1

It’d been moist yesterday, enough so that when the chill October night crept across the valley a thin layer of fog coalesced, obscuring everything from doorknobs down. Fog is unusual out here in the desert, except for times of high humidity and moisture coupled with temperature variations. The annual average rainfall doesn’t add up to much, and every year summer brings with it the familiar yelping voices hollering about drought and water conservation. This past summer had seen precipitation of unprecedented volume, more at least than we’re used to here in Utah. This, of course, brought with it talk of the “end of days” that rapid or broad change in climate brings out in the locals.

This year it seemed like there were more grey and wet days than sunny ones, and as the temperature dropped there was an unusual amount of fog to be found when the good citizens of Salt Lake arose for their daily activities. The days steadily became more and more like those in the Northwest. This morning was no exception.

I really do hate the winter; I look forward to it less and less each year. It makes work hard and miserable. I’m a private investigator, and that can mean long hours out in the elements, either on foot or in the car, watching and observing. Some days it occurs to me I ought to move to California where the weather is more predictable but, truth be told, I rather enjoy Salt Lake. We’ve got great skiing, a killer music scene, roads that aren’t overly crowded, but above all it’s safe; nothing really ever happens here.

Winter makes it hard to drive my only working vehicle as well, a 1967 Ford Mustang in dire need of restoration. I’m fully aware it’s a terrible car for P.I. work, but the Crown Vic that normally operates as my work vehicle threw a rod last year. That car and I have spent a lot of good times together and I don’t think I could bear to part with it. When the Vic broke down I’d painted the Mustang flat black and removed the pony-and crosshairs ornaments from the front grille in order to help it blend in a little better. At night with the headlights off it was nearly invisible at a distance, and with its powerful v-eight it was tough to outrun in a pinch. In the winter, though, it was tough to deal with; the heater fan didn’t work well, and the rear wheel drive is a pain in the ass when it snows.

But anyways, this morning was not unlike many others this fall; the fog began to lift as the sun made its lazy way into the south-eastern sky. Mist still crowded and swirled around the slow moving traffic on Interstate 15 directly west of my third story office window. I’d come in early to finish up a final report for a client who was seeking proof of infidelity on the part of his wife. He suspected infidelity and wanted to divorce her, but didn’t want her to get away with half of his assets and a monthly maintenance to boot, as stated in their prenup, when she was the one stepping out on him. He couldn’t prove it, yet. that’s where I came in. To make a short and sorry story even shorter, I’d tailed her to her lover’s place and taken several glamour shots of the kind which only Hugh Hefner could be proud of. My client was livid, of course, and I was glad the case was closed. Surely I would be called in to give my testimony during the divorce proceedings, but aside from that I could safely Pontius Pilate my way away from that situation.

I hate divorce work more than I hate the winter. To put it bluntly, it sucks. I wish I had the luxury of Philip Marlowe to declare that I don’t do divorce work, but the reality is in a community where divorce rates are some of the highest in the country and rising, it pays the bills. Big time. I’ve got rent to pay.

I squared away the case summary on my computer, printed it off, and slid it into the file on top of my documentation of the case as an electronic chime sounded announcing an arrival in my office reception area. It was really only a reception area in name only. My office was actually one large office that was divided into two smaller rooms; my actual office area where I met with clients, which was the larger of the two, and the reception area. I rented the space in an office building occupied with other per-month renters, mostly small time insurance agents and washout attorneys.

Through the open door that joined my office with the reception area I saw a man, maybe mid-fifties, and graying hair balding in a pattern that reminded me of Jack Nicholson. He turned around slowly from the main office door where he’d entered, surveying the setting.

“Be right with you in a moment,” I called from my office. I set aside the divorce case, and turned my attention to what I hoped would be another customer; business had been light this month. I got a better look at him as I shut the office door behind me. He would have been imposing for an older gentleman had I been any shorter than six feet, and I surmised he’d probably played football or some other contact sport in his youth. His bearded face seemed to me familiar, but I couldn’t place where I’d seen him before.

“Mr. Gage I presume,” he stated not as a question, but as a matter of fact.

“Yes, I’m Zander Gage,” I replied, offering my hand in greeting, which he reluctantly took.

“I have a matter that requires a great deal of sensitivity in regards to confidentiality.”

“Well, sir, that’s what I specialize in. Let’s start with the basics; name?” I replied.

“Alexander Martin,” again rather matter-of-factly.

Recognition flooded into the back of my brain, “Ah, as in former Senator Martin. My apologies, I didn’t recognize you with the beard. You’ll have to forgive me, I don’t follow politics much. Well, if you’ll just step into my office, we can draw up one of my standard contracts and get started on your little problem.”

“Indeed, however my problem, as you put it, is far from small.”

“Well, let’s cross that bridge when we come to it, shall we.” It’s probably not in the best of professional standards to refer to a customer’s problem as little, I reminded myself.

2

“Mr. Gage,” Martin said, as he shed his wool overcoat and taking the seat opposite mine across from my desk, handing me his coat, likely out of habit from many years of handing the coat off to a staff member or housekeeper.

Cute. Very cute. I was to be the newest member of the household ‘help.’ I restrained myself from rolling my eyes.

Moving to hang the coat next to my own on the coatrack, I noted how very similar to mine his was. I turned over the collar; they only differed in that Martin’s was of more lavish a marque and manufacture, probably custom tailored, while I had purchased mine at The GAP.

Martin continued, “many are not aware, but my political career was not done exactly, shall we say, by the book.” He shot me a look, “What we say here is in strict confidence, mind you.”

“Of course,” I nodded, sliding a photocopy of my standard contract across the desk, “however, I do require five hundred in advance before I begin anything requiring strict confidentiality, you understand.”

“As I was expecting, Mr. Gage,” Martin replied, his pocketbook already open, “is cash acceptable?”

“Cash is always acceptable, Mr. Martin,” I said, drawing up a handwritten receipt for the retainer. I pocketed the bills and motioned for him to continue as he slid the signed contract across the desk.

“As I was saying,” Martin continued, “everything was not exactly done by the book during my campaign and terms in office. I had received, shall we say, some very generous private contributions to my campaign from several of the state’s more wealthy businessmen. Greed held me fast, and I accepted them, in defiance of my advisors. It was only after I’d accepted their unusually large donations that I discovered that the majority of my benefactors were involved in other forms of business, as they say; gambling rings, prostitution, drugs, the whole gamut. So there I was, running for national office, with…”

“A monkey on your back,” I finished for him. I motioned for him to continue.

“It was after my election into office that certain requests were made of me that were of a less than legal nature. It came out that these wealthy hoodlums who’d donated to my campaign were all connected together in collusion against me. They held my campaign finance over me. They threatened to make them public if I didn’t write bills for them, if I didn’t vote in session the way they wanted me to. Apparently they have several senators and representatives in their pockets, Democrats and Republicans alike, from several states in the Union. I couldn’t go to the police, heavens no, and risk public disgrace on the eve of my election. I had to give in to their demands. For four terms, I voted as they asked, and in return they financed my reelections until this last term, when I announced my retirement. They weren’t pleased with my decision, but it had to be done, I had to break their hold on me or go mad.”

“Of course,” I nodded.

“They’ve continually tried to bully into running for public office again, especially this past year leading up to elections. I finally said ‘Enough is enough,’ and told them I’d hired a biographer to tell my story, including the campaign finance and my various benefactors’ connection to it, as well as their connection to other government officials. They threatened me and my family with various threats should I ever consider publishing their connection to me.”

“I’m not sure where I fit in here, Mr. Martin. This type of thing is more for the FBI or an oversight committee,” I interrupted.

“The actual problem hasn’t anything to do with me or my campaign finance, Mr. Gage, at least not directly. You see, last month I’d contracted with a biographer, Philo Jennings to be exact, who was to help me publish what I know, when members of this criminal syndicate made it known to me that, outside of my knowledge, my wife had accumulated a substantial amount of gambling debt in several of their underground casinos, which they demanded payment for and threatened to make public. They also accused her of terrible things, occult things, demon worship even! I refused, of course, in light of my upcoming meeting with my biographer. I refused to believe their allegations, and I was convinced once everything came out they would back off and leave me be. You see, like I said, my problem is not with me, it’s my wife.”

Here it comes, I thought, another fun filled frolic around divorce court.

“You see, Mr. Gage, she’s been missing for more than a week.”

3

“So, explain to me, Mr. Martin, why you’ve come to me instead of the police. It’s obvious you feel these folks are involved with your wife’s disappearance or else you wouldn’t have taken all the trouble of divulging to me your personal secrets. Have you bothered to file a missing person’s report?”

Martin nodded and rested his chin against his ample chest before responding. “I do, indeed, feel that my enemies are involved in the disappearance of my wife, Anne, however, I have no proof and I cannot be certain,” he paused, “things have not been going so well between my wife lately. I did confront her about about the accusations of gambling debts, and she took it rather poorly, though after many days of pressing she finally did admit to losing a large sum of money gambling. We haven’t been speaking much since, and when we have, it’s often been in anger. We spent several days apart at a time, off and on. I suspect she may have gone to her sister’s during those times, but her sister claims to have she has not been there.”

“You think she may have left you this time,” I surmised.

“Frankly, yes, it’s possible. I don’t know what exactly to believe has happened to her, though, and I’d rather know for certain.”

“I see. Would I be right in deducing that you want me to locate your wife for you Mr. Martin?”

“Yes, but only locate her. If she has indeed left me, and she’s happy where she’s at, leave her be,” Martin’s voice wavered for the first time since he strode confidently into my office, “I still love Anne, Mr. Gage. Regardless of the conflict and anger between us, I love her. I need to know.”

“I understand. Now, Mr. Martin, I need you to know, in order to conduct the kind of investigation you’re asking of me, I’ll need to ask you some questions you might find uncomfortable.”

Martin only nodded and looked at the tip of his shoe.

“The first thing I’m going to need to know is was your wife, to your knowledge, having an affair?”

“You do get right to the point Mr. Gage.” Martin exhaled a long sigh, “I have no reason to believe that Anne was seeing another man.”

“Have you cheated on her?”

He looked away in slight embarrassment, “Yes, but that was many years ago, when we were both a good deal younger. It took considerable time but we’ve moved beyond that.”

I wasn’t sure how to take his embarrassment, so I left that area of questioning alone for now; there would be plenty of time to follow up after speaking with people who knew Anne.

“Would she often have time away from your home that she could not account to you for? Had you ever caught her in a lie about where she might have been at any point in time?” I asked.

“No, not until it came out that she had been visiting some of the various illegal gambling operations. When I’d finally confronted her with where she’d accumulated this reported debt, she denied, of course, that the debt was even hers. After many hours of long and drawn out arguing over the matter, she finally admitted that she had been visiting these gambling establishments on the occasions when she’d told me she was playing cards with her bridge group. Ironically enough, Mr. Gage, whenever she had told me she was going out to play cards, she wasn’t exactly lying. She was indeed playing cards; she’d only lied about where and with whom.” Martin looked into his lap as if he had personally been shamed by his wife’s actions.

“Mr. Martin, I can understand your frustration and embarrassment in all this, after all, you were one of the more vocal proponents of many local legislature actions banning all forms of gambling. This type of publicity would have done you no favors,” I said, tapping the tip of my pen on the yellow legal pad where I’d been taking notes throughout our conversation.

Martin’s head rose and his eyes met mine, “I thought you didn’t follow politics, Mr. Gage.”

“I don’t,” I replied, “Not much. However someone of your vocal talents is difficult to miss one hundred percent of the time. Just a few more questions and I’ll get to work on this for you. Did, at any point, your wife have a legitimate bridge group she’d play with?”

“Well, in light of her dishonesty on the matter, I would say that it’s doubtful. One thing I can tell you is that she’d often claim her bridge group would occasionally meet at her sister Margie Kemp’s house.”

“You have an address for her?” He read Margie Kemp’s address and telephone number from a pocket ledger. All this information I wrote on my legal pad, “She ever mention any other people who attended this bridge group? Anyone you might be familiar with?”

“None that spring to mind. I had assumed that other attendees were friends of Margie.”

“About how often did she tell you she was playing bridge?”

“Twice, maybe three times a week.”

“Did she have any recent quarrels with anyone you’re aware of?” I queried.

“None that I know of outside our own spats, which were usually about her debts and money, her various wastes of time.”

“Did she have any personal enemies? Anyone that would want to harm or damage her at all?”

“None that I know of.”

“Any other personal enemies of yours you haven’t told me about?”

“No. I can’t think of anyone other than the syndicate who would want to damage me in this way.”

“When was the last time you saw your wife, Mr. Martin?”

“Last Wednesday. She said she was going out to get a hair treatment early in the afternoon. She never came back to the house.”

“Where was she planning on receiving this treatment? Does she have a particular salon she favors?”

“I don’t know, I think she may have gone to Francis D’s on Highland Drive.”

“I’ll need some photos of your wife, as current as possible, preferably a full figure shot and a head shot.”

“I’ll have them sent over by courier as soon as possible.”

“Ok,” I made short notes of all the things Martin was telling me; there wasn’t much to go on, just an as-yet-unknown-to-me crime syndicate and the lady’s sister. “If I’m reading you right, you think she was either taken by your crime syndicate or she left on her own, right?”

“Those would be my guesses, Mr. Gage. I don’t know what else to think.”

“If you’re so sure, and you’re all set to publicize your situation anyways, why not just take this to the cops? If she turns out to have simply left on her own, there’s no harm done.”

“I know these people too well to assume that I could waltz right out into the public eye and point these people out without them hurting my Anne. I don’t trust them not to, and besides, it’s not the right time to play my hand, Mr. Gage. That’s part of politics; you do things at the right time. A weak hand of cards may later be a strong one, and right now my hand is weak. That’s why I’m willing to pay you handsomely in return for learning the location of my Anne, and if possible, arranging her return.”

“My fees beyond the retainer are two-seventy-five dollars a day, plus expenses, plus a bonus if I show results,” I was proud of that line; I’d copped it from Jack Nicholson’s character in Chinatown, and I always liked hearing myself say it, “Nothing beyond that will be necessary, Mr. Martin. Anything beyond that from a client with a profile such as yours, and the IRS will start to wonder.”

“By the book then, Mr. Gage.”

“By the book,” I nodded.

He dropped his chin to his chest again and scowled, as if he was in deep contemplation, and let a great melancholy sigh issue from his nose, “I see now what wisdom lies in that. I wish to God I’d have seen it before.”

4

When former Senator Martin left my office, he did so in contrast to how he came in; he came in exuding confidence in his demeanor, what I surmised more than likely was a front he often put on for the benefit of those he met, learned after years in public office. He left in the same silent contemplation he ended our conversation with, chin down, great sighs seeping out of his chest. I was glad he got out of there when he did; I thought he might break down into tears before long. I’m not good at comforting people, especially other men, and the last thing I wanted was that big fellow sobbing his eyes out in my office.

The thought did occur to me at the time that Martin may have rubbed out his own wife and was hiring me as part of his cover story, but at first blush he didn’t seem like the kind of man to do that, at least based on all outward appearances. One thing I have learned over the years, though, is that appearances can be very deceiving. I’d seen cold hearted killers blubber and wail at their victims’ funerals and innocents show no sign of emotion at all.

The only initial motive that I could figure for Martin to nix his own wife would be to draw more publicity to his biographer’s account of his experience, but that could change after further investigation. Husbands knock off their wives all the time in this country, and for more petty reasons than just publicity.

I tore off the top sheet of my legal pad which I’d been taking shorthand notes on and began to transcribe them into my laptop while the information was still fresh in my head.

I reviewed what I had so far: Alexander Martin, through either unscrupulous activity or lack of vigilance, had acquired some rather shady contributors to his campaign, and this dirty laundry, if aired in public, would ruin his political career, cast doubt upon his record and more than likely send him to jail; he puts up with these thugs for several years, and finally jilts them in favor of his version of doing the right thing, all the while Anne is whiling away her time at underground casinos under the guise of playing bridge with her sister; time passes, and his shady buddies reveal Anne Martin’s connection to them in the form of gambling debts incurred at one or several of their gambling institutions; Martin is angry and embarrassed, they stop speaking to each other; Martin sets a date with his biographer to write his tale, contrary to the wishes of his dirty friends; Anne Martin goes out for a hair treatment and never returns home; Alexander Martin hires me to locate his wife and wants to keep it under wraps.

I decided the first logical step to take, until I received photos of Anne from Martin, would be getting a hold of Margie Kemp and find out what involvement, if any, she had in this whole mess.

\*\*\*

I reviewed again the facts currently in hand while I let the Mustang decelerate down the freeway off-ramp and headed north on Foothill Boulevard towards an area of the valley know as the Avenues. Since I’d lived in that area as a kid, I found the place with very little difficulty; Margie lived in a little house on Laird Avenue just a few blocks east of the University. Her house looked like most of the others, quaint, tidy, square little two and three bedroom bungalows and four-squares set forward on tiny parcels of property, usually with a single car garage set at the end of a long driveway running the entire depth of the property. I passed the address, flipped around, and parked two houses past Margie’s facing the other direction so I could get a good look at it before raising the attention of anyone inside.

The thought had occurred to me during my meeting with Martin that this Margie Kemp’s place could be a front for a small gambling establishment, possibly in the basement apartment that often was included in homes in this area, but thought better of it after seeing the miniscule size of the home itself; there simply couldn’t be enough room to operate even a moderately profitable wing of a gambling organization here; there didn’t even appear to be enough room to shoot back-alley craps.

I gathered my briefcase and slid it behind the passenger seat, no need to make her think I was a salesman, exited the car, and walked towards the house, observing what I could along the way.

The lawn appeared to have been well manicured, well cared for, and was a deeper green than that of her neighbors’ The trees and flower beds seemed to have been attended to with expert detail. Margie had an exceptionally green thumb or she hired the work out to an expensive landscaper. Even amidst autumn, her yard had a splendor that surrounding properties lacked this late in the year.

I rapped three times on the front door, stood back a step and turned back towards the yard. The care that went into the landscaping did indeed seem professional, and that kind of care doesn’t run cheap in the desert.

I heard a deadbolt disengage behind me, and turned back towards the house in time to be greeted by a comely blond woman who couldn’t have been a day over thirty; I was expecting someone at least twenty years older. I realized I’d forgotten to ask Martin what his wife’s and sister-in-law’s ages were and cursed myself for coming to this meeting so unprepared.

“Uh,” I started, a bit unprepared, “I’m looking for Margie Kemp, is she here?”

“Yes, I’m she.”

I was indeed taken aback by this; I’d assumed, since Martin appeared to be at least fifty-five or so, his wife and Margie would be near to their age group, “Uh, Mrs. Kemp...”

“Miss,” she corrected.

“Sorry, Ms. Kemp, my name is Zander Gage. I’m a private investigator in the employ of Alexander Martin; could I have a few moments of your time?”

“Sure,” she hesitated, “what’s this about?”

I motioned towards the door, “Could we speak inside? It’s important.”

“Yes,” she replied with a hint of mistrust, “but you’ll have to excuse the slight mess. I live by myself and don’t often have visitors.” She stepped aside and motioned me through the door.

I stepped into a small, green carpeted entryway which opened up on one side into a small living room and a sitting room, dining room, and kitchen combination on the other. The home certainly didn’t appear to be in any disarray by any comprehension of mine; her definition of messy was about the same as my definition of tidy. The only indications of any living even coming close to lackadaisical were a tawny overcoat and hat slung over one of the dining room chairs, a pair of tennis shoes sitting in the center of the sitting room, and a pair of socks, neatly rolled, tucked into the left shoe. The house smelled of cinnamon and something else sweet that I couldn’t quite place, and the carpets and furniture were clean. Someone attended to the needs of this house the way they attended to the yard.

“That’s a very nice yard you have out there,” I indicated back towards the front door, “most people let theirs go to pot as winter gets closer.”

“Thank you,” she said with a slight smile bordering more on embarrassment than pride, “I get a lot of enjoyment out of working in the garden.”

“It shows, it’s beautiful. I wish I had a yard that beautiful, hell, I wish I had a yard to make that beautiful.”

She cocked her head inquisitively and narrowed her gaze.

“I live in a basement apartment below a small house, and the yard is tended to by the landlord.”

She nodded and smiled the way adults nod and smile to children to acknowledge their minor accomplishments.

She directed me towards a vintage sixties era sofa in the living room, which was otherwise occupied by an upright piano and an old fashioned roll-top desk that looked like it rarely saw use. I waited for her to take her seat in an equally vintage looking armchair before I took my seat.

“Ms. Kemp, I was hoping you could possibly tell me about your sister Anne and her whereabouts recently,” I started, “in particular, I’d like you to tell me about the last time you saw her.”

She sat back in her chair and folded her arms, “Well, the last time I saw her was last Wednesday at the salon a few blocks over. We met for lunch and afterwards went together to a salon appointment we planned.”

“Where did you have lunch?”

“We went to Saffron on thirteenth; we went to the salon from there.”

“What salon did you go to?”

“Francis D’s, around the corner on Highland.”

I scribbled shorthand in my notepad as she related her answers. So far, everything she’d told me jived with what I already knew, “Did you leave the salon together?”

“Yes, she dropped me off here after, and I haven’t heard from her in a little more than a week. What’s this about? You said you were working for Alex, on what?” she queried, nervousness creeping into her voice.

“We can get to that in a second. How often do you usually see your sister?” I did my best to try and deflect her questions and segue to my next query, “Do you talk on the phone often?”

“Usually I’ll see her about once or twice a week; we talk on the phone about that much. We’re close, but not terribly close, not like we used to be when we were kids. I never could fit into the snobby lifestyle she and Alex like to lead.”

I detected a slight level of disdain in her voice, “You don’t care much for Alex?”

“Why should I?” she stammered, “She was all I had after Mom and Dad died, and he took her away from me.”

“If I might ask,” I paused, trying to tread lightly, “when did your folks pass away.”

“I was fifteen; Anne was twenty five, almost twelve years ago. It was shortly after that she and Alex were married.

“They’d been seeing each other since Anne was eighteen. Alex prefers his girls young.” she rolled her eyes.” I’ve almost been half expecting him to leave Anne for another, younger girl like he did before.”

“He’d been married before Anne?” I asked. Martin hadn’t volunteered this information, but of course, I hadn’t asked.

“He’d been cheating on his first wife with Anne for several years before the first Mrs. Martin got fed up with him and left, leaving Anne to become the second Mrs. Martin. I keep wondering when we’ll see a third…” she exhaled, looking out the picture window into the front yard, staring at nothing. “She always denies it, but I keep worrying that Alex will scoop up some other innocent young girl excited to live the ‘rich and famous’ life and break Anne’s heart. She loves Alex, always has, Mr. Gage, even through his infidelity and everything else-- but I can’t help but think one day he’ll show his true colors.” She turned farther towards the big window, not wanting me to see her silent tears, and almost hiding them. “I’m sorry, I’m a terrible host, can I offer you anything? Coffee? Tea?” She rose and strode towards the kitchen.

“No, thank you, I’m fine.” I sat there, silent and uncomfortable, until she returned with two tumblers of water, set one before me before sitting back into her chair.

She brush back behind her ear a comma of bleach-blond hair that had fallen. “I’m sorry, I guess I’m not much help.”

“No, you’ve been quite helpful.” I wrote down what I’d learned in my notepad, “If you’re ok to continue, I have just a couple more questions for you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Ok, then,” taking a sip of water before I continued, “What did you do after Anne dropped you off Wednesday?”

“I went right over to work; I was filling in for someone so I went in a bit early.”

“Ok, Alex mentioned Anne plays in a bridge group with you and some other friends.”

“Yes, she does, sometimes.”

“About how often did your group get together for a game?”

“Every week, I suppose, maybe every other. The games weren’t scheduled or anything, it was just whenever we could all work it into our schedules. It was more of an informal thing, really. Most of us met in school, and then I began bringing Anne and eventually introduced a couple more into the group.”

“Would it be possible to speak with some of the other regular players?”

She came up from her armchair just long enough to reach a nearby roll-top desk, and produced her smartphone from which she supplied names, addresses and telephone numbers for five other women.

“Those are the ones who come most often.”

“Does Anne have any enemies that you know of, anyone who might want to do her harm?” I continued.

“No, everyone who knew her seemed to love her.”

“Has she had any quarrels with anyone you know of?”

“No, she gets along with everyone. She’s that kind of person. People like her,” she’d returned to her even-keeled demeanor.

“If she was involved in anything illegal, or involved in any occult activity, were you two close enough that she’d tell you about it?”

“What? What do you mean illegal? Occult?” Her face remained level and composed as her voice, “What’s this all about? I think I have a right to know what’s going on here.” I found it difficult to gauge how much of her reaction was an attempt to feign outrage or an instinctive self-insulation from shock.

I sighed long, considering the need for client confidentiality and the missing woman’s sister’s right to know about her sibling. To hell with it, I thought.

“Ms. Kemp, Alex has hired me to locate your sister. She’s not been home since last Wednesday. You were the last person to see her, as far as I know.”

Her eyes widened almost imperceptibly as the words left my lips, her shoulders rose in a deep breath, and she kept a determined fixed eye contact with me as I continued. “He came to me because the police don’t have enough to go on to make a missing persons case,” I lied, hoping the deflection might spare me having to explain further, “and he seems to genuinely want her found.” I left out what Martin had told be about not bringing her back if she didn’t want to come, in light of what Ms. Kemp had revealed to me regarding Martin’s prior marriage and infidelity. At this point in time I didn’t want to damage what I hoped was the beginnings of trust between myself and Ms. Kemp, however tenuous it might be. When people trust you they confide in you, and I needed Ms. Kemp to confide in me.

She seemed satisfied at that answer and settled back into her seat ever so slightly, seemingly trying to hide a full-body exhale. I made a mental note that this outward satisfaction seemed to come without an explanation from me for my mention of Mrs. Martin’s occult activity.

“One last thing and I’ll get out of your hair,” I said after a brief pause. “Did you ever hear from Alex’s first wife after she left? Did they ever talk after, did she ever return for anything?”

“I honestly don’t recall ever seeing her again. We’d assumed she’d moved back to California, where she was from originally. Alex would know for sure,” she said.

“I’m sure he would.” I wondered very much whether or not I should confront Martin about his first marriage; he’d hired me to find his wife, not look into his past, and he’d not exactly been dishonest with me about it…but if the disappearance of his wife had, in any way, anything to do with his former wife there would be no avoiding it.

I rose from my seat on the sofa, “I might have a few more questions for you later; would it be alright if I stopped by again?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied, rising from the armchair.

“Would it be possible to get your telephone number, in case I need to contact you?” She recited her telephone number which I wrote into my notebook and returned to my suit pocket, “Thanks, I’ll be in touch.”

She showed me to the door, closed it abruptly, and bolted it behind me. As I strode back towards the car, I turned and looked back towards the house just in time to see a fall of lace curtain where I could have sworn I saw a swatch of bleach-blond.

5

I wondered if Margie Kemp had continued to watch me through the lace curtains after I’d left. I considered walking past my car and on down the street to the service station on Wasatch and coming back to the car later and see who might go in or out of the Kemp house, but decided against it; it might look odd to be camped out watching for activity when I really only had the slightest kernel of a hunch that something more was going on with Ms. Kemp than she’d initially let on.

I turned the car around from where I’d parked and headed back the way I came. Something didn’t sit right with me about what I’d learned from Margie, but I wasn’t sure what it was, if it was just one thing, or all of them. The trip had been informative, to say the least; I’d learned my client wasn’t exactly forthright with me about his marital activity, whether or not he was currently cheating on Anne made little difference to me. Like that Dr. Phil always says, past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior, and I saw little reason to doubt it in a man like Martin. One way or another, I was slowly convincing myself that I would eventually have to ask Martin about his first wife.

I pulled into the parking lot of a church to safely review my list of people I wanted to interview. Most of the women from Ms. Kemp’s bridge group lived in the area; I might as well get them squared away while I was out here, and deal with confronting Martin tomorrow.

One by one, I passed by and interviewed all five women in their homes, and one by one, they all told me they’d only known Anne Martin in passing, only from the bridge group, and only through Margie. Five interviews, five strike-outs; none of the women had anything that I could use, or at least nothing that they would admit to. The excursion after Margie’s house hadn’t been completely in vain, though. One of the bridge ladies, a middle-class socialite soccer-mom type, had a real mouth for gossip on her. Her name was Kathy Giordano, and she ran her mouth like a 7-Eleven; it never closed once during the entire interview. In the space of an hour and a half I’d learned the entire Giordano family history, the names of the soccer teams of her six boys, who in the neighborhood was sleeping with who, that most of the members of the bridge group (except for her, of course) hadn’t had a sexual encounter in a good long time, and that Anne once mentioned something about suspecting Alex not being entirely faithful to her. Well, at least one detail was somewhat corroborated.

I could see this was going to be difficult.

\* \* \*



As the sun burned towards the western slope of the sky I pulled back into my parking space in the office garage and rode the elevator to my office on the third floor. Waiting in the reception area was a young man, I’d say no older than twenty one, smartly dressed in a suit and tie.

“Mr. Gage?” asked young mister sharp, rising from the reception area sofa. He had in his had in his hand a document sized manila envelope, which he offered directly under my nose to me as I passed beneath the transom.

Great, I thought, a process server.

“This is from Alexander Martin’s office. I was instructed to bring them to you here post haste and hand them directly to you.”

Ah, the photos! “Thank you,” I said, hiding the enthusiasm of finally having a bit of physical material to work with after all those fruitless interviews earlier.

“Have a nice day sir,” he said, and briskly strode from my office towards the elevator.

I wondered how long the little twerp had been sitting there waiting for me to return to the office. I took a somewhat small delight in thinking he might have blown his whole day cooling his heels here in my office.

I held the envelope in my teeth as I juggled my briefcase and the keys to the office. It was chilly inside; I’d forgotten to turn on the heater before I’d left that morning. I dumped the contents of my arms and pockets onto the desk and removed my Walther PPK from its shoulder holster, slid it into the locking drawer of my desk, turned the thermostat up, and started the CD player that sat behind my desk on the window sill before sitting down to open the envelope from Martin. Miles Davis’ Birth of the Cool was in the machine.

Inside the envelope were three eight-by-ten and three four-by-six photos of Anne Martin. She was a beautiful woman, but not in the same way as her much younger sister. The two had a penchant for bleach-blond hair, and shared many similar features; that they were sisters, there was no doubt, but it was obvious to me who got the looks in their family. Anne was heavier by several pounds than Margie, and looked like she was starting to show her age more. She looked even a few years older than her actual thirty-eight. I half wondered to myself if there were other factors in her life contributing to her older appearance, stress, anxiety, smoking. Margie’s house certainly hadn’t smelled at all like a smoker had ever even visited, let alone lived there.

The photos consisted mainly of what appeared to be professional work, with the exception of the four-by-sixes, which looked like they were taken at a party or wedding reception. In the corner of the smaller photos was imprinted the date of July, 11 2006. Anne’s appearance in the professional photos was similar enough to the smaller ones to determine that all had probably been taken within the past year. The last photo was an eight-by-ten glamour shot of a much younger Anne Martin. She was a natural brunette, and more closely resembled her younger sister in this photo; she was still nowhere near the attractive woman that Margie was, but it did appear that she might have had plastic augmentation performed between then and now. On the back, in the lower corner, was penciled the year 1992; this photo had been taken shortly after the Martins were married. I was grateful Martin had included that one so I’d have a good idea what she’d look like if she dyed her hair back to brown again.

I laid the photos aside and leaned back in my chair deciding what to do next. There weren’t a whole lot of options at this point, and there were still too many things unknown to take a clear direction. I needed to confront Martin about his previous infidelity and find out what more he might have been keeping from me. If he was keeping details from me that might be vital, I decided I would have to take into consideration his motives for finding Mrs. Martin in the first place. It was a big leap in logic, but I prepared myself for the eventuality that Martin might be either criminally involved in his wife’s disappearance, or that he wanted her returned to him for reasons less than legal. I picked up the phone and dialed Margie Kemp.

She answered after the second ring, “Hello?”

“Ms. Kemp, this is Zander Gage again. I wanted to ask you something; had your sister ever mentioned that she might be cheating on Alex? Are you two close enough that she would tell you something like that?”

“I…I don’t know.” She stuttered.

“Is it possible that Anne had been cheating on Alex when she suspected his infidelity?” I grilled.

“I don’t know, I just don’t know. I guess anything is possible, but she never mentioned it to me.”

“How would you say he might react if he found out she was stepping out on him?”

“I don’t know.”

There was a long pause; I wanted to say back to her You don’t know much of anything, do you, little Margie, but held my tongue.

“Was he ever violent with her? Did he ever hit her?”

“I…I don’t know, I never saw him hit her, and she never said anything…I don’t know, Mr. Gage.”

“Ms. Kemp, is there anything you’re not telling me? Is there anything that I should know that would help me find your sister?”

“No,” her voice faltered and she paused, “there’s nothing else I can give you. I need to go. Goodbye.” She hung up without another word.

There’s something she’s not telling me, something important, I thought to myself, little Miss Margie’s hiding something. I need to know what.

------

*After the initial interview, Z finds <artifact> in his coat pocket. realizes Martin accidentally took Z's coat. description of artifact, yadda yadda, internet research, etc. There's a phrase on it or something he can reference. He calls M to ask if it means anything to her and maybe he could meet her at a coffee shop to show her. She agrees, he shows her, she says she doesn't recognize it.*

*Later on the drive home Z's phone rings, its M, she confesses she lied and that she does know about it and can they meet later.*

*They meet up at The Temple Bar, an Irish pub replica, because its a public place where they can get a high backed private booth.*

*M explains it is a Wiccan talisman of protection, that it belonged to her sister. What was Martin doing with it?*

*Z asks how she knows about the talisman. She says its a long story, probably one more suited for another night and she has to prepare for something early in the morning.*

*They plan for dinner and drinks the following night.*

------

6

I’d stopped for flowers before driving to my mother’s house. As I pulled into the driveway, the last speckle of light descended below the western mountains. All the lights in the house were lit. I used my key to gain entry thought the front door and no sooner was I across the threshold I was immediately tacked around the knees by a little ball of energy.

“Daddy!” The little Tasmanian devil exclaimed.

“Hey, kiddo!” I said, “You have a good time with Grandma after school today?”

“Yeah, we played board games and watched Grandma’s show on the T.B.”

“Oh, I see. Where’s Grandma at now?”

“She’s kitchening dinner.”

“Oh, what she making?”

“I dunno,” she shrugged.

“Let’s go see, ok?”

“Ok. Did you catch any badguys today, daddy?”

“No, kiddo. Today was a pretty tough day.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok, hon.”

“Daddy?”

“Yeah, sweetie.”

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, Lindy.”

My mother was in the kitchen preparing something at the stove. Even after the rest of her kids moved away and her house was empty most of the time, she still delighted in cooking for people. The smell of marinara sauce hovered in the kitchen, getting thicker the closer we got.

“Hi, Mom. What you cooking?”

“Oh, just a spaghetti sauce, I figured you might be hungry. I’m making a little extra for you to take to work with you.”

“Thanks ma. Brought you something,” I said, getting a vase for the flowers out of the cupboard.

“Thank you, Zander, that’s very sweet.”

Dinner at Mom’s went off without a hitch, as per the usual. I washed up, and later Mom and I talked at the table while Lindy watched some Disney movie I wasn’t familiar with about a fish that gets lost. After a while my mother pointed to my little daughter asleep on the sofa. It was probably time to get her home and into bed. I scooped the little five year old up into my arms, kissed Mom goodbye and promised we’d be back on Sunday for dinner again.

I laid my daughter down into the back seat of the Mustang, buckled her in, and drove gently home.



The house I bought after my wife Melinda passed away was smaller than our former one. It was almost a two-storey version of Marie Kemp’s. Not only was the mortgage less, as now my daughter and I had to live on one income, but it was only two miles away from Mom’s place, and that made it easier for her to watch Lindy while I worked.

I kissed my little girl on the forehead and laid her into the little toddler sized bed. I decided I wouldn’t wake her to change into her pajamas; she was already asleep, and for any single parent that’s a blessing. I shut the door to her room as I left, and whispered “I love you kiddo.”

I went back downstairs intent on reviewing again what little material I had on the case so far, in hopes that something might occur to me. As I began pulling my notebook out of the briefcase, fatigue from the day’s driving and the long hours began to settle in. I fed our two cats and went back upstairs to my room and fell into bed. I didn’t bother undressing either.



I awoke to a back furry, smarmy greeting from one of the two feline residents of the house. Light spilled through the slit in the window curtain and laid a line of sunshine across the bed.

“Ok, ok I’m up. What, are you hungry or something?” I asked the cat, “Where’s your brother?”

The cat meowed a response, to which I said, “Yeah ok, I’m coming.” I threw the covers off and loosened the tie I’d worn to bed, along with the rest of my selection from yesterday. Somehow the tie’d gotten itself wrapped another time around my neck during the night. I looked in on Lindy, who was still sleeping, and headed down the stairs. She’d be awake soon enough; she rarely missed her cartoons on Saturday. It was something that Melinda, her mother, wouldn’t have approved of, but I allowed because it gave us some time together before I started working. For this reason I usually allowed myself a later start on Saturdays.

After Lindy had woken up and we’d made a breakfast of fried eggs and toast and were halfway through our second round of cartoons the telephone rang. I turned down the television and reached for the phone.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Gage, this is Alexander Martin.”

“Good morning.”

“I wanted to follow up with you and make sure you received the photos I had sent over to your office.”

“Yes, I received them. They’ll be of some help to me in finding your wife.” I might as well try and snag an appointment to meet with him while I had his attention, I thought, “Mr. Martin, I’d like to go over a few things with you in person. Can I stop by your place around noon?”

“Of course. I’ll have the staff prepare a lunch.” He sounded to be in fine spirits, nothing like yesterday.

“You don’t have to do that for me, Mr. Martin.”

“Nonsense, I insist you join me for lunch. We can go over your progress at that time.”

“Ok,” I relented, “I see you at noon. Thank you Mr. Martin.”

I looked over my shoulder at Lindy, who was still plopped down on the sofa watching T.V., moved further out of earshot and dialed Ms. Kemp again.

“Hello?” She sounded bright and awake.

“Ms. Kemp, hello,” the out of courtesy, “I hope I haven’t woken you.”

“No, I was just tidying up. Mr. Gage?”

“Yes.”

“I already told you I don’t know anything more about Alex,” the brightness left her voice a little.

“That’s not why I’m calling, Ms. Kemp. I’m going over to Alex’s place for lunch. I’m going to confront him on some things and try to poke him for more information. I was wondering if I could run by you some of the information he’s giving me, and, you know, get another side on things. I was thinking around five-thirty.”

She hesitated. I hoped it didn’t come of sounding like I was asking her on a date. “I suppose I could make some time around then. That’s usually when I eat, would you like to do it over dinner?”

It was my turn to hesitate this time. She’d taken the thought right out of my head, “Uh, yeah that would be fine.” I’d have to remember to tell Mom I’d be working late tonight, and not to worry about making any dinner.

“I know this really great place…” we both started in at once, then burst out in a little laughter.

“Where were you thinking?” I said. I figured she’d be more comfortable if she were in a setting she was familiar with.

“No, where were you thinking?” She said.

“Really,” I said, “You choose.”

“No, I go there a lot. It gets boring, really. I’d like to try something different.”

“Ok, then. There’s this really good Japanese grill over in Sandy, the Mizumi. Do you like Japanese food?”

“Never tried it,” she said, “but I like to be open to new things.”

“Good. Pick you up at five-thirty?”

“Fine,” she said, and with a little mirth in her voice, “you’re not asking me on a date, are you?”

Damn, I thought, it did come across that way. “No, of course not.”

I heard her sigh into the receiver. Was that a sigh of relief of disappointment?

“Ok, I’ll see you at half past five, then Mr. Gage.”

“Ok, see you then.” I hung up the phone before she could get in anything else. I’d not had a woman around for more than three years, and was sorely out of practice reading those little damn nuances and behaviors they have. What was that sigh supposed to mean? Damnit.

I rested the phone back in its cradle and joined my daughter on the sofa. That coyote was getting the hell beat out of him by that bird again. It was always that way, the coyote never wins, same thing every time, but somehow it always manages to be funny.

“You ready to go spend some time with Grandma, kiddo?”

“Can we go after Bugs Bunny?” She looked up at me.

“Sure, kiddo.” I kissed her little forehead

7

After dropping off Lindy at Mom’s I went over to the office to make sure I had all my notes and paperwork regarding the case at hand and headed towards Martin’s house. The address of his house spoke volumes to me before I ever arrived; the Martins had lived on Dimple Dell Road for the last several years and after Alex’s retirement from politics. Dimple Dell was one of the places where the billionaires hide themselves in the Salt Lake Valley, out of sight of lesser class people like me.

Along the drive I phoned Diminick Edgar, a close friend of mine and fellow P.I. with whom I’d worked whenever one of us or the other needed a second. Diminick moved to Salt Lake from Los Angeles during high school, and I’d known him since. I could trust him to back me up, and that’s just what I needed right now. I wasn’t sure just what Martin was involved in. He’d freely admitted that he’d had some shady parts to his background, but that he’d severed ties with that part of his life some time ago. He might have lied to me, or rather, withheld information, about his previous marriage, and I didn’t want to gamble that he might have withheld or even lied bold-faced to me about quitting from organized crime.

The phone rang for a few rings, and then Dim picked up.

“Hey, Dim, it’s Zander.”

“Hey, Zee, what’s up?”

“Hey, listen; I need your help with something.”

Diminick listened as I explained the situation to him, leaving out the part about seeing Ms. Kemp later that evening.

“You want me to sit in on this meeting with Martin?”

“No. I don’t want to arouse his suspicions if there is something going on behind all this. I want you to stay handy in case something goes wrong in there today. I’m going to try and confront him about what I know as tactfully and gently as possible, but you never can know for sure what guys like that will do when things don’t go their way.”

“Okay, gimmie his address, I’ll meet you at the beginning of his street.”



I spotted Dim’s silver Lexus parked at the service station kitty corner from the entrance to Dimple Dell Road. I pulled up next to his car and got out. I popped the deck-lid and rooted through the gear in the trunk of the Mustang until I found a microphone and micro transmitter and its receiver. I checked the batteries in each unit, and each registered a full charge. I handed the receiver to Dim as he came over to the side of my car.

“Here, take this and listen to what goes on in there. If things start to get hanky or too suspicious I’ll say ‘President Nixon.’ If that happens, call the cops. I wont say it unless I get into something I can’t get out of. You wouldn’t happen to have that tape recorder of yours, would you?”

“Yeah, it’s in the car. You want me to record it?”

“Yeah, please. He might say something I’ll want to remember later.” I drew a diagram of what the Martin property looked like from my limited public records search information.

“I’ll park here, around the corner behind the cinderblock fence. The receiver should have no problem picking you up from there.”

“Alright” I checked my briefcase for everything I might need, and slid the transmitter into my inside pocket, clipping the tiny mic to the inside of my suit lapel, “I’m going to head over, if it goes bad you call five-oh, tell them everything I told you.”

“Gotcha. Be careful, bro.”

“I will. I’m not expecting trouble, but you never know. Better safe than sorry.”

I let the Mustang idle through the gate, which stood open to receive me. I wondered if they’d left the gate open because they knew I was coming, or if it was open all the time. I drove up a horseshoe shaped driveway that wrapped its way up a shallow incline and crested near the front door of the house.

I’d seen some good sized mansions in my time, but the Martin’s was enormous. I’d heard somewhere it had once belonged to Karl Malone, the basketball player. I walked up the wide arch covered steps to a front door that looked large enough to admit a small car. An old fashioned rope-pull doorbell hung there. I tugged on it once and heard deep chimes like a church choir echo through the building. No sooner than the chimes ceased to sound, the door gave way before me and a decrepit old man made a show of propriety as he opened the door.

“Hi. I’m Zander Gage; I have a meeting with Mr. Martin.”

“Yes Mr. Gage, you are expected. Mr. Martin is on the patio. This way please,” the old doorman wheezed.

I followed along at the old man’s slow pace as he led me through a main hall large enough to be a ballroom, between two curving sets of stairs, underneath a suspended landing that appeared to connect the upper levels of either side of the house, and to a large sliding door set into a wall composed almost entirely of framed glass. The door man slid the large door aside, motioned me through, and followed behind me into an enclosed patio larger than the entire lower level of my house. Off in one corner at a round table sat Martin, wearing sunshades and a bathrobe, sipping a mimosa. It’s one of the luxuries of the rich, I suppose, to enjoy the warmth of the sun’s rays in the far end of fall. He saw me approach and stood up.

“Mr. Gage, come in, so glad you could make it. I trust you found the place ok?”

“Fine, just fine, thanks for having me over Mr. Martin.”

“Come, sit, lunch is almost ready,” he motioned me over to his table and resumed his seat, “Mimosa? Brandy?”

“No thank you, I try not to drink this early in the day,” I lied. I’d not touched a drop of alcohol since my daughter was born, not even after my wife died. I took the seat across from him at the table. A little Latino man in a white chef’s tunic approached and set a glass of water and pitcher of the same before me.

“Alonzo,” Martin directed towards the little man, “is my head chef. He’s been with us for almost ten years. Al, we’ll take lunch out here on the patio, please.” The little Latino said nothing, only nodded, and walked off out of my field of vision. “Alonzo has prepared Churrasco; I hope you don’t mind South American cuisine.”

“Fine by me,” I said, opening my briefcase and removing my notes and photos.

“Mr. Gage, kindly save business until after lunch; meals such as Alonso makes deserve one’s undivided attention.”

I saw the wisdom in this statement as the aroma of barbecue and chimichurri preceded Alonso, who deposited a steaming plate of skewered meats and vegetables before me. We ate in relative silence, and it was only then that I heard the faint music playing from some unseen location; it sounded like Debussy or Satie. Martin must have observed my notice of the music.

“I find that music helps in the digestive processes, Mr. Gage,” he said.

I nodded in agreement. We finished our meal, which I tried to space out with casual conversation, hoping to learn something more about the man who’d hired me and as Alonso and a maid cleared our plates I tried harder to steer the conversation back over to the business at hand.

“Mr. Martin, I do have a few things relating to your case to discuss with you.”

“Very well,” he set his napkin on his plate, “On to business.”

“For starters, I was able to learn a few things about your wife’s card playing. There does, indeed, appear to be a bridge group that your wife was fond of attending at your sister-in-law’s house, however, this group did not meet as frequently as she apparently claimed to you. I spoke with Ms. Kemp regarding this bridge group, which I feel she was fairly frank about, and she gave me the phone numbers and addresses of the other ladies in the group, which I later interviewed. None of the other ladies was much help to the case at hand, however, their stories all match up; Anne was indeed among the regulars of that group, in fact, they each can recall her missing the least amount of games of the lot.” Here I left out what I’d heard from Kathy Giordano, “From my interview with your sister-in-law, she, at that time, appeared to have no knowledge of either the disappearance or whereabouts of your wife. I was told one or two things by Ms. Kemp that I felt the need to verify with you.” I paused here, pondering how to proceed with this situation. This could get sticky really fast.

“Is everything alright, Mr. Gage?” Martin inquired.

“Yes. Mr. Martin, Ms. Kemp revealed to me certain circumstances surrounding your marriage to Anne.”

“Namely?”

“Well, for starters, the fact that when you and Anne were first seeing each other, you were already married to another woman. Secondly, you left what I presume was your first wife for Anne.”

“All this is correct, Mr. Gage. I fail to see it’s bearing on your assignment.”

“With all due respect to your privacy, it does have a bearing on why your wife might have wanted to leave you. Now I’m going to ask you something, something you might consider invasive to your privacy, and rest assured anything you tell me is still held in the strictest confidence. I probably should have asked you to begin with what the circumstances were in that regard, and that’s my fault, but Mr. Martin, if your wife left you because you were cheating on her, I’d need to conduct an entirely different investigation than if she left with another man or was taken by your mobbies.” I paused to let the point sink into him a little, and I could see that he was perturbed and bothered by this turn of events. Regardless of whether or not he was uncomfortable with this, if he wanted my service I’d have to know, “Mr. Martin, I need to know if you were cheating on your wife.”

Martin took his time, gazed off through the glass-walled patio out at the expansive yard, “Mr. Gage, you have a singular ability to upset my digestion,” another pause, “No, I was not cheating on my Anne. All that which you heard from that upstart sister of hers is true, however, I have always endeavored to be a true and faithful husband to my Anne,” he said with almost practiced regularity.

There still seemed to be something he wasn’t telling me. It wasn’t anything I had any evidence of; it wasn’t something that is plain as the nose on a face, but more of a gut feeling. It’s like that feeling one sometimes hears cops talk about, that there’s some kind of sixth sense or intuition possessed by most good investigators, whether they call it ESP, the Holy Ghost, telepathy or good old-fashioned profiling, it’s there. It’s not something that’ll ever stand up in a court of law in this good country, but its there, ask any cop, and it was telling me something was not right. It might have been nothing big or earth-shattering to the case, it might have been that he simply didn’t want to admit to me that he may have been cheating on Mrs. Martin, just like he did with his first wife, but I got the strong impression he was leaving something out. Whatever it was, it obviously wasn’t something I was going to get from him willingly; I’d have to find out on my own.

“Ok, fair enough,” I said, dropping the subject, “I’m going to continue to pursue this as either one of two possible cases; first theory,” I counted off on a finger, “she was taken by your ex-buddies in relation to collecting a debt owed them, second, she’s run off with another man.” Here I stopped to let Martin digest where we ought, or where I thought he should think the investigation was going, until I could uncover anything further. “Now, one thing I’m going to be needing are some names; I need to know who specifically, if you know who, runs or might have been associated with the underground casinos Anne was visiting, or if you know someone who might know.”

Martin insisted he wasn’t familiar himself with those running the underground casinos his wife supposedly visited, but he did say he knew how I could find people connected to the criminal syndicate who should be able to tell me. He rattled off three people he thought for sure could help me track down Mrs. Martin’s gaming spots, Vince Vinetti, Brian O’Shea, and Kenny Santana, all of which were lower level enforcers for the main criminal racket here in town. Martin didn’t know how to get a hold of them, but I figured I could put in a call to and old friend, Detective Decker with the Salt Lake County Sheriffs Department, who regularly kept tabs on local organized crime.

“Right now, Mr. Martin, that’s about all I’ve got,” I said, ending my report to him.

“It’s only been a day; surely you cannot expect earth-shattering results in only a day.”

“No, but I hate being behind the curve, if you know what I mean; I hate being behind where I know this case should be.” I got up from the table, “Now, if you excuse me, I have another meeting to get to. Thanks for the meal, you have a fantastic cook.”

“My pleasure, Mr. Gage.”

The elderly doorman was waiting at the sliding door, who saw to it that it was open for me to pass through, and escorted me to the front door again. I would probably be greeted with laughter from Dim over being so concerned about this meeting, but I didn’t give a hell at this point. Something was not right, I was still getting that unsettling feeling, but I didn’t know why.

I started up the Mustang and rounded the circumference of the long curving driveway and pulled back out onto Dimple Dell Road. I signaled for Dim to follow me as I drove by his position. We proceeded through traffic back to the service station.

I backed my car into a parking stall, and after parking his, Diminick came and slid into the passenger seat of mine.

“What the hell happened back there, buddy?” He asked, “I heard your conversation with the doorman and heard you pass through to the rear of the house, I heard Martin greet you, but after that, the transmission cut off. All I got from you was static.”

“What? How? This unit should have been able to send through those walls. Besides that, we weren’t actually in the house at all; we were out in an enclosed patio, the walls were all glass.”

“I dunno how, man. All I can tell you is one second I could hear you, the next, nothing. Static. You checked the batteries in your mike and sender right?”

“Yeah, both the transmitter and the receiver were charged at the same time, they both had a full charge before I went in.” I pulled the transmitter unit out of my pocket and checked the battery gauge again. It read a full charge. I showed it to Dim who whistled through his teeth. “You get the last bit of transmission on tape before it cut off.”

“The whole thing’s on there, static and all,” he held the tape up, “I kept the recorder going just in case the transmission came back.”

“Good deal,” I took the tape and dropped it into my pocket, “Thanks again for keeping an eye out. I gotta get going, I have another meeting to be at this afternoon.”

“You want me to tag along, record that one too?”

“No, it’s ok. This one’s personal.” I couldn’t believe I’d just said that. It was a business meeting, of sorts, why did I call it personal? Why did I want to keep my meeting with Margie a secret from my friend?

“Ok, man, keep your head up; be careful.”

“You too buddy, take care.”

Diminick got back into his Lexus and left me there pondering these developments in the parking lot of the service station.

8

By the time I got to Margie Kemp’s house it was almost twenty until six; traffic had been terrible on the freeway, and the surface streets weren’t any better. A small storm system had worked it’s way into the valley and dropped showers as it passed. I parked directly in front of Margie’s house this time and ran through the cold October rain to her front porch. The front door opened for me as I lighted the steps; she’d been waiting there. I suddenly felt very under-dressed; she’d put on a little casual blue evening dress and done her blond hair up, and I’d shown up in my business slacks and sport coat I’d been wearing all day. At least I remembered to put on a tie, I thought.

“That’s a nice car, I thought that one was yours,” she said.

“Yeah, I, uh, saw you watching me leave yesterday, through your window.”

“I’m sorry, I…” she blushed in embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about it,” I waived it off, “it doesn’t bother me. Come on; let’s go eat and talk over what your brother in law told me today.”

I walked her to the passenger door and opened it for her and in a moment we were on our way out to Sandy. We talked about what I’d spoken to Martin about, what he’d freely confessed to and about what he’d flatly denied. I also told her about what Kathy Giordano had said about having heard Anne say she suspected that Martin was having an affair.

“None of that surprises me,” she said, “that’s exactly the kind of person Alex is. He’d lie about it straight to your face until you finally dug up the truth, after which he’d freely admit to anything. He knows who can touch him and who can’t, and he knows who he can lie to and get away with it.”

“Do you think he is cheating on her?”

“I dunno. It’s so hard to trust him. It’s hard to trust anyone like him, but after he dumped his first wife when she found out about Anne, I don’t think he’d hesitate to do it again if he had another girl on the side.” Her voice brimmed over with disdain. This was not how I wanted the night to go; I didn’t want her angry all evening.

“I’m really sorry about all this, Ms. Kemp.”

“Please, call me Margie.”

“Ok, Margie. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. Can I call you Zander?”

“Yeah,” I laughed in spite of myself. This was far from a witness interrogation, if it ever was intended to be one in the first place. I looked over at her. We both knew the reason why were here tonight, and neither of us was willing to admit it.

“So, what do you do for a living, Margie?”

“I’m a botanist; I work in the lab at the University and for the Sugarhouse Nursery, tending for the plants that have to be brought indoors during the winter.”

“Wow,” I started, “I could tell you had a green thumb, but I had no idea. Did you get your degree from the U as well?”

“Yes, both my bachelors and Masters degrees. I’ve been thinking about going back for my doctorate next year.”

“Doctor Margie, that sounds good. I think that works,” I teased, “Doctor Margie, just rolls off the tongue doesn’t it?” She rolled her eyes and smirked at me. “I just never had you figured for the academic type, that’s all.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she said in mock indignation.

“I dunno, I guess you just don’t look like the types of girls I knew in college, at least not like the ones that are as dedicated as you. They weren’t any where near as good looking as you…” I realized what I’d said too late to stop it. This time it was my turn to be embarrassed.

I think she noticed my discomfort, because she mercifully changed the subject, “So, tell me about detective work. How long have you been doing it?”

I told her bits and pieces about my career and a few pieces about some cases. Before long we had arrived at the Mizumi Grill. Mizumi was a small restaurant but a very popular one with the trendy set. I went there to patronize the sushi chef, Harry Tazaki, one of my former clients. Being a Saturday, the dining room was almost full. We sat in the waiting area for about fifteen minutes before we were seated at the far end of the curving sushi bar. Harry was behind the bar preparing what looked like a California Roll.

“Margie, I’d like you to meet Harry Tazaki; he’s the finest sushi chef in the valley, and one of my former clients.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Margie said.

“Likewise. Pardon me if I don’t shake your hand, I’m kinda busy at the moment,” Harry answered, indicating the roll he was preparing.

Our waitress passed by and inquired if we’d like anything to drink. I nodded to Margie, “Go ahead.”

“It’s the weekend; I think I deserve a good drink. What do they have here?”

“Well, aside from soda, coffee and tea, they serve Kirin beer…”

“No, something stronger than beer, it’s the weekend,” she prodded.

“They serve sake as well; have you ever had sake.”

“No, I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never tried it; there’s a first time for everything,” she said, and ordered a large sake.

“I’ll have a Coke, please,” I said when the waitress asked what I’d have. She jotted down our drink order and hurried back to the kitchen area.

“A Coke? Come on, I thought all detectives were hard drinkers,” she joked.

“I don’t drink anymore, not for almost five years.”

“Why’s that?” She seemed genuinely interested, not out to mock.

“Well, I made a promise to someone after my daughter was born. I’ve never broken it.”

“You have a daughter?”

I pulled the photo of Lindy I kept in my wallet out and handed it to her, “Her name is Melinda, after her mother, but we mostly call her Lindy.”

“Oh,” she cooed in that way all women coo at little kids, “she’d precious. What was it you promised?” she asked, photo still in hand.

I let a long drawn out sigh. I’d only known this woman for two days, but I was considering trusting her with a big part of my private life. My gut feeling told me I could trust this woman.

“A few years ago, not too long after my daughter was born, when I’d first gotten my P.I. license I wasn’t making much money, and my wife had to bear the burden of supporting the family while I finished school and tried to make my agency work. I slipped into a pretty deep depression and started drinking really heavy, so , yeah, most detectives are heavy drinkers, at least at one point in time or another,” I ribbed, “One evening, I’d been drinking already and decided to go for a drive out to a rural area near the copper mines and watch the stars. I took a bottle of cheap whiskey with me to enjoy while I was there. I was supposed to have been working on a case for a client, but it fell through. I’d never told Melinda that the client had dropped the case, so she wasn’t expecting me home soon. Long story short, I polished off that whisky sitting out under the stars on the hood of my car. I don’t know how long I was out there, but it began to get cold so I figured I ought to head home. I was in no shape to drive, but I didn’t care at the time. I was making a turn to head west off the rural route and over shot the turn, sending me into the oncoming lane. Out there in the middle of nowhere, right there in that lane heading straight for me was a semi on it way up to the mines. I jerked the wheel to the left and I don’t remember anything after that. I woke up and found my car wrapped around a telephone poll.”

“It wasn’t…” she pointed outside, indicating the Mustang as the waitress set our drinks down.

“No, I had a little sporty Mitsubishi at the time. I don’t know how long I was out, but apparently the truck driver hadn’t seen me wreck out there in the dark. I used my cell phone to call a friend whose father had a flatbed tow truck, and he came out in the middle of the night and picked me and my wreck up and took me home.

“We lived in an apartment at the time. Our parking spot was right below the balcony. I woke Melinda up and showed and told here what had happened, because there’d be no hiding it, even if I wanted to. She hit the roof, and rightly so. I’d been an ass, a stupid selfish ass, and it’s lucky enough I didn’t kill anyone else or myself, cause had I killed myself, little Lindy would be an orphan now; Melinda was killed by a drunk driver three months later. Since then, it’s just been me and Lindy.”

“Zander, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

I waived it off, “Don’t worry, you didn’t know, and I felt like I could trust you.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.”

We small talked our way through our first round of drinks. After being served a second round the waitress came to take our order. She apologized that she’d taken so long to get to us, it being a weekend, and a very busy one from what I could tell.

“What do you recommend?” Margie asked me.

“Well, if you don’t mind meat or fish or veggies, everything from the regular menu is great. If you’re feeling daring, the sushi menu is on the back of the regular one. If you have sushi, try the unagi, it’s great.”

“Unagi, what’s that?”

“Freshwater eel served over sweet rice.”

“Oh, well maybe I will.”

She ordered an unagi roll and a side of tempura vegetables; I ordered the beef udon with a tekkamaki roll.

We talked more while waiting for our food, and after her second sake I could see Margie’s eyes glaze a bit. She was no drinker, but she wanted me to think she was.

We talked as we waited, interspersing small talk with business. I related what had come of my meeting with Senator Martin, leaving out the part about being bugged and not being able to record the conversation.

“I don’t think he’s telling me everything,” I finally said.

“Mmm? Why’s that?”

“Dunno. A feeling, I guess. I have no proof that he’s holding out on me, it’s just a feeling, that’s all.”

“What do you mean a feeling?”

“Just a gut feeling, that’s all. It’s something I’ve learned to trust over the years.”

“Oh. He’s an asshole, you know. He wouldn’t miss a chance to screw you or me or anyone else if he thought it’d get him ahead.”

I knew it was the alcohol starting to talk now, a little rounding of her speech made that apparent. Holding off talking business might be a good idea, but seeing her reaction to my meeting with Martin was helpful, if it can be believed that under the influence of alcohol we say more of what we mean than we normally would otherwise. I thought I stood a good chance of learning more from Margie.

“Do you think he’s lying to me, or holding out?” I asked.

She nodded, “I do. I wouldn’t put it past him for a second; he’d throw his own mother under a bus if he stood to profit from it. He’s a slime and a cheat. Don’t believe for a second that he didn’t know where his campaign contributions came from.”

“You think he knew?”

“Yup.” she nodded, “He plays at stupid, pretending not to know what these kind of people are involved in, acting all shocked for our benefit when the truth came out within the family, but he’s smart. He knows the score, and I think he’s using you to even it up.”

“Why do you say that?” Now she had my attention. It seemed Margie might know a little more about her big sister’s disappearance than she let on previously.

“Let’s just say I think Anne found out about, or at least strongly suspected Alex of two-timing her, so she left. I think he wants to know where she’s at so he can shut her up about what she knows.”

This was getting into some serious territory, and if any of this was to be believed, I had to tread lightly. One false step and I could be history.

“She knows about his criminal connections, then.” I stated, as more a matter of fact.

“How do you think she knew where she could go to play cards for money instead of for kicks?”

Here we go, I thought, uncharted territory with Margie Kemp. It appeared she did indeed withhold from me her knowledge of Anne Martin’s illegal activities.

“Martin told her where to go, who to talk to?”

Margie nodded.

“I see.” The waitress arrived with our meal, and for a while we ate without speaking. Margie was finally getting some food into her system to counteract the sake, and I wasn’t going to delay that. I still needed her head clear enough for one last round of questions, and then she could go home and sleep it off.

After she’d had time to get a good way through her food I continued to pick her brain for information. “Did Anne tell you where she was going to play cards?”

“No, but she did tell me she was able to make some money when she did. She’d told me she’d be able to make a fair living gambling if she ever had to leave Alex. She didn’t suck, you know, at cards. She was really good.”

“Did she ever mention who she would play cards with? Any fellow players?”

She thought for a moment, and said, “No one in particular, but she did say once that I’d be surprised at who plays at those casinos. Famous people, she said, people who the public knows.”

“How often had she mentioned leaving Alex?”

“Only once or twice, when she suspected he might have another woman on the side.”

“I see. How long had she suspected him of seeing another woman?”

“Almost a whole year.”

“Did she ever mention if she knew who the other woman might be?”

“She never mentioned anything to me. If she knew, she kept it to herself.”

“Did Anne know Alex’s first wife?”

“No,” she shook her head, “not that I know of.”

It stood to reason that, if I could trust what Margie was telling me, and if my suspicions about Martin were correct, Senator Martin was looking for or had found the third Mrs. Martin, and that woman would more than likely be someone unknown to anyone else involved. I began to formulate the scenario in my head. Martin, in a repeat of his first marriage and divorce begins seeking another, younger woman. Unlike her predecessor, Anne Martin knows certain things about her husbands less than legitimate campaign finance. Anne Martin, suspecting she’s being two-timed, leaves Martin for greener pastures herself, but Martin is concerned about her revealing what she knows. Martin wants to get to her in order to keep her quiet or shut her up for good. If this was the case, it was doubtful that the biographer Martin had hired was going to hear the honest truth about the matter, and for that matter it was doubtful he’d told me the complete truth either.

I suppose I had the option of dropping the case where it stood. I could have sent Martin his retainer back in the mail and told him I couldn’t help him, or even to go stuff himself for trying to use me. I suppose in hindsight that might have been better, but I still didn’t know whether or not Anne Martin had left and disappeared of her own accord, or if she’d been taken against her will, by either the supposed enemies of Martin, or by Martin himself. I still didn’t know where I stood in this game, player or pawn, and I intended to stay on until I did. At the very least I intended to find Anne Martin, for better or for worse.

“Hey, y’know, I really like this place. Thanks for brining me here. Life’s been kind of nuts lately, and I really needed a night out with somebody nice.” Margie said.

“You’re welcome.” I paused, and then added, “You’ve been good company for me too.” She had been, indeed, good company. I found myself struggling to keep my mind focused on the case while in her company. I felt comfortable with her, as much so as I had felt with a woman since Melinda died. She leaned in close to me, and I let her; I didn’t pull away. This was a mistake, I knew. It was not as bad as getting personally involved with a client, nor as bad as being involved with a suspect, she was neither at this point, but she was part of the case.

Margie leaned closer to me and asked, “If you find out Alex lied to you, are you going to stop looking for my sister?”

“No,” I paused, “no, I don’t think so.” I said. If Senator Martin was lying to me, he might have had something to do with her being missing, one way or another. I felt this was one of those cases I had to see through to the end, regardless of its conclusion, regardless of profit or loss. There was a missing woman, and no one around her appeared to know where she was.

“I’m glad.” She said.

Thinking back, that was the determining moment for me, the moment that made this a case of principle instead of profit; I wasn’t in it for Martin or his money anymore, I was in it for the woman’s sister and because my own conscience wouldn’t allow me to just walk away.

Margie sighed and said, “Well, I’m stuffed and I’ve definitely had enough to drink. What do you say we get out of here?”

“Sure.” I paid our bill and escorted Margie, who was not quite so drunk she couldn’t walk with only a slight hesitation in her step, out to the car. Now I knew she wasn’t fond of drink; she’d just been putting on a show for me (because detectives are hard drinkers, right?). She wanted to appear like those girls in all those old hard-boiled Dashiell Hammett stories, like a detective’s girl. I laughed to myself in spite of everything.

I helped her into the passenger seat of the Mustang, and couldn’t help but notice she had looked up at me from the seat as I closed the door with a look of pure contentment; the look of someone who was so utterly at ease with their situation that they couldn’t or wouldn’t change it for anything. The ambivalence I was feeling earlier grew again.

To her, this was a date. I was the knight in shining armor that every little girl dreams of, the one who would come and whisk her away from her enchanted castle, or defeat the terrible dragon that imprisoned her... or find her lost sister.

Where was this going? How could I have let myself get to this point? She wasn’t a client, though. There was really no conflict of interest here, right? Goddamn these hard choices.

For that split second our eyes connected through the passenger window something flashed in the back of my mind. To hell with Martin and his case. To hell with his retainer. At that point I felt deep down that Martin was messed up in all this, that I had been used, that my encounter with Margie Kemp this evening was totally outside the realm of what Martin had predicted. Whether he had arranged for his wife to disappear or she had left him intentionally, he was using me as part of some scheme.

Something was wrong in all of this, but what had silently transpired between myself and Margie felt so right, as if some serendipidous mistake or galactica alignment had just taken place. This was not according to whatever plan Martin had concieved. Maybe this could be the key to breaking his plan and exposing the truth. But how could I take advantage of the situation like that?

As I turned and walked around the back of the Mustang to the driver’s side door, I promised myself again that I would find this good woman’s sister. To hell with Martin.

\* \* \*

I started the engine, “Where’d you like to go?”

“Oh, anywhere. Let’s just drive. Show me what this thing can do.”

“Buckle up,” I warned, and left twin trails of smoke leaving the parking lot.

Margie squealed with delight as the Mustang chirped through each of its four gears. I turned off the main road onto the access road that led into the canyon. Despite what the car looked like on the outside, despite it’s age, despite the many reconditionings the body had over the years, the V-eight power plant was healthy and alive. I took her through several turns of the access road before turning around and heading back to town.

\* \* \*

I eased the Mustang to the curb across the street from Margie’s house, leaving enough space for her egress from the vehicle in her intoxicated state. She’d been oddly silent since we left the access road. I hoped deep down that I hadn’t offended her in some way by cutting off the joyride early to take her home. I also hoped I wouldn’t see her asleep against the door. Poor girl, tried to impress me and ended up biting off more than she could chew, or drink as the case was, and would probably be embarrassed in the morning. I couldn’t let her regret too much; I resolved to act like nothing was out of the ordinary. I’d help her into the house and check up on her tomorrow. I certainly had nothing planned for the following day. I usually reserved Sundays as my day to be with my daughter and catch up on things that needed doing around the house, so there was certainly time to see how she was doing tomorrow.

What?

Had I really thought that? I was thinking of coming ‘round tomorrow just to see how she was.

I sighed as I checked for approaching cars and opened the Mustang door. It is what it is, I thought. This was so far beyond what I’d expected from this case, but I’d made my decision. This wasn’t a normal case. This was no longer just a matter of infidelity. This was not a divorce investigation or a workmans’ compensation stake out.

I opened the passenger door and offered my hand to Margie to assist her from the car, which she took. For the first time since we’d left the access road I noticed she was smiling. I was both relieved and nervous. More than any other moment during the evening I had no idea how I should act.

I shut the passenger door and walked Margie around the back of the car. Her hand gravitated to mine as we passed the back of the car. As we rounded the side of the Mustang she whirled around, pinning me against the side of the car, and pressed her lips to mine.

I didn’t resist.

I couldn’t. After all, hadn’t I already made this decision at the restaurant? Hadn’t I known this was coming?

I was so wrapped up in her that I’d only just realised she’d wrapped her arms about my neck as she released me from our embrace.

She looked deep into my eyes for several moments, I lost track of exactly how long.

“Come inside,” she whispered, “please. I don’t want to be alone.”

“I, um, I really shouldn’t. You’re drunk, really, and I would feel horrible...”

“No, please. Don’t leave me alone.”

I felt a deep nervous shudder well up from some deep primordial core of the human condition. I hadn’t been with a woman in so very long.

“Margie, I like you, I really do. You’re a beautiful woman, you really are, but I would feel horrible if I did... with you in your condition, I...”

“I saw how you were looking at me in the restaurant. It’s okay, really. It’s been a very long time for me. I don’t just take any stranger I happen to fancy to my bed, so don’t worry about that, okay. And it’s not the drink, I promise, I really don’t drink much at all. I just thought maybe this was the kind of girl you were used to,” she stammered, still a little round in her pronunciation from the effects of the alcohol, “and I thought if I could get you to like me you would try to find my sister... But then I really ended up liking you, cause you’re a nice guy and you have this little girl you’re devoted to, and you’ve treated me like such a lady, and ...” she began to choke up.

“Hey, hey, I can tell you’re not a big drinker. You’re drunk. It’s okay,” I let a little supportive laugh, “Hey, look at me,” I raised her eyes to meet mine with a gentle hand below her chin. “You don’t need to impress me,” I said, wiping away a mascara-streaked tear with my thumb. “I’m gonna find your sister, regardless. Anything else is... well... ” I had no words, no complete thought to finish this attempt at consolation, so I leaned into her and kissed her as she had me. I felt her tremble in my arms and realised I was trembling too.

She pulled gently away, placed a hand to the side of my face, and looked deeper into my soul than anyone had ever yet done. “Then please come be with me tonight.” Her eyes begged from a place of such loneliness, a loneliness that I knew all too well.

I inhaled slowly, and released.

I looked back into her eyes and inhaled again, held it for a moment, and tried to say “Okay.”

I never heard the words leave my lips, being drowned out by the thunderclap and fireball of the explosion that ripped through Margie Kemp’s house.

9

Keeping a cool head for the both of us was nearly impossible. Margie was in histrionics, all higher logic overcome by shock. The police who responded with the fire department were only able to conduct a cursory interview with the owner of the now burned out wreckage once a beautiful house. Neighbors and onlookers pressed against the perimeter the police had established.

I gave as much a report as I could, explaining that I’d been hired to find Anne Martin by Senator Martin, that I’d been conducting a witness interview.

The case seemed to be fleeing from my hands at this point. I prepared myself mentally for the inevitable conversation I would have to have with Margie. This was not going to be easy. The grief and concern this woman felt was now no doubt compounded several times over, and the detective she’d confided in was now no longer able to be of more help than moral support. Maybe it was better that way, maybe I really could be of more assistance as moral support. It certainly would remove any remaining doubt in my mind about any conflict of interest that might still exist. I would be free to give her what she wanted.

It was more than three hours before the authorities were able to disperse the crowd. We were unable to leave no matter how much we wanted to, as the Mustang was well within the police perimeter.

I sat on the lawn of an adjacent house along side Margie, who was pulling my sport coat tighter around her bare shoulders. I fought for the right thing to say, and kept coming up blank. I denied myself the luxury of being in shock if for no other reason than Margie’s sake, but my brain kept wanting to shut off and retreat into panic mode. I’d been in life threatening situations before; I’d been shot at, I’d nearly been flattened by an angry client, but I’d never been so close to something so catastrophic, so devistating. This was the kind of thing you saw in movies and on T.V., never expecting in a million years that it could happen for real.

I reached into my sport coat pocket and retrieved my cell phone. I never wore a watch, and it was the only timepiece I used. It was 1:30AM. I punched in Mom’s numbers to give her an update. When I called just after speaking to the police I made her swear not to tell Lindy anything was wrong. I knew taht would be tough for her; I could hear her trying to choke back the panic.

Mom answered after one ring, apparently waiting by the phone for my call, “Hello?”

“It’s me again. We’re both okay, at least as far as one can be okay in a situation like this.”

“How’s that poor girl?”

“Dunno. Too early to tell I guess. I’m gonna try to get her situated with someplace to stay for the night. How’s the kiddo?”

“She’s fine. She’s been asleep for a couple of hours.”

I exhaled through my teeth, trying to think through what I should do over the next couple of hours, “Is she okay with you tonight? I don’t want to be more of a burden than I already am...”

“No, no, not at all, really. It’s no trouble. Just take care of that poor girl, bless her soul.” I could hear her voice break over the phone, though I knew she was trying to hide it. My mother was one of the most caring, tenderhearted and giving people I knew. When someone was hurting, she was hurting too. Even now, with this young woman she’d never met, never even knew existed before three hours ago, she was putting the needs of others before her own.

“I figure something out. I’ll call you in the morning, okay? Please don’t let this keep you up anymore, okay? I’m going to get this worked out. Go get some sleep.”

“Okay.”

As I slid the phone back into my sport coat pocket Margie leaned into my shoulder and began sobbing again, “I don’t know what I’m going to do; everything I owned was in there, even my bank card. I’ve got no place to go, I...” she trailed off.

“Don’t worry about a thing, okay? I’m gonna help you through this. You can stay at my place tonight, okay?”

She nodded into my chest.

“My place is pretty big, I mean, I’ve got lots of space. It’s just my daughter and I.”  
 “How is she?” were the first fully lucid words Margie had uttered in over an hour.

“Hmmm?”

“Your daughter, how is she? She’s with your mother, right?”

“Yeah, she’ll be just fine until tomorrow. C’mon, lets get you squared away,” I said, standing.

“Okay,” she took my hand I offered and I helped her to her feet.

She took my hand in tense clasp, lacing my fingers through hers. I could tell she was exhausted, and took my hand as much to steady herself as for emotional support.

“Zander, thank you. For tonight.”

“No, it’s no problem, really.”  
 “No I really mean it. If I wasn’t out with you I might have been in there. If you’d have let me talk you in any sooner, we’d probably both be dead. I owe you my life.”

I sighed, “Don’t think about that right now. Just take things one step at a time, okay?”

“Yeah.”

We walked about three hundred feet to where the Mustang sat, mercifully and miraculously spared damage from the blast and the ensuing confusion with the exception to a large tear across the vinyl top. I opened the passenger door and Margie dropped into the seat. I fingered the slash in the vinyl top as I passed around to the driver’s side of the car.

Shit. Oh well, I thought. A three hundred dollar top was a small price to pay for coming through this otherwise unscathed.

I slid into the car beside Margie and fired up the car, an eased down the street.

“Thank you,” she said.

I looked over to her. Her eyes told me all I needed to know, and nothing else needed to be said.

\* \* \*

The ride home was silent, the streets devoid of life or activity. Margie leaned her head against the window of the car, snoring softly. I had no idea at what point she’d nodded off and I wasn’t going to wake her up for idle banter; not that there was really anything that needed to or should be said at this point. She really just deserved to rest.

I was left to my own thoughts for the time being though, and didn’t want to be; those thoughts were suggesting terrible things. Who would want to kill Margie? Certainly there’s no way I could have been the target, no one knew I had been with her this evening, had they? So logically someone wanted Margie out of the picture. Did Margie know more about what was going on than she let on? Did she know more and was just not aware that she was in possession of sensitive information? I suppose Margie could have mislead me at some point, but between her alcohol induced verbal candidness and the genuine shock and grief she’d displayed later I highly doubted she’d done so knowingly or intentionally.

My mind circled back around to the two central points of interest in this case: Martin and his former associates in organized crime. The idea that one of the two of these parties was involved in the events of the past evening was almost assured in my mind. It might be that Martin’s bad guys suspected Margie of hiding Anne and they wanted to send Martin a message. It might just as likely be that Martin himself wanted Margie out of the picture.

The thought then occurred to me, I’d put her in this jeopardy. I’d mentioned to Martin I’d spoken to her. If Martin was still in some way on ca-hooting terms with his supposedly former associates in the mob, he could have pulled in one last favor from them, or at the very least could have intentionally misinformed them that Anne was at Margie’s if she was indeed on the lam.

If the events of the evening were connected to my case, and at this point I was firmly convinced they were, the police and maybe even the FBI would be taking this case from me. For as much as I was willing to turn cases over to the proper authorities when criminal intent or incident was discovered, this time it felt more personal.

I didn’t think I would be letting go of this one, not completely.

\* \* \*

“The best bed in the house is mine, upstairs at the end of the hall. I’ll be fine on the sofa.”

I just then realized I’d not saved any of Melinda’s clothes, “You can use a pair of my pajamas if you like, second drawer in the corner dresser. There’s also sweatpants and t-shirts in the closet.”

“Thanks. For everything,” she Margie said wearily.

“You’re welcome.”

“Goodnight, Zander. You’re a good man.”

I hoped I wasn’t blushing outwardly, but inwardly my chest swelled, “G’night.”

She moved up the stairs with surprising grace and dignity for someone who’d just lost nearly everything they owned. I wondered if, deep down, there was a strength in Margie Kemp I’d not seen yet.

I opened the hall closet and retrieved a spare blanket and curled up on the couch in preparation to sleep in the clothes I’d worn through the day for the second time in a row this weekend.

My head swam with the events of the last two days. Shock, fatigue, exhilaration, and some form of giddy excitement swirled through my concsious brain like a manic whirlwind; I’d gotten an interesting, potentially profitable case, almost got blown to Mars, had my case taken away by the cops, turned down a sexual proposition and got a new girlfriend all in the last two days. By anybody’s standard, that’s a full weekend; by most normal people’s definition it’s insanity. I almost wish I could say that was normal for me, but being a P.I. isn’t as glamorous as the books and movies make it out to be. I’d been shot at once and almost run over, and that was as exciting as my career got, and suddenly I felt like I’d been slammed down and kicked in the ribs by a Michael Connelly novel.

I could feel in the back of my mind sleep wasn’t coming anytime soon as I pulled a spare blanket and pillow out of the hall closet. I spread myself out on the sofa and turned out the light and closed my eyes as an invitation to sleep.

I let the events of the day finish catching up with me and did my best to let them go, to let them wash over me and out, to release their tension so I could sleep. I could still smell Margie’s perfume on my shirt and realized I couldn’t let one of those events wash over me and leave my conscious; between the adrenaline and residual perfume and pheromones, I became aware of how incredibly horny I was.

Go upstairs, the voice in my head kept saying, Go upstairs!

Shut up! We’re better than that! I replied to the voice, and rolled over onto my side, trying to think of anything but the beautiful woman upstairs who’d offered herself to me so many short hours ago. Determined to push these thoughts out of consciousness, I pulled my shirt off over my head and tossed it onto a nearby chair to rid myself of the wakeful distraction of her intoxicating scent.

Go, she wants you! The voice was a relentless and driving, Go! It’s what you want, and you know it! It’s what she already said she wants!

I was on the verge of relenting, realizing the truth the voice in my head spoke, ready to throw the blanket aside and go upstairs when I realized I didn’t have to.

I felt her presence in the room with me before I saw her; she was wearing my bathrobe, belt untied, so that I could see her flawless cream-colored skin and the gentle, inner curves of her breasts.

Margie had come downstairs.

I started to protest, despite my capitulation to my own desires in my mind, but before I could speak she leaned in and pressed her lips ever so gently to mine and exhaled deeply as she cupped my neck with her hand.

I felt her other hand glide south and into my underpants.

“You don’t have to,” I started.

“I know. I want to.”

To relent, to give in, to give myself over absolutely, willingly, was a palpable release; the decision made, the tension and frustration receded like a reverse tidal wave, leaving a vacuum that Margie filled.

I lifted myself slightly, acting in unison with her as she guided my underpants off, and reached for her as she straddled me. My fingers explored her hips, navel, up to her breasts, enjoying the sensation of her skin on my palms. She was gentle and slow with me at first, as if she were surrendering as much to me as I was to her.

We committed an act of life, a raging act of rebellion against the darkness of the day, moving together like gentle waves on a beach far away from the rest of the world.

\* \* \*

I awoke with one arm around Margie, cupping her from behind, with her fingers laced through mine. I loved the feel of her skin against mine, calming yet electrifying.