spin. But, try as he might, he couldn’t shut out Freeman’s voice. Unfortunately, the doctor had one last surprise. He took out his phone and made a call.

Foster was still twenty minutes away from Madison’s apartment when his phone rang. He looked at the screen, expecting to see Madison’s number. He was about to negotiate a bend in the road, and he almost lost control of his car when Freeman’s name stared back at him. He brought the car to a halt at the side of the road, while he decided what to do. As far as he knew, neither Bradley nor Madison had managed to locate the doctor. He couldn’t think why Freeman was calling him, but maybe he might let slip where he was hiding out. It was a long shot, but worth a try. He tapped the screen and answered the call.

“Hello?”

*“Life, Jim. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”*

## Chapter 54

Fading as he was, Bradley still recognised the words Freeman uttered into his phone. It was the same line of Shakespearean verse the doctor had recited back at *The Meadows*. Right before Theresa shot Madison. It could only mean one thing. Sergeant Foster was still under his control. He managed to turn his head to look at Linda for the last time. She had stabbed him, following the orders of Dr Freeman, no doubt after he'd delivered his tribute to the Great Bard.

Bradley no longer had the energy to turn his head. Not that he wanted to. He was content to gaze at Linda's pretty face. It was just a pity that it was a face still filled with horror, after the realisation of what she'd done. Sadly, he could still hear Freeman, as he spat out his gruesome instructions.

"Jim, what are you doing?"

There was a pause as the sergeant replied.

"Excellent," said Freeman, happy to share the good news with his two companions. "You are on your way to Madison's apartment - to make her a meal, you say. A marvellous idea, I'm sure. Unfortunately, I'm afraid there will have to be a slight change of plan."

Freeman couldn't resist presenting Bradley with a self-satisfied grin, but it was wasted. Bradley had finally closed his eyes, his life-force draining away with every second. Freeman cleared his throat and gave his commands in a clear and concise manner.

"Jim. When you arrive at Detective Culver's apartment, you will pour her some wine and caress her. It is important that you put her at ease. Do you understand?"

Again, there was a short pause while Foster responded.

"Are you armed, Sergeant?"

Another short pause.

"Ah, a pity," said Freeman, and Bradley clung on to a glimmer of hope.

Perhaps Madison would have a chance. But then he remembered that Linda hadn't possessed a gun, and it had made no difference. He was still lying in a pool of blood. Freeman continued relentlessly.

"Sergeant. You are a Marine. A killing machine. And yet you failed in your mission to kill the terrorist sympathiser, Detective Bradley. Fortunately, I have taken care of business for you. Now, you have new orders. Madison Culver is



also an enemy of the United States of America. She must be killed before more innocent people die. It is your mission to do that. Do you understand?"

Another pause.

"Good. What is your ETA at her apartment? Less than twenty minutes? Excellent. Do your duty, Sergeant. Your country is depending on you. When you have completed your mission, it is vitally important that you do not fall into the hands of the enemy. I'm afraid this is a suicide mission, Sergeant. You will have to take your own life when it is complete."

The chilling phone call finally ended, and Freeman turned to Linda. She was still clutching her knife, staring at him. She was awaiting instructions, as he had expected.

"Linda. Detective Bradley is still breathing and that will not do. I must remind you of your orders. You were supposed to stab him repeatedly. You will do that now. And then you will use the same knife to end your own life. After all, there is little point in going on, once the man you are so fond of has breathed his last. You will not be able to live with the guilt of what you have done."

Linda nodded.

"Very well, then. Do as you have been told."

Linda took a step forward, until she was poised over Bradley's prone body. She took the knife in both of her hands and raised it above her head, preparing to plunge it into the detective's stomach. Bradley managed to open his eyes one last time and look into her eyes. He smiled.

Linda gasped, and tears began to fall down her cheeks. Very slowly, her body twisted, until she was looking into the smug face of her brother-in-law. Taken aback by this sudden turn of events, his smile dropped.

Before he could react, she plunged the knife downwards, into Freeman's chest. Her aim was perfect, and it struck his heart. He collapsed on to the floor. Unlike Bradley, he was no longer breathing, and his life left him in an instant.

Linda ran to Bradley's side, horrified by what she'd done.

"I'll call for an ambulance," she said.

She ran to her phone. She was about to call nine-one-one when she heard Bradley gasp. Somehow, he managed to cry out.

"Madison! Must ... help ... her!"

As much as she wanted to call for help, she knew Bradley was right. She had heard Freeman's haunting words, too. Madison only had minutes before Foster arrived at her apartment. She dialled her number.

“Hello, is that you, Jim? I’m still waiting.”

“No, Madison. It’s Linda. Listen to me ...”

Linda could suddenly hear a buzzing sound in the background.

“Oh, Linda, Jim’s at the door. I’ll just let him in. Hold on a minute.”

Linda heard footsteps walking away and she screamed into her phone.

“Madison! Madison! Don’t answer the door!”

## Chapter 55

Madison walked to the door of her apartment, preparing to let Jim in. As soon as she had got home, she had put one of her favourite albums into her old CD-player and it finished playing as she walked to the door. The sudden silence meant that she could now hear Linda's voice, screaming at her from her phone on the coffee table. God, the woman sounded hysterical. She reached for the handle of the door, but her hand stopped in mid-air. Just before Theresa had shot her, back at *The Meadows*, a little voice in her head had told her something was wrong, and she had ignored it. That had been a mistake. The little voice was calling her again and, without really knowing why, she headed back to the phone.

"Linda, what's wrong?"

"Oh, thank God. Is Jim there? I mean, are you alone?"

"He's at the door."

"Whatever you do, for God's sake don't let him in."

"Why on earth not? What's this all about?"

"I haven't got time to explain. Pete's hurt bad and I need to call for an ambulance. Just don't let Jim in. He's going to try and kill you. Call and get help."

Madison asked Linda what she was talking about, but the line was dead. She could hear Jim, hammering his fist against the door.

"Madison. Are you okay? For God's sake, let me in. Are you hurt?"

Madison tried to think fast. Linda had said Jim would try to kill her and that Bradley was hurt. That could only mean one thing. Freeman was up to his old tricks. She ran to her bedroom and pulled open the drawer of her bedside table. She grabbed her .38 and made sure it was loaded. She headed back to the lounge and grabbed her phone.

Jim's hammering had become more violent and her door was in danger of coming off its hinges. She was about to call for help but something stopped her. If she said there was an intruder trying to kill her, she worried that Jim could end up with a bullet in his head. Besides, by the time help arrived, he would probably have smashed the door down. He was making a hell of a noise. It wouldn't be long before one of her neighbours came along to investigate, and who knew what could happen then. There was only one thing to do. She was going to have to let him in.

She gripped her .38 and reached for the door.

Bradley was fading in and out of consciousness, but he heard Linda's final words. *Don't let him in.* Madison was safe, at least for the moment. Hopefully, they had warned her in time.

Linda was by his side, desperately trying to remain calm. She called nine-one-one and begged for help. A man was dying in front of her eyes, she said. She didn't care if she sounded overly dramatic. Besides, it was true. She was about to hang up, when she felt Bradley's hand touch her arm. It was as cold as ice.

"Tell them ... tell them to contact ... contact the police in ... San Diego. Tell them Madison needs ..."

The effort of talking caused Bradley to have a coughing fit, and he grimaced in pain with every heave of his chest. Linda wiped his brow, trying to soothe him as best she could.

"Okay, Pete."

She tried to explain to the dispatcher that a Detective Madison Culver in San Diego needed assistance at her home address. The woman on the other end of the line was confused, but Linda said she didn't have time to explain. She put down her phone and concentrated on trying to keep Bradley alive, but he had drifted into unconsciousness again and his breathing was so shallow, she feared he had already gone.

Linda ran to her front door and opened it. She switched on her porch light. She ran into her bedroom and grabbed blankets and a pillow from her wardrobe. She carried them to the kitchen and placed the pillow under Bradley's head. She covered his body with the blankets. She wanted to stop the bleeding but was afraid she might make things worse. All she could do was try to keep him awake and pray that he stayed alive until the ambulance arrived.

Linda was about to call nine-one-one for a second time, when Bradley suddenly stirred. His eyes opened and he tried to speak. But he could only manage a whisper, and Linda had to bring her ear down to his mouth so that she could hear what he was saying.

"The ... knife. Police ... coming. Give ... me ... the ... knife."

Linda frowned and Bradley rocked his head from side to side in frustration. She was worried that the stress might make things worse, so she looked for the knife. It slowly dawned on her that it was still in Freeman's

chest. She turned to Bradley and shook her head. Bradley swallowed and gritted his teeth.

“Give ... me ... the ... knife.”

Linda began to shake. She felt incredibly weak and she worried she might pass out, but she decided to do as Bradley asked. She crawled over to Freeman’s body, gripped the knife by the handle, closed her eyes, and pulled with all the strength she had left. The knife came away, making an awful squelching sound, and she took it to Bradley, even though she couldn’t imagine why he wanted it.

“Cloth,” he said. “Wipe ... handle.”

Linda nodded and went over to the sink to grab a dish cloth. She wiped the handle thoroughly, being careful not to touch it with her hands.

“Put ... in ... my ...hand.”

Suddenly, Linda realised what Bradley was trying to do and she shook her head.

“No ... worry ... self ... defence.”

She didn’t understand but she did as he asked and placed the knife in his hand. He managed to grasp it, but just for a second.

“Now ... in ... his ... hand. Then ... back ... in ... chest.”

The thought of doing what Bradley asked sickened her, but she steeled herself and went over to Freeman’s body for a second time. She placed the knife in his hand and pressed his fingers against the handle, still being careful not to touch it herself. And then, before she had time to think about what she was doing, she grabbed the knife, using the cloth, and plunged it into Freeman’s chest for a second time.

As she crawled back to Bradley, the sound of a siren could be heard approaching the house. She took a deep breath and ran to the door, waving the ambulance crew to her kitchen.

“Please, don’t let him die,” she cried.

## Chapter 56

Madison's hand had almost touched the handle of her door, when she had an idea. She called out to Foster.

"Can you hold on a minute, Jim. I just got out of the shower."

The crashing of the soldier's fist against the door stopped.

"Are you sure you're okay, Madison? I was worried that your wound might have opened up or something."

"I'm fine. Like I said, I've just come out of the shower. I'm only half-dressed."

Foster laughed.

"Now *I really* want to come in," he quipped.

"Just give me a minute. Okay?"

"Sure. If you insist."

Madison was confused. Jim certainly sounded normal enough. Maybe she'd misunderstood Linda's call. Perhaps he wasn't a danger. The little voice in her head told her not to take any chances.

She went back to her bedroom and retrieved her handcuffs from the same beside drawer that had held her .38 revolver. Her bed-frame was made of metal, painted white and decorated with ornate scrolls. It wasn't wrought-iron, but it was heavy enough. She took the cuffs and attached one of the ends to the foot of the bed, leaving the other dangling open. When she'd done this, she returned to the lounge and headed for the door.

Madison was a good cop. And a good cop had to be aware of their limitations. She could handle herself, but she'd be no match for a Marine if it came to a hand-to-hand fight. Her handgun was her only edge, and she needed to keep her distance. With that in mind, she reached for the door, unlocked it as quietly as she could, and stepped back to the other end of the room. Before calling out to Foster, she raised her pistol in both of her hands and aimed it at the door.

"Okay, Jim. You can come in now."

The handle turned and Foster filled the open doorway. He didn't appear to be armed. At the sight of Madison, he instinctively took a step back.

"Jesus, Madison. What the hell are you doing?"

Madison kept her gun trained on the soldier.

"Take off your jacket and drop it on the floor."

“Hell, Madison. If you’re feeling frisky, you only need ask,” said Foster, grinning.

Madison didn’t return the smile. She wanted him to know that she was serious.

“Just do it.”

Foster unzipped his jacket slowly and let it slide to the floor. He was wearing a tight T-shirt that revealed his thick, muscular arms.

“Put your hands up and do a three-sixty,” she said firmly.

“Jesus, Madison, just tell me what this is all about.”

Madison made a point of gripping her gun and pointing it directly at his head.

“Do it.”

He raised his hands and slowly turned around until he was facing her, once again. He was wearing jeans and there was no sign of a weapon.

“Okay,” said Madison. “Now, slowly walk to the bedroom. It’s through there.”

She pointed with her gun to the bedroom door and Foster was grinning from ear to ear.

“Sounds like a good idea to me. But, like I said, there’s no need for the gun. I’m a consenting adult.”

Madison ignored him and nodded at the bedroom door. He sighed and did as he was told. Madison followed, a safe distance behind. Once he’d entered the room, Foster immediately noticed the handcuffs, suspended from the foot of the bed. When he turned back to see Madison looking at him from the open doorway, he pointed to the cuffs.

“This is kind of kinky, isn’t it, Madison? I didn’t know this was your sort of thing.”

Madison continued to ignore him and issued her next instruction.

“Take the end of the cuffs and secure it to one of your wrists.”

He sighed but Madison waited patiently until he did as he was told. She heard the click as the cuff snapped on to his wrist, but she wasn’t about to take any chances.

“Try and take a step away from the bed.”

Foster pulled away from the bed and his bulky frame managed to drag it several inches away from the wall. Madison was pleased. He obviously still had some mobility, but he was no longer a threat. Just so long as she kept her distance.

“Sit on the floor,” she said.

Foster obeyed.

“Okay, Madison. What’s this all about?”

For the first time, Madison pointed her gun away from Foster. She didn’t want to shoot him accidentally. But it remained in her hand, at the ready.

“I’ve just had a call from Linda Renton. Pete’s been hurt and she said you’re going to try and kill me. Why do you think she would say that?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“I think Freeman’s up to his old tricks. He’s obviously come out of the woodwork, and either he has hurt Pete, or, somehow, he got Linda to. Just like he got Theresa to shoot me.”

“Go on.”

“So, maybe Freeman got to you, too. Maybe he’s persuaded you I’m a terrorist or some nonsense like that. Don’t forget, you killed Traynor and damn near killed my partner.”

Foster suddenly became sullen.

“Believe me, Madison, you don’t need to remind me what I did. It’s going to haunt me for the rest of my life.”

Madison couldn’t help feeling sorry for him, but she still didn’t know if she could trust the man chained to her bed. Before she could ask another question, Foster was speaking again.

“In fact, I’ve just come from the Traynor farm.”

“You’ve what?”

“I went to see Traynor’s widow and her son.”

“That was a foolish thing to do, don’t you think?”

“Maybe. But it was something I had to do.”

“Why? Did you go there, looking to be forgiven for what you did?”

“No. I don’t deserve forgiveness. I just wanted them to know what really happened.”

Madison tried to take it all in. She felt a stirring in her stomach at the thought of what it could mean to her future, if the Traynor family went to the police with what they had just been told. And then she silently admonished herself for being so selfish, when she should have been thinking about how the truth would have affected the Traynor family.

“How did they react to what you told them?” she asked, deciding that her question about Freeman could wait.

“They were shocked, of course. But they agreed not to go to police,



provided you and Pete corroborate what I told them. *And* provided you catch Freeman.”

“Sounds like they were more than fair.”

“Traynor’s widow is an incredible woman,” said Foster, and he stared at Madison, waiting for her to address the elephant in the room.

“Do you know where Freeman is?” she asked.

“No. Why, should I?”

“Has he contacted you?” asked Madison, and Foster noticed her pistol was suddenly pointing at him again.

“Yes. He called me while I was driving over here.”

Madison was startled by his reply. Whether Freeman had contacted him or not, she had expected the soldier to deny it.

“What did he want?”

“He started reciting some bullshit poetry. Told me I’d got to put you at your ease and kill you. Then he wanted me to kill myself.”

Madison felt a chill run through her body. She knew what Freeman was capable of, but to have Jim spell it out to her was a shock to her system.

“And what did you tell him?” she asked.

“I pretended to agree to kill you.”

“Pretended?”

“Yeah.”

“Theresa did as she was told, and, for all we know, Linda might have done the same. What makes you so different?” asked Madison.

“I don’t know. After meeting the Traynor family, I was feeling remorseful for what I’d done. Maybe that got in the way. And I was angry. The bastard had already fooled me twice. I was determined not to let him do it a third time.”

Madison stared at the floor, undecided about what to do. Foster tried to make it easy for her.

“Hell, Madison, don’t take any chances. Leave me chained up here and call for help.”

Madison was even more confused. Would Jim suggest that if he intended to harm her? Of course, she reminded herself, he could be bluffing.

As it turned out, the decision was taken out of her hands. The sound of footsteps could be heard entering her apartment. She suddenly remembered that she had left her door open. She turned, expecting to see one of her neighbours arriving to investigate what had caused all the noise. Instead, she was greeted by the sight of two patrolmen. One of them she recognised. A fellow Mexican-

American, Luis Martinez. Both officers had drawn their weapons.

“Are you okay, Detective Culver?”

Madison tried to think on her feet. If Jim was telling the truth, the last thing she wanted was to land him in jail. If he wasn't, she was still in danger, but that didn't mean it was Jim's fault. Freeman was the one to blame. She decided to take a risk.

“Yeah, I'm fine. I've got the situation under control. Who called you? One of the neighbours?”

“No,” said Luis. “Some woman called a dispatcher in Palm Springs and told her to call the department. What the hell is this all about?”

Madison ignored the question and had one of her own.

“Do you know if my partner is okay?”

“Who, Bradley? No, why? Is something supposed to have happened to him?”

“Forget I asked.”

“You got it,” said Luis. “So, are you going to tell us what this is all about?”

“It's a false alarm.”

“It doesn't look like a false alarm to me,” said the other officer, pointing to the handcuffs and her .38, still resting in her hand. “Is this some kind of roleplay or something?”

Madison rolled her eyes. Why did every man she crossed paths with have to have a one-track mind?

“No,” said Madison, ignoring the guy's smirk. “I thought this man was an intruder, but he's here to help me with the case I'm working on.”

“Tied to the bed?” asked the officer she didn't know. She was beginning to take an instant dislike to the man.

Madison tucked her .38 into her belt, walked over and released Foster, hoping to prove it was a case of mistaken identity. The soldier rubbed his wrist until the circulation to his hand had returned.

“What's your name, sir? For my report,” said Luis, trying to be thorough.

Madison was about to interject, but Foster was too quick.

“Sergeant Jim Foster.”

“Military guy?” asked the other officer.

“Yeah, from the Marine base, in the city.”

The two officers looked suitably impressed.

“So, are we all okay here?” asked Luis, holstering his weapon and heading for the door.

“Yeah, we’re okay,” said Madison, trying her best to sound confident. Once the officers had left, she turned to Foster.

“Am I safe?” she asked.

“No,” said Foster, and Madison flinched, despite the soldier’s smile.

But instead of attacking her, he walked over and kissed her passionately on the lips. Madison eventually pulled away.

“I better find out what’s happened to Bradley,” she said.

“Yeah, of course,” said Foster, and he tried to hide his disappointment when he glanced at the bed.

Madison, too, had felt a thrill surge through her body. It was a mixture of fear and sexual excitement she had never experienced before. But first and foremost, she was a police officer and her partner needed her help.

## Chapter 57

A lot had happened in the four weeks since Dr Gregory Freeman's death. Officers from the Palm Springs Police Department had arrived at Linda's house in the National Park, just as the ambulance was about to take Bradley away. One of the paramedics had called them when he realised that they were dealing with a knife crime. The police had many questions they wanted to ask the home's owner, but she insisted on joining her friend on his journey to the hospital. The paramedics said they weren't sure if the detective from San Diego was going to make it, and the police took pity on her.

But the detective in charge insisted that one of the uniformed officers join her. He chose a female officer and gave her instructions not to let Linda out of her sight. She was to follow her into the restroom, if needs be. He didn't want to give Linda the chance to dump any evidence, if she turned out to be a suspect.

When she was finally questioned by the detective, Linda Renton claimed that her brother-in-law had forced his way into her house, intending to kill her. Fortunately, her friend Detective Bradley arrived just in time to help her and a struggle ensued, resulting in Dr Freeman's death. Bradley, she said, had acted in self-defence. Fingerprints from both men were found on the handle of the murder weapon and this, together with the severity of Bradley's wounds, seemed to bear out Ms Renton's testimony.

When asked what motive Dr Freeman might have had for attacking her, Ms Renton initially did not have an answer. It was only a few days later that she suggested he might have held a grudge because she had accused him of having something to do with her sister's death. But the detective in charge couldn't help feeling that the woman had been coached. And he had his suspicions about who might be doing the coaching.

According to the paramedics who attended Detective Bradley at Ms Renton's home, the man should have died. He had lost almost a third of his total blood supply and his small intestine had been pierced by the knife entering his body. He received a blood transfusion when he was taken to the medical centre in Palm Springs, and surgeons patched up his intestine, before administering high doses of antibiotics. But his doctors all agreed that the detective was extremely lucky his wound hadn't become infected, and that he hadn't experienced organ failure.

Psychiatrists treating Theresa Lee were extremely pleased with her progress, and they believed that any damage done by Dr Freeman's unorthodox methods had been negated. Regular visits by her fiancé Robert Summers also helped speed her recovery, and he gave her the motivation to aim for an early release from the psychiatric hospital in San Diego.

Kyle Rudd faced a very different future. The evidence against him had been steadily building up as warrants were issued and searches were made. His signed confessions also helped to seal his fate, and his efforts to recant them at a later stage fell on deaf ears. Court dates were set, and he would soon stand trial for the murders of Timmy Brewster, Detective Dan Culver, and John Traynor. Investigators were also looking into the possibility that he was responsible for the hit-and-run accident that resulted in the death of the two witnesses to Timmy Brewster's abduction. The DA was extremely confident that he would get a conviction.

Doreen and Michael Traynor were a little apprehensive to be receiving so many visitors. Sergeant Foster, they knew, and his friends Detective Bradley and Detective Culver were joining him so that they could corroborate his story. But they were to be joined by Linda Renton who, as Freeman's sister-in-law, would be able to add her weight to the case against Dr Freeman. Theresa Lee had also volunteered to offer her support, having fallen foul of the psychiatrist. She was driven to the farm by her fiancé. He said he would wait for her in his car.

Everyone was seated around the farm's large kitchen table, all except Michael Traynor, who stood by the stove with a sullen expression, his arms folded across his chest. Doreen Traynor had made a large pot of coffee the old-fashioned way, on the stove, and Bradley thought it was the best coffee he had ever tasted. After the strained pleasantries had been dispensed with, Madison was the first to get to the point.

"I expect you already know what happened to Dr Freeman."

"We read the papers, like everyone else," said Michael. "He's dead. Is that supposed to make us feel better?"

Doreen Traynor turned in her seat to face her son.

"Michael. We invited these people here. The least you can do is show some manners."

Michael stared at his feet.

“It wasn’t my idea to invite them.”

Conscious that a family row was about to ensue, Bradley quickly interjected.

“Believe me, we appreciate this chance to put our side of the story. The point we’re trying to make is that Dr Freeman was the one responsible for John’s death, and he has paid for it with his life.”

“So you say,” said Michael. “As far as I’m concerned, the man who pulled the trigger and shot my father is sitting right here in this room.”

Madison looked across at Foster to see his reaction. He was staring at his coffee, unwilling to look anyone in the eye. She knew he wouldn’t try to defend himself in front of the Traynor family. It just wasn’t in his nature. She decided to speak for him.

“Jim knows what he has done,” she said. “I have known him for only a short time, but I know he is a man of honour. That was why he came to you and admitted his guilt. He did not have to do that. I believe he would have handed himself into the police already if it weren’t for the fact that he was trying to protect me and Detective Bradley.”

“Protect you?” said Michael, barely containing his anger. “Where were you when my father needed protecting? And now you’ve framed an innocent man for my father’s murder, just so you can save your friend’s neck.”

Doreen sighed heavily and shook her head. She gave her son another withering look, but it appeared to have little effect. Madison returned Michael’s stare and decided to try a different tack, hoping her revelation wouldn’t make things even worse.

“Your father wasn’t the only one Jim was told to kill. Freeman hypnotised him into thinking Detective Bradley was a terrorist sympathiser. He very nearly put a bullet in my partner’s back.”

“Doesn’t that prove my point?” countered Michael. “The guy should be locked up. He’s a danger to society.”

Bradley took up the reins.

“I think the point my partner is trying to make is that despite the fact Jim tried to kill me, I don’t hold him responsible for his actions. I’ve seen this Dr Freeman at work, and I know how he can mess with people’s minds.”

“I can vouch for that,” said Theresa, wading into the discussion. “He hypnotised me and I’ve needed weeks of therapy to recover. I, too, tried to kill someone.”

“Good God,” said Doreen, clearly shocked. “Who did you try to kill?”

“Madison.”

Even Michael couldn't hide his surprise at this latest revelation. Linda decided to strike while the iron was hot.

“If you need any more convincing, Freeman hypnotised me, too. I know what you might have read in the papers about the doctor attacking Detective Bradley, but it isn't true. Pete made it look that way to protect me. *I'm* the one who stabbed him,” said Linda, reaching out to touch Bradley's hand.

“You stabbed Detective Bradley?” asked Doreen, unable to believe her ears.

“Yes, he very nearly died. And I care about him a great deal.”

Madison looked across at Bradley when she heard Linda's revelation. He avoided her gaze and was blushing like a schoolboy. Linda continued to make her case.

“I can't begin to imagine what Sergeant Foster is going through. If Pete had died, I don't think I would have been able to live with the guilt. But I know, deep down, that it wasn't me who wanted Pete dead. It was Freeman. Why would I have wanted to kill the man I care about?”

Linda toyed with the idea of telling them about her sister's supposed-suicide but decided against it. She knew she was in danger of overstating her case. But Madison noticed that Linda's forceful argument appeared to be working. Doreen was almost in tears and even Michael had mellowed enough to look his guests in the eye.

“Is it true what Sergeant Foster told us about this man Rudd?” asked Michael. “Is he a child-murderer?”

“Yes,” said Madison. “And he killed my father, when he tried to arrest him. He's going to go to prison for a very long time. Yes, Freeman told him to confess to your father's murder, but I'm not going to lose any sleep over that. He got what he deserves as far as I'm concerned.”

“And he confessed, just because Dr Freeman told him to?” asked Doreen.

“Yes,” said Bradley. “I was the one who got Freeman to hypnotise Rudd.”

“To save your friend?” asked Doreen.

“Yes.”

Doreen turned to her son.

“Michael, can't you see? If we make the sergeant turn himself in, nothing will be gained by it. John's *real* murderer is dead. Sergeant Foster acted against his will, just like Linda and Theresa. These fine detectives are the ones who found John's killer and tried to do the right thing. If we make the sergeant

go to the police, they will lose their jobs. Maybe even worse.”

Michael took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He looked at everyone in turn, and they looked back expectantly. Finally, he spoke.

“Oh hell, you’re right.” He walked over to Foster and held out his hand. “In all conscience, I can’t blame you for my father’s death.”

Foster stood up and took the man’s hand. His eyes filled with tears and he nodded gratefully. Everyone turned to Doreen to see what she had to say.

“I agree, of course,” she said. “But you have to promise me something, Sergeant Foster.”

Foster turned to look at her and nodded again.

“Of course. I owe you a debt I can never repay.”

“I only ask this,” said Doreen, pausing for dramatic effect. “From this day on, you must never blame yourself for John’s death. You are no murderer, Sergeant. I know that in my heart.”

Tears streamed down the Marine’s chiselled face, and he smiled, knowing a terrible weight had been lifted from his shoulders.



## Chapter 58

As they said their goodbyes, Doreen walked over to Foster and kissed him on the cheek. He managed to smile because he didn't want to hurt the woman's feelings, but that kiss had felt as painful as any wound he'd received during his career as a Marine. He'd killed her husband and yet she was showing him affection. It was almost too much to bear. She even made him promise to visit again and he found himself wanting to. His mother had died when he was twelve years old. Spending time with Doreen brought back the same warm feelings he had experienced in his mother's embrace.

When they finally headed for the driveway at the front of the farm, Robert Summers was leaning against his sports car, and Theresa ran into his arms. He smiled at the rest of the group.

"Did Theresa tell you the news? We're getting married. Three months from today."

Everyone offered their congratulations and they all did their best to smile, despite the emotional ordeal they had just been through. But Robert had another surprise for them.

"You're all invited to my place to celebrate."

When some of the group looked hesitant, he thought he'd better explain.

"I wanted a chance to thank you all. If it weren't for you, Theresa and I wouldn't even be together. Nothing fancy. Just drinks. What do you say?"

Bradley and Linda had planned to head to Palm Springs, and Madison and Foster had been looking forward to getting reacquainted, back at her apartment, but they all nodded and said they'd love to join the happy couple.

Less than an hour later, they were all relaxing in Robert's home on the clifftop south of San Diego, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Their host had splashed out on several bottles of expensive wine and the women were more than happy to sample what was on offer. Bradley and Foster restricted themselves to a couple of beers, being the designated drivers.

"I still find it incredible," said Robert, when there was a lull in the conversation. "The way Freeman was able to force people to do things against their will like that. It's frightening, when you think about it. I mean, the guy had total control."

"Luckily, not quite," offered Foster.

"Is it that incredible?" asked Bradley.

“What do you mean?” asked Madison.

Bradley took a sip of his beer, while he planned what he was going to say.

“I’ve been thinking about hypnosis a lot, while I’ve been working the case. And it struck me how his use of drugs turned it into a whole other ball game. I think *brainwashing* describes what he did, far better.”

“Brainwashing?” asked Linda.

“Yeah. Then it doesn’t sound quite so incredible. I mean, we’ve all seen the news. We wake up to stories about suicide bombers almost every day. Think about it. What person in their right mind would kill a bunch of innocent people and end their own life, just because someone told them to?”

“That’s right,” said Robert. “I guess humans can be conditioned to do anything, if the conditions are right. Drugs, hypnosis, or months of brainwashing – it all gets the same result.”

“And Freeman might have got away with it, if it hadn’t been for you and Madison,” said Linda, leaning her head on Bradley’s shoulder.

“We make a hell of a team, isn’t that right?” said Madison, turning to her partner.”

“I guess,” said Bradley, but Madison detected a hesitancy to his voice.

He grabbed his beer and headed for the large balcony at the rear of Robert’s home, with its magnificent view of the ocean. While the others chatted, Madison took the opportunity to follow her partner. When she reached the balcony, he was staring out across the sea. She noticed that he had taken out his gun and his badge and had placed them on a table next to the balcony’s door. She joined him and rested her arm against the railing.

“What are they doing there?” she asked, pointing to his Glock and police ID.

“I’m resigning,” he said, continuing to gaze at the horizon.

“Why?”

“I’m getting too old and tired to do this anymore. I’m starting to make too many mistakes.”

Madison stared at the waves, crashing against the rocks, far below.

“If you’re talking about Rudd killing my father, you’re wrong. And I was wrong to blame you for him getting killed. It wasn’t your fault.”

Bradley turned to look at her.

“I appreciate that, Madison. It means a lot. But it’s not just that. I’ve recently come close to getting killed, twice,” he said, reaching down to his stomach to feel his stitches. “Maybe someone’s trying to tell me something.”

“It’s your decision, Pete, but I’ll miss you if you go. It’ll be tough finding a new partner that comes anywhere close.”

Bradley touched her hand.

“Thanks, Madison. I appreciate it.”

“Come here,” she said, her arms outstretched, and they embraced before she headed back into the house.

She looked for Foster but couldn’t spot him. He had been waiting by the balcony door, out of sight. As soon as she was inside, Foster joined Bradley on the balcony.

“Hey, Detective!” yelled the soldier, shouting over the sound of the waves.

Bradley turned around, startled by Foster’s cry. He glanced at the table and immediately noticed that his gun was missing. The sergeant’s arms were clasped behind his back, his hands out of sight. Bradley stiffened, all too aware that his injuries had left him weak and vulnerable. If the guy was still having his strings pulled by Freeman from beyond the grave, there was very little he could do about it.

“Something I can do for you, Sergeant?” said Bradley, smiling. He had almost resigned himself to his fate.

“Yes, there is,” said Foster, stepping forward, a grim look on his face.

His right hand came from behind his back, clutching the Glock and badge.

“You can hang on to these. Ask anyone inside,” he said, nodding to the house. “You’re too good a cop to throw it all away. We need you out there, doing the right thing.”

“I’ll think about it, Sergeant. I promise.”

Bradley reached out and took the pistol from Foster’s hand, hoping the man didn’t notice that his hand was shaking.